



Master's Degree Studies at Rhodes University: Access and Postgraduate Readiness

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By

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ABSTRACT

This mixed method, grounded theory study aimed to explore access to Master's level study at Rhodes University, a small, traditional South African university established in 1904, over the ten year period 1999-2008. It also sought to capture the essence of 'postgraduate readiness': the generic (non-certificated) attributes which academics expect graduates to possess in order to undertake Master's degree study.

While the majority of students enter Master's level via the formal route (which at Rhodes is an Honours or 4-year bachelor's degree), a significant number are admitted based on the recognition of prior learning (RPL), a practice which is encouraged in South African higher education national policy as a means of widening access and also of acknowledging that learning can take place in ways other than 'formally'.

The findings show that while RPL is well defined nationally at the undergraduate level, the concept of RPL at the postgraduate level is vague and largely left to institutional discretion. No national, and few institutional, guidelines are available on which to base the assessment of potential Master's degree students who do not have Honours degrees. Interviews with Deans, supervisors and policy makers at Rhodes indicated that while there is institutional support for admitting alternative access candidates, there is a general perception of deficit compared to those entering the Master's with formal qualifications. However, the statistical findings showed no significant difference in success rates or time taken to completion between students with and without Honours degrees. In addition, comments from supervisors with extensive experience of alternative access students praised the diversity and rich life experience which such students brought to their studies and their peers. The study concludes that an institutional culture characterized by resistance to change, risk and externally imposed regulations at Rhodes has resulted in weak implementation of the University's RPL policy, little marketing or publicizing of alternative access routes to postgraduate study, and low numbers of RPL enrolments at the Master's level.

A framework for the assessment of potential Master's candidates - both RPL and formal admissions - for use at Rhodes University and potentially also at other higher education institutions, is proposed in conclusion.

Key words: Access; RPL; Graduate Attributes; Master's degree; Postgraduate Readiness

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my beloved parents, particularly my sagacious father Philip Neil Dowdle (1923 – 2006) who, despite not having had access to formal educational opportunities of his own, believed passionately in the transformative power of Education.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	ii
DEDICATION	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
LIST OF APPENDICES	x
LIST OF TABLES	xi
LIST OF GRAPHS	xii
LIST OF FIGURES	xiii
ACRONYMS	xiv
CHAPTER ONE: OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 The Research Context: Background to the Study	1
1.3 Research Goals and Objectives	2
1.4 Research Orientation and Methodology	2
1.5 Potential Limitations of this Study	3
1.6 Overview and Structure of the Thesis	4
CHAPTER TWO: THE HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT	8
2.1 Introduction	8
2.2 The Role of Higher Education in Society	8
2.3 Higher Education in South Africa	10
2.3.1 The Role of Higher Education in South Africa	10
2.3.2 The Structure of Higher Education Qualifications in South Africa	12
2.3.3 The State of Postgraduate Education in South Africa	13
2.4 Rhodes University	15
2.4.1 Rhodes University in Context	15
2.4.2 The Development of Rhodes University's Identity	16
2.4.3 Rhodes University Governance Structures	18
2.4.4 The Postgraduate Context at Rhodes University	19
2.5 Concluding Summary	20

CHAPTER THREE: ACCESS TO MASTER’S DEGREE STUDY	21
3.1 Introduction	21
3.2 Higher Education Qualifications Frameworks	21
3.3 Definition of a Master’s Degree	22
3.4 Access to Master’s Degree Study	23
3.4.1 International	23
3.4.2 South Africa	25
3.4.3 Rhodes University	26
3.5 Recognition of Prior Learning	26
3.6 Recognition of Prior Learning at Rhodes University	29
3.7 Ad Eundem Gradum	30
3.8 Discussion	31
3.9 Concluding Summary	32
CHAPTER FOUR: GRADUATENESS	34
4.1 Introduction	34
4.2 Graduateness and the Role of the University	34
4.3 The Concept of Graduateness	35
4.3.1 Graduateness and Institutional Culture	36
4.3.2 Graduateness and Learning Outcomes	36
4.3.3 Graduateness and Functioning Knowledge	37
4.3.4 A Critique of Graduateness	38
4.4 Graduateness in South Africa	38
4.5 Graduateness at Rhodes University	40
4.5.1 Rhodes University Vision and Mission Statement	40
4.5.2 Requirements for the Award of a Qualification at RU	40
4.5.3 Rhodes University Recognition of Prior Learning Policy	41
4.5.4 Leadership and Institutional Culture at Rhodes University	41
4.6 Graduate Attributes	44
4.7 Graduate Attributes and the South African NQF	46
4.8 Graduate Attributes and Postgraduate Readiness	47

4.8.1	Postgraduate Attributes in Formal Admissions	48
4.8.2	Postgraduate Attributes in Alternative Admissions	50
4.9	Concluding Summary	50
CHAPTER FIVE: RESEARCH DESIGN		52
5.1	Introduction	52
5.2	The Research Question	52
5.3	An Interpretive Approach	53
5.4	Research Orientation	54
5.4.1	Grounded Theory	57
5.4.2	Assumptions and Expectations	60
5.5	Theoretical Framework	61
5.5.1	Literature Review	61
5.5.2	Locating the Research within a Grounded Theory Approach	61
5.6	Research Methods	63
5.6.1	Quantitative Data - Statistical Analysis of Master's Student Records	63
5.6.2	Qualitative Data - Interviews	64
5.6.3	Historical Documentary Analysis	67
5.6.3.1	Senate and Faculty Minutes	68
5.6.3.2	Formal Motivations from Supervisors	68
5.7	Research Methods in Grounded Theory	69
5.7.1	Memoing	70
5.7.2	Theoretical Sampling	70
5.7.3	Constant Comparative Analysis	71
5.7.4	Theoretical Sensitivity	71
5.7.5	Theoretical Saturation	71
5.7.6	Coding	72
5.7.7	Theoretical Integration and Theory Generation	73
5.8	Rhodes University as a Case Study	73
5.9	Reliability and Validity	73
5.10	Ethical Issues	76

5.11	Concluding Summary	77
CHAPTER SIX: QUANTITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION		78
6.1	Introduction	78
6.2	Data Issues	78
6.3	Student Admissions and Performance	79
6.3.1	Admissions Per Faculty 1999-2008	79
6.3.2	Time Taken to Completion	82
6.3.3	Dropouts and Distinctions – Cohort Analysis 1999-2009	84
6.4	Discussion	86
6.5	Concluding Summary	89
CHAPTER SEVEN: QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION		90
7.1	Introduction	90
7.2	Analysis of Semi-Structured Interviews	90
7.3	Coding the Interviews	90
7.4	Themes and Categories emerging from the Interview Data	91
7.5	RPL at the Master’s Level at Rhodes University	93
7.5.1	Attitudes towards RPL	94
7.5.2	The National Ten Percent RPL Rule	94
7.5.3	Circumstances under which RPL should be considered	95
7.5.4	Comparison of RPL Admissions to Regular Admissions	98
7.5.5	Awareness of RPL at the Master’s Level amongst Staff and Students	100
7.5.6	RPL and Redress	102
7.5.7	RPL and Institutional Culture	104
7.6	Summary and Conclusion	108
CHAPTER EIGHT: POSTGRADUATE READINESS		111
8.1	Introduction	111
8.2	The Concept of Postgraduate Readiness	111
8.3	Interviewees’ Comments on Postgraduate Readiness	112

8.4	Interviewees' Opinions on Graduate Attributes for Postgraduate Readiness	114
8.5	Documentary Analysis of Motivation Records at Rhodes University	120
8.6	Evidence of Postgraduate Readiness Attributes	127
8.7	Inconsistencies, Anomalies and Curiosities	130
8.8	Discussion and Synthesis of the Findings	132
CHAPTER NINE: CONCLUSIONS		134
9.1	Introduction	134
9.2	Summary of the Findings	134
9.2.1	Access to Master's Degree Studies	134
9.2.2	Graduateness and Postgraduate Readiness	137
9.2.3	Institutional Culture and Postgraduate Readiness	137
9.2.4	Access and Postgraduate Readiness at Rhodes University: A Grounded Theory	138
9.3	A Return to the Beginning	139
9.4	Towards a Framework for Postgraduate Access	140
9.5	Areas for Further Exploration	143
9.6	Concluding Remarks	144
REFERENCES		145

LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix 1	Rhodes University Vision and Mission Statement, 2000	155
Appendix 2	Rhodes University Recognition of Prior Learning Policy, 2007	157
Appendix 3	South African Higher Education Qualifications Framework Levels	162
Appendix 4	South African HEQF Level Descriptors	163
Appendix 5	Interview Question Guide for Academics	167
Appendix 6	Research Context and Background for Interviewees	169
Appendix 7	Interview Question Guide for Executives	172
Appendix 8	Rhodes University Oppidan Press PG Journalism Degrees Advertisement, 30 Aug 2013	174
Appendix 9	Motivation Letter from Environmental Education Programme to Education Faculty Dean, 17 September 2001	175

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1	Gains and Losses of the Academic Revolution in Higher Education	9
Table 2	Goals and Strategic Objectives of the National Plan for HE, 2001	11
Table 3	Qualification Types on the NQF (HEQF)	13
Table 4	Research Paradigms	55
Table 5	Total New Master's Registrations at RU, by Faculty, 1999 – 2008	80
Table 6	Regular Master's Registrations at RU, by Faculty, 1999 – 2008	80
Table 7	AEG Master's Registrations at RU, by Faculty, 1999 – 2008	81
Table 8	Completion Rates for Master's degrees at RU, 1999 – 2008	83
Table 9	Formal and AEG Master's Dropped and Distinctions at RU 1999 – 2009	84
Table 10	AEG Master's Dropped and Distinctions at RU 1999 – 2009, by Type of Degree	85
Table 11	Attributes of RPL Students Compared to Formal Admissions	98
Table 12	Awareness of RPL at RU, Interviewees' Opinions	101
Table 13	Resistance to Change and Difference at RU	105
Table 14	Resistance to Rules and Policing at RU	106
Table 15	Resistance to Extra Effort and Risk at RU	107
Table 16	Attribute Frequency in Interview Transcripts	115
Table 17	Postgraduate Readiness Attributes Identified by Interviewees, by Category	116
Table 18	Example of Line by Line Coding of one Motivation Letter	123
Table 19	Postgraduate Readiness Attributes Identified in Motivation Letters and Paragraphs	124
Table 20	Potential Evidence: Examples by Postgraduate Attribute Categories	128

LIST OF GRAPHS

Graph 1	Master's Enrolments at RU: Faculty Proportions by Admission Status, 1999 - 2008	81
Graph 2	Growth of Regular Master's Admissions at RU 1999 – 2008	82
Graph 3	Growth of AEG Master's Admissions at RU 1999 – 2008	82
Graph 4	Average Years to Completion by Admission Status, 1999 – 2008	83
Graph 5	All RU Master's Dropped and Distinctions by Admission Status, 1999 – 2009	85
Graph 6	AEG Master's Dropped and Distinctions by Type of Degree, 1999 – 2009	86
Graph 7	Postgraduate Attribute Citing Frequency in Interview Transcripts	116

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1	Reliability and Validity Continuum for Historical Documents	75
Figure 2	Recognition of Prior Learning Categories and Sub-Categories	92
Figure 3	Postgraduate Readiness Categories and Sub-Categories	92
Figure 4	Postgraduate Access Framework Outline	141

ACRONYMS

AEG	Ad Eundem Gradum
ANC	African National Congress
CHE	Council on Higher Education, South Africa
DMU	Data Management Unit, Rhodes University
DoE	Department of Education
GT	Grounded Theory
HDG	Higher Degrees Guide (Rhodes University)
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HEQC(SA)	Higher Education Quality Committee, South Africa
HEQC(UK)	Higher Education Quality Council, United Kingdom
HEQF	Higher Education Qualifications Framework, South Africa
HESA	Higher Education South Africa
HoD	Head of Department
MA	Master of Arts
MBA	Master of Business Administration
MSc	Master of Science
NPHE	National Plan for Higher Education, South Africa
NQF	National Qualifications Framework, South Africa
P/A	Per Annum
PG	Postgraduate
QDA	Qualitative Data Analysis
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
RU	Rhodes University
RBS	Rhodes University Business School
SA	South Africa
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
UG	Undergraduate
UK	United Kingdom
UNISA	University of South Africa
USA	United States of America
UWC	University of the Western Cape
VC	Vice-Chancellor

CHAPTER ONE: OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

Human intelligence is richer and more dynamic than we have been led to believe by formal academic education. (Sir Ken Robinson)

1.1 Introduction

This Chapter provides an overview of the thesis – it outlines the research context and goals, and provides a brief summary of the aims of each Chapter. In addition, the research orientation is presented, and the limitations of the study are discussed.

1.2 The Research Context: Background to the Study

The majority of postgraduate students, both in South Africa and internationally, enter higher degree studies directly from undergraduate qualifications which provide formal minimum admission requirements and enable vertical access to the next level of qualification. However, alternative or non-formal entry to postgraduate studies has historically been a feature of many countries' higher education systems although this practice does not have a universal framework or terminology and is generally not widely advertised or researched.

Alternative access to any level of credit-bearing education is usually obtained by the recognition of prior learning (RPL), a concept which is used in South Africa both for the purpose of awarding formal credit for prior learning, and also for the purpose of granting access to a particular field or level of study (Thomen 2000; SAQA, 2004). Key research into RPL policies and practices at South African higher education institutions indicates however, that much of the focus has been on RPL at the undergraduate level and very little attention has been given to non-formal access to postgraduate study (Breier and Burness, 2003). In addition, institutional and national RPL policies concentrate largely on using RPL to award academic credit rather than as a means of providing access to formal programmes of study. This research will focus only on the use of RPL for the purpose of *access* to a particular field or level of study, in this case, to the Master's degree level.

The above situation raises fundamental questions relating to the basis on which admissions decisions are made when applicants do not have the necessary formal admission requirements. Central to any evaluation of potential or readiness to embark on postgraduate study, is the concept of 'graduateness' (the attributes expected or implicitly assumed of a graduate) and 'functioning knowledge'

(knowledge acquired through experience in a profession or occupation). These concepts are explored further in Chapter 4.

1.3 Research Goals and Objectives

The aim of this study was to undertake a critical evaluation of Rhodes University's policies and practices regarding the Recognition of Prior Learning at the Master's level within a national and international context, and to consider the concept of 'postgraduate readiness' in an attempt to uncover the specific skills and attributes which academic supervisors are looking for in potential Master's students. The overarching research question was therefore:

“What are the generic (non-certificated) attributes which Rhodes University academics expect graduates to possess in order to undertake Master's degree study?”

In order to understand the context in which admissions decisions are made, it was necessary to first examine:

- What formal and informal access routes are available to enter Master's level study internationally, in South Africa, and specifically at Rhodes University?
- What is the motivation for offering alternative access to higher degree studies at the national and institutional levels?
- How do students who are admitted to Master's level study via alternative routes at Rhodes University fare compared to those admitted via the conventional route?

Arising out of this, the research aimed to consider ways in which Rhodes University's current admission process and practices for Master's degrees could be enhanced.

1.4 Research Orientation and Methodology

A case study was undertaken of Rhodes University using grounded theory methodology within an interpretive paradigm. Two central premises of grounded theory – that theory emerges from the data and that relevant literature should preferably only be reviewed after data has been collected – provided an appropriate methodology as very little research has been published in the area of alternative access to Master's level studies. An interpretive approach, which aims to understand a situation from the unique point of view of the subject (Cohen et al, 2007), was essential as the research was concerned with exploring the context in which students are admitted to Master's degree studies as well as understanding

the subjective interpretation and application of the concept of graduateness. As advocated in grounded theory, a flexible approach was adopted order to explore findings as they emerged during the data collection phase.

Quantitative data was gathered by analysing admissions to Master's degrees in four Faculties at Rhodes University (Commerce, Education, Humanities and Science) over a period of ten years, 1999-2008. By the time the writing-up stage of the thesis was reached, an additional year of data had subsequently become available, so 2009 was added to the dataset for the dropout and distinction cohort analysis.

Qualitative data was obtained by undertaking a historical documentary analysis of written motivations submitted to Faculty boards in support of students applying for alternative admission during this period, 1999 - 2008. In addition, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted over a period of eighteen months with sixteen senior staff members at RU, including Faculty Deans, Supervisors, the Registrar, the Dean: Teaching and Learning, and the Vice-Chancellor. During the process of data collection, field notes, memos and interview summaries were used to capture observations and record key themes as they began emerging from the data.

1.5 Potential Limitations of this Study

Firstly, there were limitations relating to the analysis of historical data: demographic details of Master's candidates are not provided in Rhodes University's Senate minutes so identifying trends or possible common denominators in terms of students' personal backgrounds did not form part of this study. In addition, student records are continuously updated in retrospect so the figures obtained for the quantitative analysis would differ according to the date on which they were extracted from the University's database. This would make exact replication of the tables and graphs generated for this study difficult if not impossible. However, this is an accepted phenomenon in higher education information management systems, and the differences would generally not be significant enough to invalidate the findings.

Secondly, Master's students themselves were not interviewed in this study as almost all would have left the University by the time the study was undertaken. More importantly however, the study was concerned with ascertaining *staff* members' views on graduate attributes and postgraduate readiness. Research into the experience of students who have been admitted via RPL compared to those who meet the formal requirements, would be a valuable area for future investigation.

Thirdly, there is limited national and international literature published in the area of postgraduate RPL. Recognition of Prior Learning is a relatively new area for academic research and much of the available literature focuses on the use and effectiveness of RPL as a means of awarding credit rather than as a means of widening access. The published literature also focuses almost exclusively on RPL at the undergraduate level and very little attention is paid to recognizing prior learning for the purposes of awarding credit or providing access at the postgraduate level. International comparisons also proved to be difficult as the term RPL is not uniformly interpreted or applied within the different educational systems around the world.

Fourthly, as Director of Institutional Planning during the period of data gathering at the institution which is the focus of the study, I worked alongside the Deans and senior staff members whom I interviewed and whose practices and attitudes the study was intended to critically evaluate. Whilst this raises the limitations of familiarity and professional sensitivity, I found colleagues more than willing to reflect critically on their own practices and understandings as well as being able to suspend personal relationships during the formal interviews. In fact, my position in the University proved to be a major advantage as it provided first-hand experience of the context in which decisions are made, and also enabled easy access to statistical data as well as the interview subjects – senior academics and executives within the University who would perhaps not normally be willing or able to spare the time and requisite deep reflection on this issue, for an unknown researcher.

Finally, there were personal and professional challenges, if not limitations, to my own position as researcher. As a mature student myself with many years of experience in a higher education institution, I acknowledge a bias towards the optimistic view of RPL candidates as being more motivated and more likely to succeed. However, I have tried to minimise this bias by ensuring any discussion and conclusions are based on detailed interviews, empirical data, formal documentary analysis and substantiated argument.

1.6 Overview and Structure of the Thesis

In essence, the study:

- Describes the existing arrangements (formal and alternative) for access to Master's degree study internationally, nationally, and specifically at RU;
- Describes the process and basis on which decisions are made regarding access to Master's level study at Rhodes University;

- Considers success rates (completion, time taken to completion and distinction ratios) of RU Master's level students according to their entry status;
- Explores and critiques current definitions and understandings of 'graduateness';
- Identifies generic attributes (skills, knowledge, values, attitudes etc) which RU staff expect or assume graduates possess in order to embark on Master's level study, and proposes the adoption of the term 'postgraduate readiness' to distinguish readiness for postgraduate study from readiness for the world of work; and
- Suggests a framework for the assessment of potential Master's candidates - both those who do and those who do not have the formal academic requirements for automatic admission - for use at Rhodes University and potentially also at other higher education institutions.

Chapter Two considers the changing role of higher education internationally and in South Africa, and aims to build a foundation for the analysis of graduateness in a later chapter. It describes the structure of HE in SA and discusses the state of postgraduate education in SA, aiming to explore the claim that increasing and widening access to postgraduate study is a national and institutional goal. The context of RU and the challenges identified by the University are examined in relation to institutional culture and identity which, it will be argued in subsequent chapters, impact on an institution's approach to RPL.

Chapter Three sets out to consider how a Master's degree is defined, and what is required in order to be admitted to this level of study internationally, in South Africa, and at RU in particular. The concept of RPL and how prior learning is recognised at the postgraduate level is discussed with particular reference to RU. The understanding and use of the term *ad eundem gradum* is explored and its recent re-interpretation as RPL at RU is discussed. This Chapter outlines the requirements for both formal and alternative access to Master's level study, and lays the foundation for the development of a framework and criteria for considering alternative admissions in future at RU.

Chapter Four aims to analyse the concept of graduateness – how it is defined and interpreted internationally, in SA and at RU, and how it relates to readiness for postgraduate study as opposed to readiness for the world of work. The relationship between graduateness, institutional culture, learning outcomes and functioning knowledge is examined, and some criticisms of the concept of graduateness from academics are considered. A deeper look is taken at how the concept is implemented at RU in terms of its relationship to the University's vision and mission

and to the requirements for awarding a Master's degree, and how it is interpreted in RU's RPL policy. RU's specific institutional culture and focus on 'where leaders learn' are examined in order to explicate RU's interpretation of graduateness, given that the University has not formally discussed this concept nor made any public statements on what it considers to be desirable graduate attributes. Graduate attributes – the actual skills, attitudes and achievements graduates are expected to possess – are then discussed with a view to identifying generic attributes which supervisors could use to assess applications from potential Master's students. An argument is made that while 'graduateness' may be appropriate to conceptualise 'readiness for the world of work', a different, more appropriate term – postgraduate readiness – should rather be utilized to indicate 'readiness for postgraduate study'.

Chapter Five explains how the research questions were encountered, and sets out the research orientation and methodological framework of the study. It aims to justify the choice of an interpretive, mixed method, grounded theory approach and describes the specific methods used: historical documentary analysis, interviews and empirical data analysis. The assumptions and expectations encountered at the commencement of the study are noted in order that they may be revisited in the conclusions. Reliability, validity and research ethics relating to the study are also presented.

Chapter Six presents the findings of a statistical analysis of student admissions data: time taken to completion as well as success, dropout and distinction rates of formal vs RPL admissions. Difficulties encountered in the collection and analysis of student records are also discussed.

Chapter Seven presents the outcomes of a qualitative analysis of interviews with senior staff at RU as well as a content analysis of RU motivation records (letters and paragraphs formally submitted in support of alternative admissions candidates). Emergent themes and categories are discussed, focusing on staff attitudes towards RPL, the circumstances under which RPL should be considered at Master's level, staff and students' awareness of RPL at RU, the comparison of RPL students to formal admissions, RPL as a redress strategy, and RPL in the context of RU's institutional culture. An overarching theme of resistance - to change and to externally imposed rules and regulations - is identified and discussed.

Chapter Eight deals with the concept of Postgraduate Readiness. It examines interviewees' opinions on the concept, and considers the evidence presented in support of alternative admissions in interviews and motivation records. Inconsistencies and anomalies found during the course of the study regarding the implementation of the AEG rule at Rhodes are also presented.

Chapter Nine brings together the overall findings of the study with a focus on access and postgraduate readiness, in relation to the original research questions. In conclusion, an institutional framework for considering future applications for both RPL and formal admissions to Master's degree studies at Rhodes University is proposed.

CHAPTER TWO: THE HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

2.1 Introduction

This Chapter considers the role and evolution of higher education over time, with particular reference to recent developments in South African higher education. The current state and structure of postgraduate education in South Africa and at Rhodes University is discussed and a brief outline of Rhodes' identity and institutional culture is provided.

2.2 The Role of Higher Education in Society

The earliest universities were concerned with "knowledge preservation, religious values and social ethics" and later evolved to be associated with the professions, elites and liberal humanism. (Schreuder, 2013: xxxi). Wilhelm von Humboldt wrote in 1810 that a university should be based on three principles: unity of research and teaching, freedom of teaching, and academic self-governance. (Bolton & Lucas, 2008). John Henry Newman, in his seminal book "The Idea of a University", stated that "A University is a place for the communication and circulation of thought... where inquiry is pushed forward... discoveries verified and perfected... Mutual education... is one of the great and incessant occupations of human society." (Newman, 1852) The Western conceptualisation of a university then, based on Newman's and Humboldt's principles, provided an almost universal model for higher education (Bolton and Lucas, 2008). This 'traditional university' embraced collegiality "as a basis for authority and management in the university: the essentially democratic notion of academic teachers in a social fellowship, and in which the vice-chancellor (or president) is merely the first among equals among the staff." (Schreuder, 2013: xxxviii) Typically, single-campus institutions served a small number of privileged 18 to 21 year old students who were expected to contribute towards the development of society and the 'public good'.

According to Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley however, an "academic revolution has taken place in higher education in the past half century marked by transformations unprecedented in scope and diversity." (2009, in Schreuder, 2013) Whether the revolution has resulted in losses or gains remains a topic of much debate. In the recently published book "Universities for a New World" (2013), international historian and educationalist Deryck M Schreuder identifies some of the credits and deficits of this academic revolution, as summarised in Table 1 below:

TABLE 1: Gains and Losses of the Academic Revolution in Higher Education

GAINS	LOSSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A huge increase in participation rates (the number of students enrolled in higher education as a proportion of a population) • An increase in trans-border education and international students • New pedagogies and new modes of education delivery are transforming the student experience • A massive advance in knowledge generation and knowledge transfer • New areas of human endeavour and productivity have been created • Nations are discovering the power of educating and skilling the populace • Boundaries between public and private provision of higher education have been redrawn and private providers now assist in widening access, especially in lower-income countries • Creative funding streams such as patents, research grants, industry contracts, professional services etc have diversified and strengthened institutional incomes • HE institutions have become more 'business-like' in the sense of being more professional and have widened their missions • Institutions are becoming transnational and networks of universities collaborate and interact at unprecedented levels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is increasingly difficult to define what constitutes a 'university' in the 21st Century, and claims for university status are all too easy • Many HEI's have given the traditional 'idea of a university' a utilitarian meaning and aspire towards massification and innovation rather than collegiality • Top-down managerial cultures dominated by professional staff rather than academics are becoming the norm • The inability of many governments to adequately fund their HE systems means an increasing reliance on the private sector to meet educational needs • Student-staff ratios are worsening • Universities are having to rely ever more heavily on student fees as well as other third-stream income which results in HE itself becoming a competitive industry with brand and ranking being critical in an institution's success • The market for 'knowledge workers' is increasingly competitive and there is a general flow of teaching and research talent from South to North • The domination of English as a language of learning is to some extent leading to the homogenisation of cross-cultural engagements

In addition, Schreuder (2013: xxxiv) identifies some of the paradoxes emerging from the rapid change in the role and meaning of higher education:

- High quality is expected at the same time as increasing access and participation rates;
- Academic autonomy is seen as a core value while institutional governance is increasingly driven by external pressures such as the State and market forces;
- Diversity in institutional missions is valued to meet societal needs yet uniformity of performance and provision is increasing;

- Governments aspire to be ‘knowledge nations’ but are rarely able to meet the costs involved;
- Pure research is praised in the abstract while short-term outcomes are expected;
- Global rankings rely heavily on research achievements but national imperatives are increasingly focused on dealing with social and economic problems.

2.3 Higher Education in South Africa

2.3.1 The Role of Higher Education in South Africa

The South African White Paper 3 on Higher Education (DoE, 1997) identifies three main roles for higher education in a ‘knowledge-driven world’: human resource development, high-level skills training, and the production, acquisition and application of new knowledge, and states that universities are meant to embody the following core principles: equity and redress; democratisation; development; quality; effectiveness and efficiency; academic freedom; institutional autonomy (and) public accountability. (DoE, 1997: sections 1:12 - 1:25)

According to the Council on Higher Education (CHE), higher education is “...charged with developing a citizenry capable of participating effectively in democratic processes... with producing intellectuals... and with producing high-level skilled graduates and new bases of knowledge to drive economic and social development and to enhance the overall levels of intellectual and cultural development.” (CHE 2004b: 14)

Prior to the first democratic elections in 1994 when the African National Congress (ANC) came to power, South Africa had 36 higher education institutions. “Having inherited a higher education ‘system’ profoundly shaped by social, political and economic inequalities of a class, race, gender, institutional and spatial nature, South Africa’s new democratic government committed itself to ‘transforming’ higher education as well as the inherited apartheid social and economic structure and institutionalising a new social order.” (Badat, 2007: 5) In 1997, the ANC indicated its goal to fundamentally change the higher education landscape in its “Education White Paper 3” entitled “A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education.” (DoE, 1997) and in 2001, detailed plans were outlined in the “National Plan for Higher Education” (RSA, 2001). The main goals of the National Plan are provided in Table 2 below:

Table 2: Goals and Strategic Objectives of the National Plan for HE, 2001

	GOALS	STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES
1.	Provide a full spectrum of advanced educational opportunities for an expanding range of the population without any form of discrimination	Produce graduates with skills and competencies to meet the human resource development needs of South Africa
2.	Promote equity of access and fair chances for success and advance redress for past inequalities	Reflect demographic realities in South Africa in student and staff composition and ensure that 'race' and gender profiles of graduates reflect the profile of student enrolments
3.	Diversify the system in terms of missions and programmes mix to meet national and regional needs	Ensure diversity through mission and programme differentiation
4.	Secure and advance high-level research capacity to ensure intellectual enquiry and application of research for technological improvement and social development	Sustain current research strengths and promote research required to meet national development needs and build competitive capabilities
5.	Build new institutional and organisational forms and new institutional identities and cultures as part of a co-ordinated national HE system	Foster collaboration at regional level and restructure the institutional landscape

Source: National Plan for Higher Education, RSA, 2001

The main problems characterising higher education under apartheid are summarised as follows:

- historical inequality leading to unequal standards of provision across the higher education system;
 - lack of access to higher education for members of disadvantaged communities and skewed representation of the student and staff profiles in comparison to the demographics of the country;
 - inefficiency and ineffectiveness; high failure and drop-out rates, especially for black students and unacceptably long periods taken to complete degrees;
 - irrelevance of the content of many programmes for the South African and broader African context;
 - inadequate research productivity.
- (Botha, Favish and Stephenson, 2008: 29-30)

Twenty-three HE institutions existed once the merger and incorporation process was completed in 2005: eleven universities, six comprehensive universities and six universities of technology¹ (Eloff, 2011).

Three main instruments were introduced by the post-apartheid state to steer the higher education system towards addressing the problem noted above: formal quality assurance, the introduction of a new funding framework which directed funding towards the attainment of key goals in the National Plan for Higher

¹ 'Universities of Technology' are institutions previously known as technikons and 'Comprehensive Universities' combine both university-type and technikon-type programmes. (CHE, 2004)

Education, and the use of three-year rolling plans submitted by institutions to determine the numbers of students each institution is permitted to enrol and, consequently obtain government subsidy. (Ibid)

Several other State interventions followed, including a language policy for HE which was introduced in 2002 in order to develop a multilingual environment and ensure languages of instruction do not “serve as a barrier to access and success”, and in 2003 the CHE submitted its advice to the Minister of Education on a redress policy and strategy for higher education. (CHE, 2004b)

In his deliberations on the concept of a University, South African higher education specialist Saleem Badat wrote in 2007 that the core characteristics of a university are four-fold:

- A university produces and disseminates knowledge which advances our understanding of our natural and social worlds, and enriches our accumulated ‘cultural inheritances’ and heritage;
 - A university cultivates and forms the cognitive character of students so that they can think effectively and critically;
 - A university is committed to the spirit of truth and allows intellectual enquiry to go where it will without any boundaries;
 - A university possesses the necessary academic freedom, appropriate self-rule by academics and institutional autonomy to produce and disseminate knowledge.
- (Badat, 2007: 13)

Badat goes on to state that “There is a wide range and diversity of purposes and goals accorded to higher education” and questions whether the purposes and goals that have been defined for South African higher education advance or erode the meaning of higher education and of a university. (ibid: 14)

2.3.2 The Structure of Higher Education Qualifications in South Africa

In 2007, the Minister of Education published the Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQF) which was a major development in the pursuit of an overriding national goal – to establish a single but diverse and differentiated higher education system for South Africa. The HEQF provided “... the basis for integrating all higher education qualifications into the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and its structures for standards generation and quality assurance.” (RSA, 2007)

The South African National Qualifications Framework has ten levels, with levels 5 to 10 designated as ‘higher education’ (ie the HEQF). Levels 5-7 are considered undergraduate and levels 8-10 are postgraduate. Each NQF level has a ‘level descriptor’ which indicates the different levels of complexity of qualifications on the

framework. (HEQF, 2007, Appendix 4) Level descriptors in relation to Master’s degrees will be discussed further in Chapter 4 on ‘Graduateness’. Nine qualification types are defined on the HEQF:

Table 3: Qualification Types on the Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQF)

HIGHER EDUCATION QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK		
QUALIFICATION	LEVEL	CREDITS*
Higher Certificate	5	120
Advanced Certificate	6	120
Diploma	6	360
Advanced Diploma	7	120
Bachelor’s Degree	7	360/480
Postgraduate Diploma	8	120
Bachelor Honours Degree	8	120
Master’s Degree	9	180
Doctoral Degree	10	360

*10 notional study hours equal 1 credit. Credit ratings as indicated above are minima.

Source: HEQF, 2007

2.3.3 The State of Postgraduate Education in South Africa

The National Plan on Higher Education took the White Paper’s goal, ‘To secure and advance high-level research capacity which can ensure both the continuation of self-initiated, open-ended intellectual inquiry, and the sustained application of research activities to technological improvement and social development (White Paper, 1997: 1.27) as the framework to establish and give effect to five priorities: increase the graduate output, especially doctoral graduates, increase research outputs; sustain existing research capacity and create new centres of excellence, facilitate partnerships and collaboration in research and postgraduate training; and promote articulation between the different elements of the research system (RSA, 2001: 70).

Various programmes, support mechanisms and State funded capacity development initiatives were subsequently introduced in an attempt to increase the number of master’s and doctoral graduates. According to a report on postgraduate studies in South Africa (CHE, 2009), “...higher education has made progress in changing the demographics of postgraduate enrolment and graduations in relation to both race and gender; and the number of enrolments at postgraduate level has increased considerably since 1995.” (CHE 2009: vii) The Report goes on to note that “High international demand for South African graduates, together with the continuing

brain drain of professionals, provide an urgent imperative to increase the production of postgraduate students in order for the country to remain competitive and to be able to generate knowledge that is responsive to a wide range of societal needs.” (ibid: ix)

Changes within the HE sector over the past 10-15 years impacting on postgraduate study are noted as rapid massification of the student body, significant transformation of the demographics of postgraduate students, increased internationalisation, especially of postgraduate students, and the merging of several South African HE institutions. (ibid: 1)

Points emerging from the CHE’s analysis of postgraduate education of direct significance to this study are:

- The SA HE system grew substantially between 1990 and 2005 – the number of students almost doubled (from 385 700 in 1990 to 715 800 in 2005);
- The number of Master’s and Doctoral enrolments increased during this period;
- However, postgraduate students as a proportion of the overall number of graduates decreased from 31.3% to 26.9% ;
- Master’s enrolments increased from 14 162 in 2000 to 19 352 in 2003, then declined to 17 398 in 2005;
- The average annual growth rate for Master’s enrolments between 2000 and 2005 was 4.4%;
- On average, Master’s students take about 3 years to graduate;
- The proportion of Master’s graduates as a percentage of the overall number of graduates in SA HEI’s was 7% in 2005 (ranging between 0% and 18% for individual institutions) - for Rhodes University this figure was 8% in 2005.

Source: (CHE HE Monitor, 2009)

In relation to the ‘efficiency’ of the SA HE system (defined as the ratio of graduates to first enrolments), the number of Master’s students as a percentage of total enrolments increased from 32% in 2000 to 37% in 2005 whereas the percentage of Master’s graduates declined from 67% in 2001 to 52% in 2005. “This means that fewer Master’s students, relative to the number of recurring students, have graduated since 2002” or in other words, the system is producing fewer Master’s graduates in relative terms. (ibid: 16) The Report suggest that this is a result of a ‘pile-up’ effect – a situation where students remain enrolled for their degree much longer than expected. The report goes on to examine the time taken to graduate and finds that:

- the average Master’s student takes 3 years to complete their degree;
- there is no statistical difference in completion rates according to subgroup (gender, race, field of study or place of study);

- A 'time to degree' of 3 years compares favourably to completion rates for Master's students in Europe, Australia and North America. (ibid: 22)

2.4 Rhodes University

2.4.1 Rhodes University in Context

Rhodes University, established in Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa in 1904, is the smallest university in South Africa with approximately 7500 students, 300 academic staff and 1000 support staff (RU Digest of Statistics, 2012) in six faculties: Humanities, Education, Law, Pharmacy, Science and Commerce. Approximately 75% of the students are undergraduates with the majority of enrolments – both PG and UG – in the humanities and social sciences (including education and law), followed by science and commerce. Rhodes is located in a small 'university town' and describes itself as having "a reputation for high quality in terms of student experience, academic achievement and research output" (RU Audit Portfolio, 2005). The University's small size and rural location have shaped its development and conferred a particular set of advantages and challenges. Until 2004, Rhodes had a strong and rapidly growing satellite campus in East London but this was incorporated into the University of Fort Hare as part of the national restructuring exercise.

The University's favourable student:staff ratios (average 16:1 in 2012), "facilitates easy and informal contact between students and academics at the cutting edge of their disciplines and so fosters collegiality and good scholarship" (RU Audit Portfolio, 2005: 7). According to the University's self-evaluation report prepared for the national Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) audit undertaken in 2005, a major advantage of being small is that it:

[F]acilitates transparency and good governance and enables a hands-on approach by the Vice-Chancellor and senior management. All students and staff have easy access to senior managers and an 'open-door policy' is a characteristic of the institution's management style. Moreover, the small number of academic staff means that a high proportion sit on Faculty committees and Faculty Boards which report in turn to Senate sub-committees and Senate. The full Senate normally meets 5 times per annum and is a widely representative and effective decision making body. Rhodes University functions well; it has long had financial stability, good leadership, effective management and a depth of administrative capacity. (ibid: 7)

The University's self-evaluation report goes on to say that:

The University has the reputation of being a well-established liberal arts institution with strong humanities, science, law, education, commerce and pharmacy faculties. Students are drawn from the Eastern Cape, the major urban regions of South and Southern Africa and beyond. The University also has the best research record in the Province. In 2000 it produced some 60% of the total research publication outputs of the eight higher education institutions in the Province and 40% of the region's masters and doctoral graduates. Rhodes University may be small but its contribution to higher education in Southern Africa has always exceeded what might be expected on a pro rata basis.
(ibid: 7)

The University describes its mission as to being to:

Create a research based teaching and learning environment that will encourage students to reach their full potential, that is supportive of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and that will produce critical, capable and skilled graduates who can adapt to changing environments. To promote excellence and innovation in teaching and learning the University provides its staff with access to academic development opportunities.
(ibid: 8)

2.4.2 The Development of Rhodes University's Identity

The University's vision and mission statement (Appendix 1) was developed in the late 1990's and formally approved by the institution's Council in 2000. It was used as the basis for the University's Self-Evaluation Report in preparation for the external audit undertaken by the HEQC in 2005. However, as noted in a document entitled "Critical Reflections on Rhodes: 2006-2011" prepared by the University's Vice-Chancellor Dr Saleem Badat for a university-wide strategic planning 'think-tank' held in July 2011:

[T]here were critiques of various aspects of the Rhodes vision and mission statement [at the previous think-tank, held in July 2006] – the meaning of an 'African identity' and what precisely was meant by 'sound moral values.' Some questioned the need for a vision and mission statement at all, and posed whether a clear statement that set out the social purposes of Rhodes University, its specific goals, and its values and commitments should not suffice.
(Badat, 2011)

In addition, the notion of being a 'liberal arts' institution was challenged by the HEQC in its Audit Report of 2006²:

The liberal arts tradition, of which Rhodes sees itself a part, has its roots in the 19th Century and, to a large extent, is inspired by John Newman's writings on the concept of "a university". The [HEQC Audit] Panel noted that, despite its ostensible centrality to Rhodes' identity, the implications of the liberal arts tradition for Rhodes have not

² Whilst the HEQC audit of Rhodes University was held in September 2005, the formal audit report was only received by the University in January 2007 although it is dated December 2006.

been considered in any strategic document or any other documentary appendix received or requested by the Panel.
(CHE, 2006: 10)

Regarding the University's 'research identity', Badat noted that "Some consider Rhodes to be a 'research intensive' institution. Phrases such as 'liberal arts', 'research intensive' and the like do not always easily capture identity, nor do justice to the precise character of a particular university." (Badat, 2011: 5)

A section on transformation and institutional culture in the University's self-evaluation report reveals the institution's own understanding of its cultural environment in the mid-2000's:

More important than the statistics is the issue of institutional culture – the general ethos of the institution, its characteristic forms and practices and its dominant value systems which are embodied in the structures through which institutional life is pursued. It is well recognised that some aspects of institutional culture may be perceived by some staff, students and other stakeholders as alienating or even hostile. Further, it is in the long established institutions that such cultures are deeply embedded and difficult to change. Rhodes University is well aware of this situation and of the need to adopt a proactive approach to its mission statement which states that the University undertakes to 'develop shared values which embrace basic human and civil rights; acknowledge and be sensitive to the problems created by the legacy of apartheid, to reject all forms of unfair discrimination and to ensure that appropriate corrective measures are employed to address past imbalances.
(RU 2005: 11-12)

The HEQC audit report noted that:

[I]nterviews held with staff and students suggest that Rhodes urgently needs to confront the issues which have surfaced through its own investigations into institutional culture, and to understand some of these issues better in order to develop appropriate interventions.
(CHE, 2006: 13)

One of the recommendations included in the 2006 HEQC audit report was that:

[T]he University consider the development of a bold and transparent strategy to address negative aspects of its institutional culture. This needs to include an institution-wide implementation plan to transform relevant aspects of Rhodes' institutional culture and clear monitoring mechanisms to track progress.
(ibid)

However, the situation had not improved significantly by 2011 insofar as institutional culture is concerned, with the VC noting that "Rhodes cannot as yet claim to truly be a home for all. There continue to be manifestations among students and staff of the

lack of respect for difference and diversity, of prejudice and intolerance, and unacceptable conduct.” (Badat, 2011:14) Further, he identified:

[A] strong laissez faire culture at Rhodes. This laissez faire culture is predicated on certain dubious assumptions and seemingly equates a laissez faire approach with safeguarding academic freedom and organisational autonomy. It is evidenced in a holding fast to doubtful conventional wisdoms and a seeming aversion to planning and prioritisation, quality assurance and, ultimately, quality promotion. The laissez faire approach is seemingly content to wait for problems to manifest *before* willing to address all too evident weaknesses and shortcomings. Ultimately, the laissez faire culture is an aversion also to *any* real democratic and peer accountability. (Badat, 2011:19)

Challenges currently facing Rhodes, as identified by the Vice-Chancellor in his Critical Reflections document, which are pertinent to this study are:

- Transformation – the need to create an enabling environment which is free from prejudice and intolerance in which difference and diversity - whether class, racial, gender, national, linguistic, religious or sexual orientation - are appreciated and all feel respected and affirmed;
- Modernisation – the need to address the lack of systems, documented protocols and effective and efficient procedures, the lack of innovation, the lack of proactive engagement and responsiveness, and inflexibility in certain areas of institutional life;
- The need to give effect to Rhodes’ overall institutional development strategy of increasing further its current postgraduate numbers;
- Developing appropriate institutional arrangements to enhance the quantity, the quality, the academic and social experience and the equity profile of our postgraduates, and especially South African postgraduates;
- Reconsidering academic staff norms in the context of a trajectory of becoming more postgraduate and research-oriented;
- Non- or non-timeous or inadequate engagement or/and responses on the part of structures and Offices with critical issues which compromises inclusive processes of policy- and decision-making, delays decision-making and implementation with various negative consequences;
- The absence of or ineffectual monitoring of implementation. (Badat, 2011: 18-24)

2.4.3 Rhodes University Governance Structures

The University’s Council, which comprises executive management, representatives of staff, donors, students, alumni, local government and a number of national government appointees, is the governing body of the institution and is empowered to frame statutes and rules governing the general conduct and organisation of the University and to make all staff appointments. The Senate, comprising full professors and heads of academic departments and research institutes as well as student and staff representatives, is the guardian of academic standards and supervises teaching and learning within the University. Thirty four academic

departments are organised into six faculties: Humanities, Science, Law, Education, Commerce and Pharmacy, for each of which a Board acts as a committee of the Senate. The Chair of the Board is the Dean of the Faculty. The titular Head of the University is the Chancellor, elected by Council, and the chief executive officer is the Vice-Chancellor. Heads of Departments and Deans are appointed on three year terms and are elected by their Faculties (as opposed to being executive appointments). The decision-making path regarding academic issues, including postgraduate student admissions, would be: Department → Faculty → Senate → Council.

2.4.4 The Postgraduate Context at Rhodes University

In 2010, Rhodes University set itself a trajectory of increasing its proportion of postgraduate students – from 23% to 30% of the total number of students by 2013 – indicating to the Minister of Higher Education and Training in its enrolment plan that:

At the postgraduate level, an annual average growth rate is predicted at approximately 7% per annum. This is in recognition of the strategic opportunities for Rhodes in this area, as well as the organic growth which has already been taking place in postgraduate numbers over the past few years, we believe as a result of the ideal conditions offered at Rhodes for postgraduate study: low student:staff ratios, a high proportion of academics with doctorates, good throughput rates, a strong publication record, excellent academic facilities and individual attention, as well as a 24/7 campus which is never more than a few minutes commute from students' residences or digs. A R75million Library building and renovation project has recently been completed and includes a dedicated research commons with state-of-the-art facilities for Master's and Doctoral students as well as research staff.
(RU Enrolment Plan 2011-2013 covering letter to Minister of HET, 5 Oct 2010)

The University went on to say that 'becoming more postgraduate and research oriented' would be the institution's main strategic thrust in the 2010-2013 enrolment cycle and that in aiming to enhance the quality, quantity and equity profile of postgraduates, specific strategies, policies and mechanisms would be developed in relation to:

- Postgraduate administrative processes
 - Recruitment and retention of postgraduates
 - The academic organisation of postgraduate studies and their related responsibilities
 - The structure of postgraduate education
 - The introduction of new postgraduate programmes
 - Enhancement of supervisory capacity and capabilities
 - The provision of appropriate and effective postgraduate support and facilities
 - Infrastructure requirements, including postgraduate residences
 - Financial support for postgraduate students
- (ibid)

2.5 Concluding Summary

The role of higher education and the mission of higher education institutions has undergone rapid change over the past half century. However, there is no doubt that HE remains a positive, integral and beneficial part of society. In some countries, particularly SA, it is seen as a major player in the State's strategies to achieve its objectives. SA HE objectives emphasise 'public good', ensuring equity, and widening access. However, SA HE has been in a state of flux and transformation for the past decade, and as the pursuit of many goals simultaneously (some of which are contradictory – such as 'improve success rates' at the same time as 'widening access') is almost impossible, certain goals must be prioritised. Whilst increasing postgraduate numbers is a stated aim of the NPHE, no policies or specific strategies to widen access via RPL at the postgraduate level have been published. It is therefore assumed that RPL at the postgraduate level is not a current national priority.

South African national HE policy and funding encourages increasing the numbers of postgraduate students, and the broadening of access opportunities, but few strategies or mechanisms are outlined for achieving this, and the pool of formally eligible students is small relative to the number of postgraduate students required in terms of national needs and institutional enrolment plans (references: National Plan for HE, Ministerial Funding Statements, National and RU student enrolment plans).

Rhodes University is evolving from a traditional and conservative university with an institutional culture which is not all-inclusive, towards a commitment to transformation and ensuring measures are taken to correct past imbalances - but is making very slow progress although intentions to address this have been outlined by the current VC. One of the University's main strategic thrusts for the foreseeable future is to increase the number of postgraduate students and widen access, but no specific plans appear to have been made to facilitate this at the postgraduate level. In particular, RU has 'symbolic' (passive rather than active) policies with poor monitoring of implementation. Of particular relevance to this study is the weak implementation of the Recognition of Prior Learning policy and this, together with a resistant institutional culture, could explain why the University does not actively market the alternative entry option and might be the reason Rhodes enrolls very few RPL students at the Master's level. This is discussed further in Chapter 3.

CHAPTER THREE: ACCESS TO MASTER'S DEGREE STUDY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the definition and structure of Master's degrees within the context of higher education frameworks and policies internationally, nationally and at Rhodes University. Access to Master's level study is then explored with a focus on the recognition of prior learning and specifically the understanding and use of the term *ad eundem gradum*.

3.2 Higher Education Qualifications Frameworks

"Graduate education in the United States will almost certainly be different from the system offered in your country." This quote, taken from a website providing information on graduate study in the United States of America (<http://www.educationusa.info/> accessed 24 Sept 2012) illustrates the absence of conformity between higher education systems internationally.

An overarching, international 'qualifications framework' which describes the structure, admission requirements, duration and titles of higher education qualifications across the world does not currently exist. Even within individual countries, uniformity is rare. An example is provided by the UK's Quality Assurance Agency (QAA UK, 2010: 3):

Various types of master's degrees exist in UK higher education. There are no nationally-agreed definitions of types, and awards with similar titles can vary in nature both between institutions and across disciplines. This situation reflects the independent and autonomous nature of UK higher education institutions and the diversity of traditions that exist within different disciplines.

Over the past 10-20 years however, many countries have introduced 'national qualifications frameworks' (NQFs) in an attempt to achieve consistency, equivalence and comparability of qualifications within their own education systems. In some parts of the world, countries in close geographical proximity have begun developing regional qualifications frameworks, for example within the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) area. Another example of regional cooperation is England, Wales and Northern Ireland in the development of a *Framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), in 2008.

National Qualification Frameworks are:

[D]iverse in their structure, coverage, operational purposes and governance. Most share the purposes of providing greater transparency for qualifications, support for skills standards systems, means of managing quality assurance in the context of the proliferation of qualifications, and the international recognition of qualifications. (APEC, Mapping Qualification Frameworks, 2009: 22)

One of the difficulties in developing common qualifications frameworks is that historically, many universities were established and operated independently from national governments and traditionally “have tended to guard their autonomy and only accept frameworks that largely reflect their existing practices.” (Ibid: 2)

There is thus a wide variation between and within educational systems of how qualifications are structured and accredited which makes international comparisons difficult if not impossible.

3.3 Definition of a Master’s Degree

Several definitions of a Master’s degree can be found, ranging from the simple “an advanced college or university degree” (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/master-s-degree>) to Wikipedia’s more detailed definition of a Master’s degree as “an academic degree granted to individuals who have undergone study demonstrating a mastery or high-order overview of a specific field of study or area of professional practice.” Graduates are expected to gain “advanced knowledge of a specialized body of theoretical and applied topics; high order skills in analysis, critical evaluation or professional application; and the ability to solve complex problems and think rigorously and independently” within the area studied. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Master's_degree, 21 Sept 2012)

Master’s degrees can be course-based, research-based, or a combination of the two, and generally take one to three years to complete following a three-year bachelor’s plus a one-year honours degree, or a four-year undergraduate degree.

Latin is often used to name the degrees, because of the flexibility of the word order in Latin. For instance, a Master of Arts may be known as *magister artium* or *artium magister* (Ibid). Increasingly however, international practice is to use English names, often with the addition of a ‘qualifier’ to indicate the particular focus of the research for example ‘Master of Education in English Language Teaching’ or ‘Master of Science in Forensic Entomology’.

The admission requirements and structure of Master’s degrees differ according to country and even university. In many systems, such as the United States, South Africa and Japan, a Master’s degree is a postgraduate academic degree. In the UK,

whilst an 'Integrated Master's' degree can be earned by adding a dissertation to a four-year Bachelor of Science or Engineering degree, most Master's degrees are postgraduate and are classified according to three broad types: 'research', 'specialised/advanced study' and 'professional/ practice'. (QAA UK, 2010)

To further confuse matters, a long standing tradition in the UK allows students with a Bachelor's degree from the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge to 'earn' the title of Master of Arts three to six years after graduating from the initial degree (simply by paying a small administration fee, often as little as £10), without undertaking any further study whereas "students from other universities must undertake at least a year's extra study, pay tuition fees averaging £4,250 and pass examinations in order to achieve an MA."

(<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/universityeducation/8318460/Oxbridge-students-MA-degrees-under-threat.html> accessed 30 December 2013)

According to the UK's Quality Assurance Agency however, this title is honorary and is not considered a 'real' Master's degree. "The Master of Arts (MA) granted by the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge is not an academic qualification." (QAA, UK 2010: 3)

3.4 Access to Master's Degree Study

3.4.1 International

In those countries where a Master's degree is considered a postgraduate qualification, admission to the degree normally requires the successful completion of a bachelor's degree or a 'bachelor honours' degree (for example in South Africa and many other Commonwealth countries) although 'relevant work experience' may also qualify a candidate. While in some systems the applicant's undergraduate qualification must be in the same subject as the proposed research area, in others an allied subject may be acceptable - and in other cases (especially coursework-and-thesis Master's degrees), the undergraduate study area is immaterial (this is often the case in admission to a Master of Business Administration in particular).

In the USA, the Master's degree is "designed to provide additional education or training in the student's specialized branch of knowledge, well beyond the level of baccalaureate study." (<http://www.educationusa.info/> accessed 20 September 2012) There are two main types of Master's programmes in the US system: *academic*, which can be undertaken by coursework and thesis or by coursework only and which lead to doctoral level study, and *professional* master's programmes which are "designed to lead the student from the first degree to a particular profession." (Ibid)

Professional Master's degrees usually do not have a thesis requirement and are normally "terminal" degrees, in that they do not lead to doctoral programmes.

European countries follow diverse practices with regards to the structure and naming of Master's degrees, for example:

- In the German and Austrian systems, a five-year undergraduate *Diplom/Magister* is considered equivalent to a Master's degree.
- In Denmark the title *candidatus* or *candidata* (female) abbreviated *cand.* is used as a master's equivalent whereas in Finland and Sweden, the title of 'kand.' equates to a bachelor's degree.
- In France, the equivalent of master's degrees is the combination of two individual diplomas the Master 1 (M1) and Master 2 (M2), following the Bologna Process. Depending on the goal of the student (a doctorate or a professional career) the Master 2 can also be called a "Master Recherche" (Research Master) and a "Master Professionnel" (Professional Master) each with different requirements. To obtain a national diploma for the Master 2 requires a minimum of one-year of study after the Master 1 however a Master 2 often requires 2-years depending on the university's unique requirements. This is often the case with the Master Recherche as it requires time to conduct research and write a thesis.
- In Italy the Master's degree is equivalent to the 2-year *Laurea Specialistica*, whose courses start after earning the 3-year *Laurea Triennale* (roughly equivalent to a Bachelor's degree).
- In Switzerland, the old Licence or Diplom (4 to 5 years in duration) or a postgraduate DEA is considered equivalent to the master's degree.
- In Slovenia, all academic degrees awarded after a minimum of 4 years of university studies and a successful defence of a written thesis are considered equivalent to the master's degree.

(Summarised from Wikipedia, 21 Sept 2012)

In Australia, there are two types of master's degrees: the Master's by Coursework which involves 1.5 to 2 years of full-time study with a combination of classroom-based teaching and a dissertation, which is similar to the American or Canadian two-year master's degree. The Master's by research is a research-based degree that takes two years to complete and leads on to doctoral level study. (www.studyinaustralia.gov.au/ 24 Sept 2012)

In New Zealand, a Master's Degree:

[Q]ualifies individuals who apply an advanced body of knowledge in a range of contexts for research, a pathway for further learning, professional practice and/or scholarship, ... and usually build on a Bachelor's Degree, Graduate Diploma, Bachelor Honours Degree or a Postgraduate Diploma. They may also build on extensive professional experience of an appropriate kind. Their outcomes are demonstrably in advance of undergraduate study, and require individuals to engage in research and/or advanced scholarship. Master's Degrees are constituted in one discipline or coherent programme of study. They may be undertaken by taught courses or research, or by a combination of both.

The New Zealand Qualifications Authority indicates that admission to a Master's Degree is based on the evaluation of documentary evidence (including the academic record) of the applicant's ability to undertake postgraduate study in a specialist field of enquiry or professional practice. The individual must have attained, through formal study, professional or other experience, a high order of knowledge about the principal subject(s), and have demonstrated interest in, and an aptitude for, scholarship. (www.nzqa.govt.nz/studying-in-new-zealand/nzqf/ 24 Sept 2012)

3.4.2 South Africa

According to South Africa's Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQF), the primary purposes of a Master's Degree are to:

Educate and train researchers who can contribute to the development of knowledge at an advanced level, or prepare graduates for advanced and specialised professional employment.... graduates must be able to deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively, make sound judgements using data and information at their disposal and communicate their conclusions clearly to specialist and non-specialist audiences, demonstrate self-direction and originality in tackling and solving problems, act autonomously in planning and implementing tasks at a professional or equivalent level, and continue to advance their knowledge, understanding and skills.

(HEQF, Government Gazette No. 30353, 2007: 27)

All Master's degrees must have a "significant research component" and may be obtained by completing a single research project/thesis/dissertation or by 'successfully completing a coursework programme requiring a high level of theoretical engagement and intellectual independence and a research project, culminating in the acceptance of a dissertation.' (Ibid). In the latter case, a minimum of 60 credits (of a total minimum of 180 credits) must be devoted to conducting and reporting research.

The minimum admission requirement is "a relevant Bachelor Honours Degree. A 'professional' Bachelor's Degree or a Postgraduate Diploma may also be recognised as meeting the minimum entry requirement to a cognate Master's Degree programme." (Ibid)

However, students without the minimum admission requirements may be admitted to Master's level study on the basis of RPL, if approved by the university's Senate. "One must have a minimum of a matric exemption to do a bachelor's or honours degree, but one can enrol for a Master's without any formal undergraduate qualification, even matric exemption." (RU Registrar, 2012)

Upon completion of the degree, Master's graduates must (sic) be able to:

Deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively, make sound judgements using data and information at their disposal and communicate their conclusions clearly to specialist and non-specialist audiences, demonstrate self-direction and originality in tackling and solving problems, act autonomously in planning and implementing tasks at a professional or equivalent level, and continue to advance their knowledge, understanding and skills.

(HEQF, 2007: 27)

3.4.3 Rhodes University

According to Rhodes University's Higher Degrees Guide (2012: 5-8) in terms of formal admissions:

[C]andidates may register for an appropriate *Master's* degree (which may require the completion of course-work, or a thesis, or both), the degree of *Doctor of Philosophy* (PhD), or a *Senior Doctorate* (e.g. Doctor of Science) ... The normal requirement for admission to a Master's degree is a four-year qualification of an acceptably high standard, i.e. usually a three-year Bachelor's degree, plus a good Honours degree in a relevant subject, or a satisfactory pass in a four-year degree such as BPharm, BFineArt, etc.

Applicants are required to first make contact with a prospective supervisor to discuss a potential project, before obtaining an application form from the Registrar's Division. The application form must be accompanied by the candidate's full academic record and certified copies of any degree certificates and other supporting documentation, which is then sent to the relevant Head of Department and Faculty Dean together with a supervisor's form.

If the Head of Department and Dean are satisfied that the applicant is a suitable candidate for higher degree study, that the proposed research topic is viable, and that the Department can provide adequate supervision and facilities, the application will be recommended for approval. The appropriate Faculty Board must then approve the candidate's registration and the proposed research topic, and appoint a supervisor(s). The candidate will then be registered for a higher degree. (RU Higher Degrees Guide, 2012: 8)

3.5 Recognition of Prior Learning

As is the case with the 'definition of a Master's degree', international comparisons are difficult as the term 'Recognition of Prior Learning' is not uniformly interpreted or applied within the different educational systems around the world.

According to the University of South Africa (Unisa), RPL is the:

Identification, assessment and acknowledgement of an individual's skills and knowledge within the context of a specific qualification, irrespective of how and

where they have been acquired... [through] informal training, on-the-job-experience, life experience, formal training eg short courses.
(UNISA website www.unisa.ac.za accessed 18 Sept 2010)

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), defines RPL as “The formal acknowledgement of skills, knowledge, and competencies that are gained through work experience, informal training, and life experience.” (Vlasceanu, 2007:85)

In a very similar approach, South Africa’s Higher Education Quality Committee defines RPL as:

The formal identification, assessment and acknowledgement of the full range of a person’s knowledge, skills and capabilities acquired through formal, informal or non-formal training, on-the-job or life experience.
(HEQC, 2004: 28)

The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) defines RPL as

The comparison of the previous learning and experience of a learner howsoever obtained against the learning outcomes required for a specified qualification, and the acceptance for purposes of qualification of that which meets the requirements.
(SAQA, 2002: 7)

Simply put, this means in practice that via RPL, a person’s non-formal experience and learning can be acknowledged and used to obtain academic credit³, and/or to obtain access to a formal programme of study.

Pressure to explicate and formalize RPL practices began to build in the late 1990’s at the national and institutional levels and while, according to Breier and Burness (2003), in 2000 not one South African University had a formal RPL policy in place, by 2003, seventy five percent of South African higher education institutions had developed RPL policies albeit of varying levels of detail and sophistication.

Formal RPL policy and regulations were subsequently debated within South African higher education more widely following the publication in 2004 of SAQA’s *Criteria and Guidelines for the Implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning* which clearly stated that “Recognition of Prior Learning in South Africa has, unlike similar initiatives in other countries, a very specific agenda. RPL is meant to support transformation of the education and training system of the country.” (SAQA, 2004:6). In South Africa, the pursuit of a transformative agenda is of critical

³ *Note:* This study is concerned only with the application of RPL for the purposes of access to Master’s level study, and not with the use of RPL to award formal credits for prior learning furthering their learning” (SAQA, 2004).

importance and RPL is seen as a necessary component in attaining an equitable educational system which will not only benefit young learners but also redress inequalities by providing meaningful opportunities to those denied educational access in the past.

Interestingly, the Council on Higher Education places a restriction of 10% on the number of students that may be admitted into a programme via RPL (CHE, 2012: 9) which could be interpreted as an attempt to balance access with retaining academic standards – which are explicated in the national HEQC document entitled “Framework for Programme Accreditation” (ibid). This ‘ten percent rule’ is discussed further in Chapter 7, Section 7.5.2.

Before the introduction of formal RPL policies and practices, the alternative access route to postgraduate study in South African higher education institutions was traditionally via the ‘Senate discretion’ rule which gave university Senates the authority to admit students who did not meet formal entry requirements (Universities Act 61 of 1955, HE Act 101 of 1997).

The only mention of RPL in the national Higher Education Qualifications Framework (RSA, 2007: 6) is that “The recognition of prior learning should enable potential students, including those who had suffered disadvantage in the past to be admitted to particular higher education programmes depending on their assessed knowledge and skills.”

On 5 October 2012, SAQA published a document entitled *Policy and Criteria for the Recognition of Prior Learning* for public comment (SAQA, 2012). This document updates the national RPL policy of 2002 as well as the Criteria and Guidelines for RPL released in 2003. Greater clarity is provided in the 2012 document on RPL in relation to redress of unfair discrimination in education, training and employment opportunities, access to learning pathways, and fair recognition of knowledge and skills in the workforce in South Africa (ibid: 5).

The revised document also provides useful definitions and position statements in areas key to this study, most notably the principles of RPL which are listed as:

- a) The focus is on what has been learned and not on the status of the institution, organisation or place where the learning was obtained;
- b) Credit is awarded for knowledge and skills acquired through experience and not for experience alone;
- c) Learning is made explicit through assessment and/or other methods that engage the intrinsic development of knowledge, skills and competencies acquired;

- d) Candidate guidance and support, the preparation of evidence and the development of an appropriate combination of teaching-learning, mentoring and assessment approaches are core to RPL practice;
 - e) Notwithstanding all the features listed here, RPL is generally considered to be a developmental process, and not an end in itself.
- (SAQA, 2012: 10)

RU academics' views on the subject of RPL are explored in detail in Chapter 7 but one thought-provoking comment is worth mentioning at this point. According to the University's Dean of Teaching and Learning, "RPL is idealistic, a lot is based on the assumption that learning is learning is learning. But academic learning is very different to other learning."

3.6 Recognition of Prior Learning at Rhodes University

Although a national survey conducted in 2003 by Breier and Burness reported that Rhodes University was one of only two higher education institutions in South Africa which indicated that it had 'no plans to develop institutional policy' in this area (Breier and Burness, 2003), Rhodes University approved its first formal RPL policy in 2007 (RU Council Minutes 15 March 2007). In this policy, RPL is defined as "...the practice of awarding credit or granting educational access to students on the basis of prior learning acquired through a variety of formal, non-formal and informal means, including life and work experience." (RPL Policy, RU 2007)

The RPL Policy states that applicants lacking the necessary formal qualification (specifically an Honours degree or a four-year undergraduate degree) may be admitted by Senate, on the recommendation of Heads of Departments, Deans and Faculties, to Master's degree study as *ad eundem gradum* candidates (see Section 3.7 for further discussion of the term *ad eundem gradum*). The University's Rule G.51 requires that the approval of the Board of the Faculty, on the recommendation of the Head of the Department concerned, must be obtained for all persons admitted to the degree of Master, including AEG admissions. The Policy goes on to indicate that:

- In order to satisfy auditing and quality assurance requirements and build up a research base relating to the use of RPL at Rhodes, it is important that current practices be recorded, documented and monitored. Accordingly,
 - i The Registrar's Division will compile an "evidence portfolio" of Senate's reasons for granting students *ad eundem gradum* admission status to Master's degrees in order to guide departments. Senate will assess applications on the evidence provided by candidates and departments in each case, relying on the professional and academic judgment of Heads of

Department, Deans, Faculty Boards and members of Senate rather than on prescriptive criteria.

- ii Those Faculties which are currently using RPL to award credit will document the principles and procedures they apply in using RPL in their programmes for approval by the Academic Planning and Staffing Committee and Senate. Once approved, these will be published on the Rhodes University Intranet. (RU RPL Policy, 2007)

At this point it should be noted that as part of South Africa's national quality assurance (institutional audit) system, Rhodes University was required to undertake a self-evaluation of its quality assurance mechanisms which outlined the University's approach to RPL in 2005. In its self-evaluation report, the University indicated that arrangements for recognizing prior learning were not yet formalized (Rhodes University Audit Portfolio, June 2005: 26). Surprisingly, the Higher Education Quality Committee's Audit Report on the University (CHE, 2006) made no reference at all to RPL, despite RPL being one of the HEQC's 19 criteria for institutional audits (CHE, 2004a). However, a subsequent exercise undertaken by the HEQC to 'delegate responsibility' for the quality assurance of five specific areas in each higher education institution, viz Certification, Short Courses, Assessor Training and Development, Moderation of Assessment, and RPL, withheld 'full delegation' for RPL from Rhodes, indicating that '...this area had not yet been adequately addressed' (HEQC correspondence to Rhodes University, 2 April 2009). The University responded that it had subsequently approved a Policy on RPL, and was in the process of explicating the principles and procedures used for recognizing prior learning (RU correspondence to the HEQC, 23 April 2009).

Despite the undertaking given in the University's 1997 RPL policy (Appendix 2) to compile an evidence portfolio of Senate's reasons for granting students AEG admission status to Master's degrees in order to guide departments; and to document the principles and procedures Faculties apply in using RPL (see i and ii above), neither of these pledges had been implemented by 2013.

3.7 Ad Eundem Gradum

Whilst formal RPL is a relatively new concept in higher education, particularly in South Africa (SAQA, 2004), the practice of admitting students not meeting formal admission requirements has been undertaken since universities were first established. The University of Oxford, for example, notes that:

The 1516 Statutes were the first to make written provision for the procedure of incorporation ie the placing of members into the body of the University in the same

rank, status or degree...a formal embodiment of the idea of mutual enrichment.
(Oxford University Archives, 2005)

The practice of incorporation became known as *ad eundem gradum* (AEG) which is defined as “to, in, or of the same rank - used especially of the honorary granting of academic standing or a degree by a university to one whose actual work was done elsewhere” (new Latin, circa 1711, Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary).

Since its inception in 1904, Rhodes University has always provided an alternative access route to postgraduate study (RU Rules, as outlined in the annual University Calendar), based on the AEG rule. In its Higher Degrees Guide (RU Research Office, 2012), the University indicates that candidates who have extensive experience and/or are judged to have considerable potential as a researcher but lack the formal qualifications normally required, may be admitted to a research programme as AEG candidates. The term AEG is defined in this context as ‘to the same level’ (ibid). In such cases, the supervisor and the Head of the Department will “ultimately advise the candidate, on the basis of the progress made, whether the work should be submitted for a Master’s degree or a Doctorate. Such a recommendation is subject to the approval of Senate and it should be noted that *ad eundem gradum* students are initially registered for a Master’s degree.”

3.8 Discussion

South African policy documents and legislation (including the HE Act, SAQA Act, the HEQF and the national RPL Policy) promote and provide for RPL – however, no mention is made in the ‘admission requirements’ listed for each qualification on the Higher Education Qualifications Framework that RPL is an option for admission to a qualification. (RSA, 2007: 19-29)

It is apparent that, in its early conceptualisation, RPL was seen more as a political or redress tool than as an opportunity to widen access to Master’s degrees or increase the number of Master’s graduates, despite one of the country’s primary educational goals being to increase the number of postgraduate students, as noted in Chapter 2.

Whilst the concept of RPL is supported at Rhodes University, the actual process for considering RPL applications and providing information required for a decision to be made is not specified in the University’s Higher Degrees Guide, and analyses of AEG admissions at Rhodes over the period 1999 to 2008 reveal inconsistencies and a lack of clarity in the implementation of the AEG rule (see Chapter 8, Section 8.7). Analyses of the University’s Faculty Minutes also reveal several instances where students have been admitted without the AEG motivation, yet do not meet the

University's normal admission requirements. In other instances, applications which *do* meet formal admission requirements are submitted as AEG applications, possibly unnecessarily.

It seems ironic that AEG candidates, on the advice of their Head of Department/Higher Degrees Committee, can submit their thesis as a PhD (after upgrading their registration status to PhD level) even though they may not even have a basic degree, whilst according to University (and national access) rules, students may not even be admitted to a lower level qualification (an honours or postgraduate diploma) without having an initial tertiary qualification.

Evidence that the University's RPL policy is symbolic rather than active is provided by the fact that six years after the policy was approved in 2007, the policy undertakings had still not been implemented. It could be argued that the absence of institutionally agreed criteria and processes for assessing RPL applications could result in accusations of injustice, inconsistency or favouritism, and could ultimately devalue the status and achievements of candidates admitted on this basis.

The University's approach to postgraduate RPL is summed up by the Dean of Teaching and Learning during the interviews undertaken as part of this study (see further discussion in Chapter 7):

Access is usually on the basis of the personal experience of the person but there are no criteria or tests for it. RPL is very difficult to implement in reality, therefore the doors of learning are only open symbolically.

3.9 Concluding Summary

The concept of RPL is relatively well-defined at the undergraduate level in South Africa and clear policies and processes have been formulated in this regard at the national and in some cases, institutional levels. At the postgraduate level however, the understanding and implementation of RPL is vague and largely left to institutional discretion.

Although it is not possible to make direct comparisons because of a lack of an international qualifications framework and differing interpretations and implementation of RPL between countries and between different universities, contradictions and inconsistencies within national and institutional RPL policies and practices are evident.

Despite being a latecomer to formalising its RPL policy, Rhodes University has a long history of enabling access to Master's degree studies via the AEG rule. However, the RPL policy itself appears to be symbolic rather than active as the University had not been fully implementing it at the time this study was completed in 2013.

CHAPTER FOUR: GRADUATENESS

It is not automatic that a graduate thinks more critically than a worker.
(Dean of Science, RU, 2010)

4.1 Introduction

In asking the question “On what basis are students admitted to Master’s level study at Rhodes University?” (see Chapter 3 for further discussion of this aspect of the study), fundamental issues are raised relating to the concept of ‘graduateness’ - the attributes expected or implicitly assumed of a graduate at various levels - as well as the notion of ‘functioning knowledge’ - knowledge acquired through experience in a profession or occupation.

This chapter aims to explore and critique current definitions and understandings of ‘graduateness’ and to consider its interpretation internationally, in South Africa, and specifically at Rhodes University. An argument is then made for the use of the term ‘postgraduate readiness’ to capture the graduate skills and attributes desirable in order to continue studying at levels higher than a first degree.

4.2 Graduateness and the Role of the University

As discussed in Chapter 2, the nature of universities is changing – and as higher education institutions attempt to reinterpret their purpose and role in the face of society’s changing aspirations, the focus falls on “what kind of education an HEI is able to offer its students, and what potential contribution its graduates can make to society.” (Barnett, 1990) According to Barrie (2006), one way in which universities attempt to clarify their role is by articulating what is expected of their graduates. As higher education around the world has massified and levels of HE have been linked to the economic success of nations, pressure from the state and society to account for public investment in higher education has increased. This, together with calls for universities to produce more employable graduates, has resulted in many HEIs drawing up statements of graduate attributes in order to “demonstrate that they are efficiently and effectively achieving what are deemed to be relevant and worthwhile outcomes” (Woodhouse, 1999).

According to Australia’s Higher Education Council, generic graduate attributes – also referred to as ‘graduateness’ - are the “skills, knowledge and abilities of university graduates, beyond disciplinary content knowledge, which are applicable in a range of contexts and are acquired as a result of completing any undergraduate degree. They

should represent the core achievements of a university education.” (HEC, 1992) Graduateness, therefore, is directly related to the role of higher education and is a critical element in assessing the readiness of graduates to enter the world of work, or to continue into higher levels of tertiary education.

4.3 The Concept of Graduateness

There can be no definitive answer to the question of what graduateness is. ‘University’ and ‘graduate’ are relative concepts.

(Harris, 1996)

The extent to which present day university teaching and learning processes actually develop such outcomes in graduates is contestable.

(Barrie, 2001)

Despite these views, various attempts have been made recently to define and analyse the concept of ‘graduateness’. The UK’s Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC(UK)), in its interim report on its Graduate Standards Programme, defined graduateness simply as “the generic qualities that might be expected of any graduate” (Ross, 1996). In a 1996 discussion paper entitled “what are Graduates? Clarifying the Attributes of Graduateness”, the HEQC(UK) equates graduateness to “fitness for award [of a qualification]” and proposes that a broad distinction can be made between three kinds of graduate achievement:

- *Field-specific*: the possession of a body of knowledge and other qualities particular to the field (or fields) of studies;
- *Shared*: the possession of certain more general attributes that might be common to graduates from families of degrees;
- *Generic*: the possession of yet more general attributes, which might be common to all – or most – graduates.

(Ross, 1996: 2)

Five categories of graduate attributes were proposed by the HEQC(UK) in 1996:

- Intellectual/cognitive
- Subject mastery
- Social/people
- Self/individual
- Practical

(HEQC(UK), 1996)

The HEQC(UK) report also recognises the existence of what it calls ‘ancillary qualities’ which would be expected of a graduate but which should not be (or did not used to be), the responsibility of HEI’s to teach - such as literacy, numeracy, general knowledge and computer skills (ibid:3). However, while ancillary properties may be

common to all graduates, they are not definitive of graduateness – they may be exemplified differently in different subject fields and it may not be realistic to expect all graduates to display the same ancillary qualities. (Ross, 1996)

4.3.1 Graduatness and Institutional Culture

Graduatness is also influenced by the *institutional culture* of each particular HEI. “Some of the traditional properties of graduateness have more to do with the experience of being a student than with the education received.” (Ross, 1996:3) A common objection from academics surveyed about implementing recognition of prior learning is that RPL students lack something other graduates have, that the sum [of a qualification] is greater than the parts and that collegiate processes exist beyond the curriculum which develop leadership skills and graduate qualities. Wheelahan (2002) notes that in Australian HE, “qualifications are more likely to be identified with the institution in which they were gained” and that in order to be awarded a qualification from a particular institution, some (usually between 30%-50%) of the study needed to be undertaken in that institution.

This sentiment is echoed by South African Professor Magdalene Swanepoel, speaking at a seminar on ‘graduateness within the African context’ at Unisa in March 2011, who said “An institution’s effectiveness can be measured by the type of graduates it produces” and that “It is the institutional culture that makes the difference in what we call graduateness – and this is not simply the ability of students to pass their exams.” (Unisa, 2011)

A recent Scottish initiative to develop a national understanding of graduate attributes needed by the 21st Century graduate recognised the role played by institutional culture and encouraged HEIs to “develop a vision of graduate attributes for the twenty-first century that best reflects its own distinctive mission, ethos and strategic priorities.” (Hounsell, 2011)

4.3.2 Graduatness and Learning Outcomes

Wheelahan et al (2002) note a relationship between graduateness and learning outcomes, saying that learning outcomes for qualifications are often incomplete, that there is often a substantial ‘hidden curriculum’ and that teaching, learning and assessment activities address a broader range of learning outcomes or competencies than those formally contained within the qualification. However, the focus on specific outcomes assumes that the outcomes of learning are already known - but in a world of rapidly changing technology and increased sharing of knowledge, “new

kinds of learning may need to be encouraged that cannot easily be predicted in advance and may not be readily accessible for qualifications.” (Young, 2001:10)

While clear and explicit learning outcomes may be desirable, especially from the student’s perspective, a danger also exists that ‘over-specification’ of learning objectives can narrow the scope of learning and subsequently impoverish the concept of gradueness. “What is interesting and important is what you can’t see, not what you can.” (Biggs, 1999: 42)

Biggs (1999) proposed a model of assessment called *constructive alignment* which considers what the student learns, rather than what the teacher teaches. This requires the development of ‘open-ended’ outcomes which focus on the process of learning as well as the acquisition of particular skills and then assessing against these outcomes. “Qualifying is a *process* and not simply an outcome.” (Wheelahan, 2002: 7-8)

This approach is supported by Fraser and & Greenlough (2001) who caution that there is an important difference between *competence* - what individuals know or are able to do in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes, and *capability* - the extent to which individuals can adapt to change, generate new knowledge, and continue to improve their performance. They argue that traditionally, education has focused on enhancing competence but as the world grows increasingly complex, institutions should focus on educating for capability and should avoid setting learning goals with rigid, prescriptive content.

4.3.3 Gradueness and Functioning Knowledge

Another aspect of gradueness is the concept of ‘functioning knowledge’ which people acquire through experience in a profession or occupation (Eraut, 2000 as cited in Wheelahan, 2002) which refers to implicit learning and tacit knowledge. “Graduates from qualifications do not always have functioning knowledge.” (Boud, 1998) Functioning knowledge becomes a particularly important factor when considering applications from potential postgraduate students who do not have the requisite qualifications for formal admission.

The most comprehensive and useful definition of gradueness for the purposes of this study, is:

a combination of generic attributes combined with differing degrees of functioning knowledge... Gradueness can be taken to mean the ‘meta-thinking’ or learning skills (with an emphasis on reflective practice) that people acquire which is

contextualised in the occupations or professions in which they work or are destined to work.

(Wheelahan, 2002)

4.3.4 A Critique of Graduatness

Richard Harris, Dean of Quality Assurance at the University of Luton in the UK, challenged the Higher Education Quality Council discussion paper on graduate standards which argued that “there is an essence of graduatness characteristic to those who have successfully completed an honours degree at a United Kingdom university” (Harris, 2012). He argued that the prevailing concept of graduatness is based on a traditional, residential model of higher education and that the development of mass higher education will influence the kinds of graduates produced, although not necessarily in terms of lowering standards.

A more traditional view of graduatness was presented by Professor John Higgins of the University of Cape Town in an article entitled “Academics need to shout louder if they are to survive” (Mail & Guardian Online, 27 Aug 2012), who wrote:

The very idea of ‘graduatness’ disappears from view in the new managerial focus on vocationalism. It is the ability of graduates in all fields to take a critical distance from the received ideas of the day and therefore at least to have the potential to ‘speak the truth to power’.

Barrie (2005: 3) suggests lists of generic skills/attributes/competencies position “what might be termed broad motherhood statements” and wonders if every graduate of each university would be able to live up to the rhetoric of such statements. Barrie (2006: 216) further suggests that the extent to which statements of graduate attributes “actually represent a shared understanding of the outcomes of a university education is a matter of conjecture. The extent to which present day university teaching and learning processes actually develop such outcomes in graduates is even more contestable.”

4.4 Graduatness in South Africa

South Africa’s Education White Paper 3 – A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education – states that HEIs should be producing:

[G]raduates with the skills and competencies that build the foundations for lifelong learning, including, critical, analytical, problem-solving and communication skills, as well as the ability to deal with change and diversity, in particular, the tolerance of different views and ideas.

(DoE, 1997)

Despite this open-ended approach to graduateness in national policy documents, graduateness in South African HE tends to be equated with 'employability' and the two terms are often used interchangeably. In a study on graduate attributes undertaken by Higher Education South Africa (HESA) in 2007/8, it is noted that "There is pressure on higher education from both government and employers to produce graduates who are employable in the sense that they have the attributes, capabilities and dispositions to work successfully." (Griesel & Parker, 2008). The study claims that:

[T]he expectation is for higher education to engage proactively with the skills needs of the economy, and simultaneously to address ... the many pressing imperatives that constrain South Africa as a developmental state and young democracy ... it is even more important that South Africa can produce even more skilled graduates who are able to compete within a shrinking global work force.
(ibid: 2)

The HESA study questionnaire aimed to generate data on the graduate attributes employers consider important and expect graduates to have when they enter the workplace, and the degree to which graduates from South Africa's public HEI's demonstrate these attributes. The research concluded that employers and higher education have differing expectations of graduates and that "there is a real need to address gaps between employer expectations and higher education outcomes."
(ibid: 20)

It is illuminating that of the 99 employers surveyed in the graduate attribute study undertaken in SA by HESA, not one was a university. (List of Employers in Griesel & Parker, 2008: 28). This suggests that preparedness for 'further study' or 'employment in a higher education institution' are not viewed as core components of graduateness.

A recent internal discussion document on developing graduate attributes at the University of the Western Cape pronounced that graduate attributes "are both intended to equip [students] for future employment and as critical and responsible citizens, contributing to the social and economic wellbeing of society." (UWC, 2010) No mention is made of preparing students for further study in this statement although in the specific graduate attributes proposed for UWC, 'scholarship (having a critical attitude towards knowledge)', and being 'confident lifelong learners' are identified as desirable graduate attributes.

At a seminar entitled "Becoming a graduate in the 21st Century" hosted by the country's largest HEI, the University of South Africa, the Pro-Vice-Chancellor stated that "Unisa must prepare graduates for careers by preparing students with

foundational knowledge and encouraging independence” (Unisa online, 18 June 2010). Unisa proceeded to develop a statement on graduateness which formed part of a 2010 draft Curriculum Policy in which it defined Unisa graduates as:

- Independent, resilient and caring citizens who are able to fulfil and serve in multiple roles in their immediate and future local, national and global communities;
- Able to critically analyse and evaluate the credibility and usefulness of information and data from multiple sources in a globalised world with its ever increasing information and data flows and competing worldviews;
- Having a critical understanding of their location on the African continent with its histories, challenges and potential in relation to globally diverse contexts; and
- Knowing how to apply their discipline-specific knowledge competently, ethically and creatively to solve real-life problems.

4.5 Graduateness at Rhodes University

Graduateness as an institutional concept had not been recognised or formally discussed at Rhodes University at the time of this study. However, some insight into the University’s interpretation of graduateness can be gained from various public statements, institutional policies and practices, and internal discussion documents.

4.5.1 Rhodes University Vision and Mission Statement

Rhodes University will strive to produce outstanding internationally accredited graduates who are innovative, analytical, articulate, balanced and adaptable, with a life-long love of learning... [RU] will produce critical, capable and skilled graduates who can adapt to changing environments... [and] will foster the all-round development of our students.

(RU Vision and Mission Statement, 2000)

This extract from the University’s vision and mission statement (Appendix 1) implies that graduates of RU would ideally be capable, skilled, critical thinkers who are innovative, analytical, articulate, balanced and adaptable and who display a life-long love of learning.

4.5.2 Requirements for the Award of a Qualification at Rhodes University

As indicated in the extract below from Rhodes University’s 2012 Calendar, students are required to complete a minimum of 50% of their courses at RU:

46.1 Credit for courses passed at another university subsequent to registration at Rhodes University is subject to approval by Senate; provided that:

46.2 Credit will not be given for more than half of the courses prescribed for the degree at Rhodes University.

(RU Calendar 2012: 37)

Regarding AEG students, the University rules state that:

Persons who have graduated at another university, or who are able to give satisfactory evidence of their qualifications may be admitted as students to courses of special study and research at the University. Such persons may, on completion of such courses, be admitted to a degree of Master or Doctor; provided that they before being so admitted... have been registered as a student of the University for not less than two years.

(ibid: 38)

In requiring students to complete at least half their credits (including one exit-level major) at RU and in requiring AEG students to spend at least two years registered at RU, It is clear that the University believes a significant association with the institution is an important element of gradueness. This supports the proposition that institutional culture plays a major role in gradueness, as discussed in Section 4.3.1.

4.5.3 Rhodes University Recognition of Prior Learning Policy

The University's RPL policy makes no reference to gradueness or graduate attributes except to say that "Recognition of prior learning for purposes of access [to RU] will focus on a candidate's capacity to succeed" (RU RPL Policy 1997: 5). There is no indication given of what criteria may be used to assess such capacity to succeed, and the process for doing so is given as "Senate will assess applications on the evidence provided by candidates and departments in each case, relying on the professional and academic judgment of Heads of Department, Deans, Faculty Boards and members of Senate rather than on prescriptive criteria." (ibid: 4). The RPL Policy further notes that "it is unlikely that there will be large numbers of potential RPL adult applicants".

This approach reflects an aspect of the university's institutional culture, where 'mature students' are in the minority and, it appears from the policy statements, are not actively encouraged to apply for admission. This lack of active encouragement for alternative admissions is discussed further in Chapters 7 and 9.

4.5.4 Leadership and Institutional Culture at Rhodes University

Two Vice-Chancellors were in office during the period of this study: Dr David Woods (up to May 2006) and Dr Saleem Badat (June 2006 to date). The leadership style and ethos of the institution during the Woods years is reflected in the University's HEQC Audit Portfolio (RU, 2005) in which the institution is described as small, collegial, having high quality in teaching and research, nationally and internationally recognised, and renown for providing a holistic student 'experience'.

In short, Rhodes University has for decades gone out of its way to do more than offer a high quality education; it aims to provide its students with a multi-faceted and well-balanced educational experience... The very smallness of the University and the favourable student/staff ratio facilitate such personal attention. This approach... of providing a broad, high quality educational experience rather than just an education, is one of the defining features of Rhodes University.
(RU Audit portfolio, 2005: 4-5)

Whilst there is no specific mention of graduate attributes in the Portfolio, it is clear that the institution believed at the time that graduates of the university were 'transformed' into 'well rounded individuals' during their studies at Rhodes:

[T]he University has developed the kind of environment described in its mission statement and which is believed to assist students to reach their full academic potential and develop as well rounded individuals - a philosophy which conforms to the definition of quality as 'transformation'. The Environment describes the total environment of students at The University including the residence system, student support systems, the extracurricular environment, the academic environment, facilities, services and infrastructure.
(ibid: 5)

The closest the report comes to making a statement on gradueness is found in the section dealing with Vision and Mission:

The University's aim is to create a research based teaching and learning environment that will encourage students to reach their full potential, that is supportive of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and that *will produce critical, capable and skilled graduates who can adapt to changing environments.*
(ibid: 8) (italics added)

Elsewhere it is stated that "the main business of the institution... is teaching, research and the production of well-rounded graduates who are able to make a valuable contribution to society." (ibid: 13)

The University also implies that involvement in some form of community engagement and the ability to foster social change are elements of gradueness at RU:

The Community Engagement team will foster an ethos of voluntary community service within its staff and student body so that ideally, by the end of their third year, all students will have participated in some way in community engagement activity, whether through the Volunteer programme, through Service Learning or through residence or hall volunteer activities, leading to well-rounded graduate citizens who will be active agents for positive social change.
(ibid: 88)

The slogan "Where Leaders Learn" was coined by the University's Marketing and Communications Division in the 1990's, and quickly made its way into the

Institution's corporate identity and marketing materials. The slogan was explained in the University's 2005 audit portfolio as follows:

In line with its slogan 'Where Leaders Learn', the University strives to provide leadership training and opportunities in all spheres of University life. Access to these opportunities is provided by the nature of the residential system and the University's inclusive committee system, and is greatly facilitated by the smaller number of students competing for leadership positions relative to the larger urban institutions. Students are encouraged to play an active role in, for example, Hall and House Committees, student societies, Senate committees, Faculty boards and departmental sub-committees, peer counselling and mentoring, sub-warden selection committees, sports administration, student discipline, Oppidan support services, festival and conference administration etc.

(ibid: 30)

In contrast, the current Vice-Chancellor of the University, Dr Saleem Badat, interrogated the slogan 'Where Leaders Learn' in an institutional discussion document circulated in 2007 saying "...there is little clarity of thinking regarding the slogan" (Badat, 2007a: 2) Whilst he acknowledged the promise the slogan holds as an 'animating *leitmotif*' of Rhodes, he pointed out that

- The interpretation that because RU only selects the 'cream of the crop' (because of its high entry requirements) they are already 'leaders' is of dubious value and begs many questions, not least regarding limiting access
- The interpretation that the slogan refers to RU graduates who have gone on to "occupy positions of leadership, achieve fame, accumulate wealth and exercise influence" is flawed in that many other universities can point to equal successes in their graduates, and in that some Rhodes students in fact "display values and attributes that are disturbing, if not alarming"
- The claim that RU provides students with leadership opportunities and personal contact with academics is spurious as again, RU is not unique in this regard.

(ibid: 3)

Dr Badat went on to suggest that RU needed to explicate the meanings the institution wished to confer on 'leaders' and 'leadership' and should define what would be valuable for students to learn in terms of knowledge, competencies, skills, values and attitudes, and why. He suggested that a teaching module could be developed which would help give substance to RU's commitment to "providing a formative education and to producing balanced and adaptable graduates, and to develop shared values that embrace basic human and civil rights." (ibid: 5) This, he proposed, would set Rhodes apart from other HEI's insofar as 'graduateness' was concerned.

Perhaps the statement which comes closest to defining graduateness at RU in the view of the current VC is found in his discussion paper “Critical Reflections on Rhodes, 2006-2011”⁴:

Our goal is to ensure that our students can think imaginatively, ‘effectively and critically;’ that they ‘achieve depth in some field of knowledge;’ that they can critique and construct alternatives, that they can communicate cogently, orally and in writing, and that they have a ‘critical appreciation of the ways in which we gain knowledge and understanding of the universe, of society, and of ourselves.’ At the same time, we also seek that our students should have ‘a broad knowledge of other cultures and other times;’ should be ‘able to make decisions based on reference to the wider world and to the historical forces that have shaped it,’ and that they should have ‘some understanding of and experience in thinking systematically about moral and ethical problems.’

(Badat, 2011: 2)

4.6 Graduate Attributes

What are the fundamental attributes which would differentiate a graduate from a non-graduate? As far back as 1852, John Henry Newman - author of the influential work “The Idea of a University” - posited that a graduate should “see things as they are, to go right to the point, to disentangle a skein of thought” (in Glover et al, 2006: 295). According to Barrie (2005), the University of Sydney’s first statement of generic attributes dates back to 1862, and there are similar statements to be found in the archives of American and British universities.

In 1996, the HEQC(UK) attempted to identify graduate attributes according to the ‘standards’ which might mark a university graduate, some of which could be seen as generic, and others specific to particular disciplines or ‘families’ of subjects, and proposed five categories of attribute: intellectual/cognitive, subject mastery, social/people, self/individual and practical (HEQC(UK), 1996).

From a student perspective, London Guildhall University responded to the HEQC(UK) report by suggesting the following attributes should be expected of graduates:

- i) The ability to research, analyse and present information coherently.
- ii) Breadth of vision – the ability to continue learning, the ability to relate to a wide range of subjects, a command of a foreign language, a curiosity about other subjects, a breadth of knowledge.
- iii) Expertise in their chosen field, the ability to achieve a balanced view, an open and flexible mind.

⁴ Prepared for the 2011 RU ‘institutional imbizo’ – a biennial strategic planning gathering of internal and external stakeholders.

- iv) A good knowledge of the English language – the ability to write and spell.
- v) Impetus to reach a goal, in a disciplined manner.
(Glover et al, 2006: 296)

Various attempts have been made to draw up a definitive 'list' of graduate attributes. However, descriptions of graduate attributes tend to be coloured by "the particular institution's values and beliefs, as well as the political and social climate in which they exist." (Barrie, 2006: 216) In addition, there is a lack of a coherent theoretical model underpinning the generic skills agenda (Barrie, 2005).

Whilst few HEIs have formally discussed the concept of gradueness or specifically identified the attributes they aim to develop in their graduates, several key themes and attributes can be extrapolated from the literature and from various university mission and vision statements. Lists of attributes "typically include outcomes that range from simple technical skills to complex intellectual abilities and ethical values." (Barrie, 2006: 218)

In South Africa, the University of the Western Cape (UWC) set up an institutional task team to deliberate on the attributes a UWC graduate should have, and defined graduate attributes as "the qualities, values, attitudes, skills and understandings that a particular university sets out as being important for students to develop by the end of their studies" (Bozalek, 2010). UWC identified three main graduate attributes based on Barrie's Framework (2006) as well as their own vision and mission as:

- Scholarship: A critical attitude towards knowledge;
- Critical Citizenship and the Social Good: A relationship and interaction with local and global communities and the environment; and
- Lifelong Learning: An attitude or stance towards themselves.

The institution further listed six overarching skills and abilities which UWC graduates should possess:

- Inquiry focused and knowledgeable
- Critically and relevantly literate
- Autonomous and collaborative
- Ethically, environmentally and socially aware and active
- Skilled communicators
- Interpersonal flexibility and confidence to engage across difference.
(Bozalek, 2010)

The 2011 Scottish "Graduates for the 21st Century Enhancement Theme" exercise identified the following generic or common graduate attributes in Scottish HEI's:

- *lifelong learning*: equipping students with the ability and interest to continue to enlarge their knowledge, understanding and skills throughout their working lives.

- *research, scholarship and enquiry*: providing students with a sound grasp of how new understanding is generated in a given field or subject area through experiment and empirical investigation, and the ability to apply a systematic and critical assessment of complex problems and issues.
- *employability and career development*: developing students' knowledge, skills and qualities relevant to chosen career paths and to those paths which may open up in the future, *enabling* each to succeed in a rapidly changing workplace .
- *global citizenship*: encouraging a capacity to thrive in a globalised society and economy, and an awareness of cultures beyond and different to one's own.
- *communication and information literacy*: cultivating students' abilities to communicate effectively their knowledge, understanding and skills, in a range of settings, and using a variety of media; and formulating, evaluating and applying evidence-based solutions and argument.
- *ethical, social and professional understanding*: nurturing a reflective awareness of ethical dimensions, and responsibilities to others, in work and everyday life.
- *personal and intellectual autonomy*: developing a capacity to think independently, exercise personal judgment and take initiatives.
- *collaboration, teamwork and leadership*: cultivate skills for working in teams and groups, and leading where appropriate.
(Hounsell, 2011: 2-3)

4.7 Graduate Attributes and the South African NQF

The South African Qualifications Authority Act (No. 58 of 1995) was promulgated in order to establish a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) which had the following objectives:

- To create a single integrated national framework for learning achievements;
- Facilitate access to, and mobility and progression within, education, training and career paths;
- Enhance the quality of education and training;
- Accelerate the redress of past unfair discrimination in education, training and employment opportunities.

(<http://www.nqf.org.za/page/about-nqf/index> accessed 18 November 2012)

The NQF comprises ten levels (Appendix 3), with levels 5-10 designated as the Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQF). A bachelor's degree is at level 7, an honours degree at level 8, a Master's degree at level 9, and a doctorate is the highest qualification, at level 10. Each NQF level has a level descriptor which provides "guidelines for differentiating the varying levels of complexity of qualifications on the framework" (RSA, 2007, see also Appendix 4).

In the absence of formally specified graduate attributes in South African HE policy documents, the level descriptors set out for each of the qualification levels on the

HEQF come the closest to a national understanding of what attributes and skills those who successfully achieve this level of education could be expected to display. Progressive degrees of achievement are described for ten common elements at each level:

1. Scope of knowledge
2. Knowledge literacy
3. Method and procedure
4. Problem solving
5. Ethics and professional practice
6. Accessing, processing and managing information
7. Producing and communicating information
8. Context and systems
9. Management of learning
10. Accountability

(http://www.nqf.org.za/download_files/level_descriptors.pdf accessed 18 Nov 2012)

Appendix 4 provides a table outlining the level descriptors provided by the CHE for levels 7 (three- and four-year Bachelors' degrees), 8 (Postgraduate Diplomas and Honours degrees) and 9 (Master's degrees).

4.8 Graduate Attributes and Postgraduate Readiness

While a great deal of research has been undertaken into RPL at the undergraduate level as well as into the concept of graduateness as 'readiness for the world of work' (Williams, 1997; Nyatanga et al, 1998; Thomen, 2000, Wheeahan, 2002; Breier and Burness, 2003; Bozalek, 2010; Hoover, 2010), very little research has been done into RPL at the postgraduate level, or which generic attributes potential Master's level students are expected to possess in order to continue into Master's degree study. As indicated in Section 4.4, graduateness is vaguely defined at present and - in South Africa particularly - focuses on preparedness for the workplace rather than suitability for further study.

Harvey and Green (1994) cite several studies which list the advantages of employing graduates such as: flexibility, ambition, logical thinking, quick learning, high levels of motivation, good communication skills, creativity, maturity, specialist knowledge, analytic skills, and initiative. Their research suggests a set of core skills and attributes are expected of graduates including: willingness to learn, teamwork, communication skills, problem solving, analytic ability, logical argument and an ability to summarise key issues as well as a range of personal attributes including commitment, energy, self-motivation, self-management, reliability, co-operation, flexibility and adaptability. However, the graduate attributes sought by employers may not be the

same as those required or expected by academic supervisors for the purposes of further study.

A question raised in the progression of this study was thus 'Are these generic graduate attributes the same as those attributes which academic supervisors expect or require in postgraduate students?'

In a 2005 research project investigating student perspectives on the *postgraduate* learning experience in the UK, certain themes emerged: greater depth of engagement, specialised subject matter, analytical skills, problem-based learning, more interdisciplinary perspectives, greater expectations from staff, greater student responsibility, increased access to resources and facilities, better time management, more individualised approach, communication skills and more independent study (McEwan et al, 2005). In addition, a major theme emerging from the research was the benefits students themselves bring to the learning environment which greatly enhance 'co-learning' with peers who frequently have different prior learning, disciplinary or cultural experiences, as well as with staff.

Two critical questions arise in considering the concept of gradueness at the postgraduate level: "What graduate attributes do academics expect graduates (or potential postgraduate students) to possess in order to undertake and succeed in postgraduate studies?" and subsequently then, "How do supervisors assess whether or not a potential student has the requisite graduate attributes?" The latter question will be discussed in Chapter 7 (analyses of interviews and supervisor's motivation letters) whilst the former question is discussed below.

4.8.1 Postgraduate Attributes in Formal Admissions

While there is significant guidance on programme development and benchmarking at undergraduate level, there is currently very little guidance for those embarking on course development at postgraduate level.
(McEwan et al, 2005).

However, certain skills and attributes necessary for postgraduate study have been identified by some HEI's – for example, the University of Dundee in Scotland lists the following 'academic skills' needed in order to "learn successfully and perform well":

Independent learning skills, critical thinking, interpersonal skills, listening, oral skills, postgraduate reading, postgraduate writing, grammar, numerical and maths, exam skills.

(www.dundee.ac.uk/aatu/pg.htm accessed 24 September 2012)

As specific attributes are usually not spelt out in admissions requirements, it is useful then to consider what postgraduates are expected to *achieve* in order to be awarded the qualification. For instance, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority states that a graduate of a Master's Degree is (or should be) able to:

- show evidence of advanced knowledge about a specialist field of enquiry or professional practice;
- demonstrate mastery of sophisticated theoretical subject matter;
- evaluate critically the findings and discussions in the literature;
- research, analyse and argue from evidence;
- work independently and apply knowledge to new situations; and
- engage in rigorous intellectual analysis, criticism and problem-solving.

In addition, if the degree includes a component of supervised research, the graduate should also be able to:

- demonstrate a high order of skill in the planning, execution and completion of a piece of original research or creative scholarly work, and
- apply such skills learned during the study programme to new situations.

The research should be completed to internationally recognised standards and demonstrate that the graduate has a capacity for independent thinking.

(<http://www.nzqa.govt.nz/studying-in-new-zealand/nzqf/understand-nz-quals/master-s-degree/> accessed 24 Sept 2012)

Rhodes University's Higher Degrees Guide (RU, 2012b) provides criteria for the award of a higher degree, specifying that a thesis for the degree of Master must show that the candidate:

- (a) is sufficiently acquainted with the appropriate methods and techniques of research;
- (b) is sufficiently acquainted with the relevant literature;
- (c) has both satisfactorily understood the nature of the problem or topic and assessed the significance of the findings;
- (d) has satisfactorily presented the results of independent research for the award of the degree in a manner which is satisfactory as to literary style and presentation, and free from grammatical and typographical errors.

The HDG goes on to state: "When the award of the degree *with distinction* is under consideration, examiners are asked to look for evidence of real methodological and conceptual skills, clarity of exposition and development of argument, sound judgement, originality of approach, and some contribution to knowledge, and require that the thesis should reflect literary skills appropriate to the subject."(ibid: 6)

From the above list, it can be deduced that in addition to meeting the academic pre-requisites (an honours or a four-year bachelor's degree), RU Master's students

should be analytical, independent, experienced researchers with good literacy and communication skills.

4.8.2 Postgraduate Attributes in Alternative Admissions

HEIs generally have significant discretion in admissions decisions at the postgraduate level, unlike admission to the undergraduate level where matriculation prerequisites are nationally legislated (Universities Act, 1955; Higher Education Act, 1997).

At Rhodes University, the RPL Policy (2007, Appendix 2) simply states that “Applicants lacking the necessary formal qualification (an Honours degree) may be admitted by Senate, on the recommendation of Heads of Departments, Deans and Faculties, to Master’s degree study as *ad eundem gradum* candidates”. In the absence of an institutional framework on RPL, decisions on the suitability of potential Master’s students at RU are currently made on the intuitive professional judgement, experience and motivation skills of supervisors as well as the mood of particular Faculty meetings when these applications are discussed. This will be discussed further in Chapter 8, Section 8.5 (Supervisor’s motivations).

4.9 Concluding Summary

While the term ‘graduateness’ has crept into academic jargon both internationally and in South Africa, there is no universally accepted definition. Very few HEIs have formally discussed or agreed upon what it means for their institution although individual institutions are increasingly considering what qualities they believe their graduates should acquire during their studies. This is complicated by the ‘institutional culture’ factor, which is difficult to define or succinctly capture.

In general, the term graduateness is used to refer to the skills and attributes graduates possess in order to be ‘employable’. However, certain common themes are emerging which, although influenced by each HEI’s mission and vision, institutional culture and specified learning outcomes, can be used to analyse which attributes higher education is aiming to instil in university graduates. The essence of graduateness identified during this study is that students who have completed an undergraduate education should be literate, critical, flexible, analytical, socially aware and able to communicate at a high level. “However, we should not exclude the possibility that there are people who have that ‘something else’ associated with graduateness even if they do not have a formal qualification.” (Wheelahan, 2002: 9). This all-important ‘something else’ will be explored in detail in Chapter 8.

In conclusion, gradueness is essentially backward-looking in that it aims to capture the skills and attributes students who have completed an undergraduate degree have achieved and might be expected to display, particularly in the workplace. I propose to use the term 'postgraduate readiness' to represent *the skills and attributes gained during academic study, practical training and/or life experience, which would be necessary or beneficial in order to successfully complete a Master's degree*. The specific postgraduate skills and attributes which could be incorporated in the term postgraduate readiness will be discussed further in Chapter 8.

CHAPTER FIVE: RESEARCH DESIGN

5.1 Introduction

This chapter explains the motivation for undertaking this research, and outlines the methodological framework subsequently used to conceptualize, gather and analyse data used in this study. It presents my own understanding of research paradigms and discusses the epistemological rationale underlying the approach deemed most appropriate, namely grounded theory (GT). The chapter concludes by describing the tools associated with the grounded theory research method and linking them to the processes and aims of this study. Reliability, validity and ethical considerations are also discussed.

5.2 The Research Question

As I explained to my Supervisor, *“I did not go looking for a research question, my research question found me”*.

It is worthwhile beginning this chapter by outlining the initial incident that sparked this study, and which gave rise to the questions which guided the research. I did not enrol for a Master’s degree and then look for a research topic. Rather, I came across one particular event during the course of my 27 years of employment as a university administrator that sparked several questions about the essence of the academic project, and I was inspired to explore the assumptions upon which this event rested: A proposal was made to the Rhodes University Senate in 2006 by the Science Faculty Board to admit a student to a Master of Science degree on the basis of the recognition of prior learning. This in itself is not an unusual request, as the University makes provision for this form of access in its AEG rule (see Chapter 3, Section 3.7 for details of how this rule is applied). What did make it unusual, however, was that whereas students admitted in this way normally have an undergraduate degree or diploma at the very least, this particular student had no tertiary education qualification *whatsoever*.

The Science Faculty Board argued that the applicant “had been immersed in the proposed study field for several years ... had a keen intellect and a sound knowledge of the field ... and had the necessary skills to complete a research MSc” (RU Science Faculty Minutes 2 March 2006). The Senate agreed to the request and the student completed the degree in minimum time, graduating *with distinction*.

Some of the questions which immediately sprang to my mind were:

- Why does *anyone* require an undergraduate degree in order to pursue higher level studies?
- How does one measure or assess a 'keen intellect' and a 'sound knowledge of the field'?
- Could life-, work- and/or practical-experience be as, or possibly even more, valuable as preparation for postgraduate study than a formal undergraduate qualification?
- Is it possible that students admitted on the basis of recognition of prior learning are as, or perhaps even more, likely to succeed than those entering postgraduate studies via the formal route (ie having an honours or four-year undergraduate degree)?

In considering these questions, I realised it was important to identify my own underlying assumptions about knowledge and the world, and to position myself philosophically and methodologically before undertaking the research (Burks & Mills, 2011: 5).

After reading extensively on various epistemological lenses (see Section 5.4), I identified most closely with taking an interpretive approach, and aimed to enable 'the theory to emerge from the data' as advocated in grounded theory, rather than attempt to overlay an existing theory onto the phenomenon being explored.

5.3 An Interpretive Approach

My study was concerned with understanding the concepts of access and postgraduate readiness from the perspective of those most experienced in this area – I wanted to "investigate the subjective world of human experience" which is a characteristic of an interpretive approach (Cohen et al, 2007: 21). According to Connole (1993: 16), an interpretive paradigm acknowledges 'multiple realities which require multiple methods for understanding them' in order to understand the phenomenon from the subject's point of view. I also wished to interpret 'how people create and maintain their social worlds' (Neumann, 2006: 88). This study therefore explored several 'layers of reality' relating to access to Master's Degrees at Rhodes University, specifically:

- The views of academic supervisors and university executives – accessed via semi-structured interviews;
- The arguments provided by supervisors of RPL students in their written motivations to Faculties and Senate;
- The outcomes of RPL (AEG) applications as recorded in Senate minutes;

- Institutional views as contained in formal policy documents and institutional plans;
- South African national higher education policy on RPL; and finally
- Empirical data on student success rates in relation to their category of admission (formal, or based on a recognition of prior learning).

In addition, the process of alternative or RPL admission at the Master's level and the concepts of 'graduateness' and 'postgraduate readiness' were explored in relation to national and international practices, in order to provide a further layer or 'method of understanding' the multiple realities involved in the interviewees' views.

This qualitative research project, within an interpretive paradigm, involved undertaking a case study of Rhodes University over a period of ten years (1999-2008), focusing on four academic faculties in order to explore the phenomenon of access to Master's degrees. Consistent with an interpretive orientation (Cohen et al, 2007:21), semi-structured interviews were undertaken with supervisors, senior academics and policy makers at the University in order to access the subjective experiences of those tasked with making decisions regarding access to Master's studies for students lacking the formal admission requirements.

5.4 Research Orientation

Because researchers' beliefs, feelings and underlying assumptions about their area of study as well as the wider world affect their choice of research methodology (Birks and Mills, 2011: 8), it is important to understand one's own ontological, epistemological and practical assumptions before undertaking any research activity. Epistemology, the theory or study of knowledge, is concerned with "how we know what we know" and deals with the source, nature and scope of knowledge (Newby, 2010: 93, DeRose, 2008: 1) or in other words, what is knowledge and how do we acquire it? In a shared world, it is important to agree upon a method to determine what we *know* rather than what we *believe*. As Newby argues, "whatever framework we choose to work within, our task is to uncover some truth ... we need to convince others that our results are not false and that our conclusions are valid." (ibid: 92) My task as a researcher was therefore to convince others that the processes I used to collect and analyse my data and the resulting conclusions are reasonable and logical and can be considered 'knowledge' rather than 'belief'.

In order to begin exploring my research questions I needed to conduct an empirical analysis of RU student admissions to Master's degree studies, as well as examine success rates according to the category of admission, over a significant period of time (I selected a ten-year range, from 1999-2008). The statistical results (discussed

in Chapter 6) suggested there was little difference in success rates between the admission categories - but were not conclusive, which illustrated how a purely positivist, quantitative approach provides only limited insight into the issues raised. I realised I needed to understand the context in which access decisions were made and I also wanted to identify the student attributes sought, and criteria used, by academics to evaluate whether or not students without the necessary formal qualifications were likely to succeed at the Master's level. I attended two courses at RU on research methodology, and subsequently joined a pre-doctoral programme at the University in order to orient myself in the various research paradigms and decide on an appropriate methodological framework for this study.

In reflecting on my own epistemological position and potential research paradigms, I struggled to find one which resonated with me and with the aims of this study in its entirety. I took comfort in Newby's reminder that no one approach is better or worse than another, and that ideas and techniques can be shared (2010: 93). When I felt overwhelmed and confused by the multitude of readings on research design, I referred myself to the following statement from a passage on relativism: "It is easy to over-intellectualize the notion of a conceptual framework. On most accounts frameworks are not tidy and precise cognitive artifacts like road maps or axiomatic formal systems. They are often messy, indefinite, and may include vague intuitions or cognitive habits as well as specific principles and standards." (Swoyer, 2010)

In an effort to achieve 'methodological congruence' - harmony among the researcher's personal philosophical position, the stated aims of the research and the methodological approach the researcher uses to achieve those aims (Birks & Mills, 2011: 36), I developed Table 4 (below) which synthesised my understanding of research paradigms and clarified the differences between various elements.

TABLE 4: Research Paradigms

METHODOLOGY/ FRAMEWORK <i>Strategic approach to research</i>	ONTOLOGY⁵ <i>What is reality? What exists out there?</i>	EPISTEMOLOGY <i>How do we know something or go about finding it out? Our relationship with knowledge – are we part of knowledge or external to it?</i>	RESEARCH METHODS <i>Research tools</i>
Scientific – quantitative, positivist,	<u>Realist</u> – reality is 'out there', nature just	Objective – knowledge is external and governed by	Experiments, measurements,

⁵ Ontology refers to what actually exists – the nature of reality. Epistemology refers to how we gain knowledge of what exists – how we can know anything. (Maxwell, 2012:vii)

deductive	waiting to be found. Belief in an observable and measurable reality, rules exist independently of the research problem	the laws of nature; Cause and effect, outcomes can be generalized, evidence is used to draw logical, deductive conclusions	statistical data analysis, hypothesis testing, surveys
Humanistic – qualitative, interpretive, holistic, naturalistic Eg Postmodernism, Grounded Theory (although grounded theory can also be scientific), Phenomenology, Ethnomethodology, Critical Theory, Social Realism, Legitimation Code Theory	<u>Relativist</u> – knowledge is a social reality, value-laden, individually interpreted <u>Constructivist</u> – knowledge is constructed by individuals based on their own experiences <u>Critical realist</u> – things exist ‘out there’ but our humanness influences what we see and understand	Subjective – knowledge is interpreted by individuals; knowledge is multi-layered and complex, research guidelines exist but considerable flexibility and freedom of choice for researchers	Interviews, case studies, ethnography, action research, historical documentary analysis, discourse analysis, narrative analysis, focus groups, ideology critique, coding, memo writing, constant comparative analysis, theoretical sensitivity, selecting a core category, theoretical saturation, theoretical integration

Adapted from Barney et al (2010); Cohen et al (2000); Guba (1990); Newby (2010)

As described earlier (Section 5.3), the qualitative, interpretive, relativist approach seemed most appropriate for this study but personally I also acknowledge the independent existence of ‘things out there’ as understood by critical theorists and social realists. I knew that empirical data would be an important element in this study so – despite Newby’s caution that “for some researchers on either side of the quantitative/qualitative divide, the incorporation of a procedure from ‘the other side’ is tantamount to supping with the devil” (2010: 125) – I decided to adopt a mixed methods approach to my study. Although some authors claim that using mixed methods - combining quantitative and qualitative methods - is a new approach to research (Johnson & Onwegbuzie, 2004; Gorard & Taylor, 2004), Newby (2010: 126) claims the approach dates back to the 1950’s, and that it only became problematic from the 1980’s onwards – with one researcher referring to mixed methods as “positivism dressed up in drag” (Giddings, 2006).

Newby argues against this view, suggesting that a mixed method approach enables researchers to expand the study to “expose and assess more issues and factors at work” and also provides an additional method of triangulating evidence as well as further legitimising the researcher’s interpretation of the focus area (2010: 128-134). The greatest appeal of a mixed methods approach, for me, lies in Newby’s statement that “A mixed methods approach downplays the influence of philosophy altogether because the need for pragmatism is paramount, because of the importance placed on the issue being researched and because of the need to find an answer to a

specific question.” (2010: 47). I view research methodologies as means to ends rather than ends in themselves, and was attracted to the pragmatism inherent in a mixed methods approach.

Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) propose three typologies of mixed methods research:

- Mixed *method* design – where both quantitative and qualitative data is collected and analysed (in parallel or sequentially). Data may also be converted from one format to another
- Mixed *model* design – where quantitative and qualitative approaches are integrated throughout the study; and
- *Multilevel* design – where one approach dominates at one level and the other at another level.
(in Newby, 2010: 128)

My research could then be described as a mixed *method* design as it entailed a statistical (quantitative) analysis of student enrolments and success rates according to Faculty and admission category, as well as an interpretive, qualitative analysis of interview transcripts and historical documents (motivation letters written by academics in support of students who did not meet the formal entry requirements for a Master’s degree at RU). Newby’s claim that one of the approaches (either qualitative or quantitative) would dominate (ibid: 130) proved to be the case in my study, with the qualitative approach providing the greatest insight and content for critical reflection.

5.4.1 Grounded Theory

It’s a world view that says not to have a world view when doing research.
(Ke and Wenglensky, 2010)

Given the mixed methods adopted for this study, the fact that little research had previously been undertaken in this area, and the lack of an obvious ontological framework, a grounded theory approach offered the most effective and appropriate ‘road map’ for undertaking the research and analysing the data.

Grounded theory is “a general methodology for developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analysed... the suggested guidelines and procedures allow much latitude for ingenuity and are an aid to creativity.” (Strauss and Corbin, 1990: 273). Grounded theory is a way of conceptualising and thinking about data and can be adapted to studies of diverse phenomena (ibid: 275). According to Dr Barney Glaser, one of the two main founders of grounded theory:

All research is "grounded" in data, but few studies produce a "grounded theory." "Grounded theory is an inductive methodology. Although many call grounded theory a qualitative method, it is not. It is a general method. It is the systematic generation of theory from systematic research. It is a set of rigorous research procedures leading to the emergence of conceptual categories. These concepts/categories are related to each other as a theoretical explanation of the action(s) that continually resolves the main concern of the participants in a substantive area. Grounded theory can be used with either qualitative or quantitative data.
(www.groundedtheory.com)

Grounded theory was developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in 1967 as "a method of conducting qualitative research that focuses on creating conceptual frameworks or theories through building inductive analysis from the data." (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007: 608). Glaser and Strauss were sociologists working on the concepts of death and dying, at the University of California in San Francisco, USA and were heavily influenced by 'symbolic interactionism' where:

- Human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings these things have for them.
- The meaning of such things is derived for and arises out of the social interaction that one has with one's fellows.
- These meanings are handled in and modified through an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things s/he encounters.
(Blumer, 1969: 2)

Glaser and Strauss parted ways in the 1980's, with Strauss joining forces with Juliet Corbin and developing a more explicit, prescriptive and formulaic approach to data analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Melia, 1996; Gibbs, 2010). Subsequently, another influential grounded theorist, Kathy Charmaz, developed what came to be known as 'constructivist grounded theory' (Charmaz, 2006) which places more emphasis on the role of the researcher in constructing and interpreting reality. Sbaraini et al (2011) suggest that two other versions of grounded theory are also recognised: Adele Clarke's 'Postmodern Situational Analysis' and Leonard Schatzman's 'Dimensional Analysis'.

However, Glaser is highly critical of adaptations and refinements to his theory, saying in a 2004 article entitled 'Remodeling Grounded Theory' that "The mixing of QDA [qualitative data analysis] and GT methodologies has the effect of downgrading and eroding the GT goal of conceptual theory. The result is a default remodeling of classic GT into just another QDA method with all its descriptive baggage."

According to Calman (2011), there are probably as many versions of grounded theory as there are grounded theorists but despite some technical differences, the

fundamentals of the various approaches remain similar to Glaser and Strauss' original conceptualisation. This study follows the 'Glaserian' or 'Classic Grounded Theory' methodology which is simpler in its approach and less prescriptive in terms of data analysis. Classic grounded theory is best summed up by Glaser who claims that the original approach is

Simply a set of integrated conceptual hypotheses systematically generated to produce an inductive theory about a substantive area. Classic GT is a highly structured but eminently flexible methodology. Its data collection and analysis procedures are explicit and the pacing of these procedures is, at once, simultaneous, sequential, subsequent, scheduled and serendipitous, forming an integrated methodological "whole" that enables the emergence of conceptual theory as distinct from the thematic analysis characteristic of QDA research.
(Glaser, 2004)

Three specific aspects of adopting a grounded theory approach appealed greatly to me. The first was the ability to watch lectures and discussions online - led by Dr Glaser - and hear 'first hand' about the aims and methods associated with the theory, from the original theorist, as it were. The second was the emphasis in this methodology of using memos as data. Since school days I have been in the habit of taking notes and using my notes to capture thoughts and make meaning from my studies as well as in my professional work and more general experiences of life. Lecturers often used to say to classes I attended, 'don't write, just listen' – but the act of writing *while* listening *for me* is critical in understanding, retaining and engaging with the content. One prominent grounded theorist, Dr OE Simmons, states in his outline of the grounded theory process and methods, that:

Memoing should take precedence, because it is the actual write-up of what is emerging from the data and the analysis. Data is always available, and can be analyzed at any time. Ideas are fragile. They should be written down at the earliest possible time.
(Simmons, <http://www.groundedtheory.com/what-is-gt.aspx>)

The third characteristic of grounded theory which resonated with my relativist understanding of knowledge and 'truth' is that grounded theory is an interpretive approach which "*must* include the perspectives and voices of the people whom we study" and that "knowledge is linked closely with time and place". (Strauss and Corbin, 1990: 274-276)

One major reservation I had about using a grounded theory approach was that perhaps I would not be able to achieve the (classical Glaserian) approach's ultimate aim of 'theoretical integration' and theory generation - which should happen when the researcher integrates the categories s/he has uncovered to form a grounded theory (de Vos, 2005). However, Corbin and Strauss (2008) reassure novice

researchers that *even if a new theory does not emerge from the data*, the 'descriptive analysis' which the research would have produced has the potential to add further to what we know of the world and could help improve our understanding of it (italics added).

5.4.2 Assumptions and Expectations

Birks and Mills (2011: 19-20) suggest grounded theory researchers should acknowledge what they know about the topic before going into the field, and explicate what they expect to find from their research in order to ensure that one stays 'grounded throughout all stages of ... the research adventure' as well as to guard against their preconceptions influencing the gathering or analysis of data. What I (thought I) knew and expected to find about the field of *alternative access* was that⁶:

- Very little research has been undertaken or published about access to Master's level study.
- National and institutional policy in this area is mostly directed towards undergraduate access.
- The motivation/agenda for recognizing prior learning is social rather than political.
- Few universities still use the Latin term 'Ad Eundem Gradem' and few people actually know what it means or how it originated.
- AEG is used interchangeably with RPL but there are subtle differences.
- AEG/RPL is very poorly publicized as an option for potential students, and not widely known amongst newer academic staff.
- No national or institutional frameworks or guidelines are available on the concept or the process of RPL at the postgraduate level.
- The number of students admitted in this way (RPL) at RU is very small.
- Many academics have strong reservations about recognizing prior learning and display 'academic arrogance' towards those who do not have formal qualifications.
- AEG rules are not fully understood or consistently applied at RU.
- Most RU academics would be resistant to the prospect of a 'framework' for RPL and would see it as an attempt to capture a fluid concept which would impact on their academic freedom.
- Little attention or thought has been given to the concept by the majority of RU academics.
- Those academics who have experience of AEG students would be enthusiastic supporters of RPL at the Master's level.
- AEG students do better than 'formal access' students.
- The social sciences would be more open to admitting students on an RPL basis than the natural sciences.

⁶ These assumptions are based on my own personal observations and memos made during many years of attending RU Faculty and Senate meetings and participating in strategic institutional planning discussions, and were recorded by myself before analysing the statistical data or undertaking any interviews.

What I (thought I) knew and expected to find about the field of *graduateness* was that:

- The notion of 'graduateness', the attributes university graduates are expected to possess as a result of their studies, is becoming increasingly relevant nationally and internationally as HE resources dwindle and public accountability rises.
- Graduateness means 'readiness for further study'.
- There would be much discussion on assumptions, expectations and criteria for assessing graduateness.
- I would find similar generic 'graduate attributes and skills' across different fields.
- Interest in and enthusiasm for alternative access would be mainly from academics in areas where potential Master's students are not easy to find.
- There would be general support from interviewees for a conceptual and procedural framework for assessing graduateness.

Listing these assumptions early on in my study helped me to remain aware of how my preconceptions might influence the collection and analysis of data, and provided a useful framework for the discussion of my conclusions in Chapter 9.

5.5 Theoretical Framework

5.5.1 Literature Review

Whilst a comprehensive literature review is generally considered to be the starting point for any research undertaking, the founders of grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss (1967), propose that a literature review should only be conducted *after* the collection and analysis of data has been completed in order to avoid interpreting the data through the lenses of others. They advise that the "literature of theory and fact on the area under study" should be ignored, in order to "ensure that the emergence of categories will not be contaminated by concepts more suited to different areas." (ibid: 37). As very little research has been formally undertaken or published in my research area, access to Master's level studies, I believe my data analysis was not influenced by predetermined categories or inappropriate concepts. Reading undertaken in the critical conceptual areas of recognition of prior learning and graduateness is discussed in Chapters 3 and 4 respectively. The focus of my literature review for this research design chapter, therefore, was on research paradigms and on exploring the development and evolution of grounded theory itself.

5.5.2 Locating the Research within a Grounded Theory Approach

What is a theory? According to Newby (2010: 71), a theory is "a generalisation that should apply in all or most cases (which is how it tends to be used in science) or in some cases or particular circumstances (which is how it is often used in the social

sciences), ... and seeks to explain things in terms of cause and effect and with varying degrees of certainty.”

The ultimate aim of grounded theory is to *generate or discover a theory* (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory aims to develop explanatory theory about common social patterns and interactions and is recommended when investigating social problems or situations to which people must adapt. The approach enables the researcher to move from describing what is happening to understanding the process by which it is happening. (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Grounded theory is essentially an *inductive* research form which involves searching for patterns and developing explanations, or theories, for these patterns as opposed to *deductive* research which generally starts with a theory and seeks to confirm, revise, adapt or disprove a hypothesis (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). “In general, the less we know about a research problem, the more important it is to take an inductive approach – to suspend our preconceived ideas as much as we can and let observation be our guide.” (ibid: 265)

The use of this approach “for exploring integral social relationships and the behaviour of groups where there has been little exploration of the contextual factors that affect individuals lives” (Crooks, 2001), makes it highly appropriate for my study, where little research has been done into the contextual factors and processes surrounding decision-making for Master’s degree admissions.

Grounded theory is based on a three step process: the researcher enters the field without a hypothesis, describes what is being investigated, and then develops a tentative explanation as to why it is so (Cohen et al, 2007; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Key points which emerge from the data are marked with a series of codes extracted from the text, and constant comparison of codes is undertaken in order to develop a coding paradigm (Morrow and Smith, 1995). Codes are then grouped into similar concepts from which categories are formed and used as the basis of the emergent theory.

In this method, the analytic categories are directly ‘grounded’ in the data and “analysis is favoured over method description, fresh categories over preconceived ideas and extant theories, and systematically focused sequential data collection over large initial samples” (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007: 608). One of the defining characteristics of this method is that the researcher is involved in data analysis while still collecting data, and uses this analysis to inform and shape further data collection. “Thus the sharp distinction between the data collection and analysis phases of traditional research is intentionally blurred in grounded theory analysis” (ibid).

This was the case in my study, where I began with a statistical analysis of access and success rates of Master's level students which uncovered gaps in the University's records. I then realised that I needed to go through the actual Faculty and Senate minutes (1999-2008) in order to ensure I correctly categorised the access categories (RPL or formal access). During this phase of the research, I encountered the formal narratives/motivations submitted by the supervisors of potential AEG students to Faculty Boards, providing rich narrative texts which needed to be analysed to understand the basis on which the AEG access decisions were made. Reading and coding the motivations enabled me to formulate focused questions to include in the semi-structured interviews, and also enabled me to identify the most appropriate interview subjects (those that had supervised two or more AEG students). I believe this process of data collection, analysis, discovery and further data collection conforms to the spirit and intentions of the grounded theory approach.

In summary, grounded theory is a research design that revolves and evolves, where theory emerges from the data, and which entails a research process whereby data is collected and analysed simultaneously and constantly compared in order to develop an emergent grounded theory.

5.6 Research Methods

5.6.1 Quantitative Data - Statistical Analysis of Master's Student Records

Quantitative data was obtained from Rhodes University's Data Management Unit (DMU) for the years 1999-2008. The request from myself to the DMU was "Please indicate the number of Master's students admitted per annum as well as the number of Master's degrees completed per annum, according to Faculty and admission category (AEG or regular admission)". Upon going through the resulting dataset, I picked up discrepancies between the number of AEG admissions provided by the DMU, and the students identified as AEG admissions in the Faculty Minutes. As the student numbers (identification numbers) were included in the dataset provided by the DMU, I was able to check which student numbers had not been included in the DMU data and why. I discovered that the Registrar made a decision in 2002 to not flag 'AEG' in admissions data (this decision was reversed in 2011 as a result of this study). By going through the Faculty minutes again, I was able to provide the DMU with the student numbers of those that should have been included in the dataset.

Simple statistical analyses were used to interpret the data, and the results and statistical significance were verified using independent T-Tests with assistance from Professor Sarah Radloff, Head of Rhodes University's Department of Statistics.

5.6.2 Qualitative Data - Interviews

Interviews, or "interchanges of views between two or more people on a topic of mutual interest" (Kvale, 1996: 14), are the building blocks of most qualitative studies. Interviews enable data to be *constructed* as opposed to 'discovered' given that they are intersubjective rather than objective or subjective (Laing, 1967 in Cohen et al, 2007: 349). Cohen et al (2007: 250-251) propose that an interview is a social encounter, not simply a site for information exchange and that "no matter how hard interviewers may try to be systematic and objective, the constraints of everyday life will be a part of whatever interpersonal transactions they initiate." In addition, the questions asked are inevitably "couched in the cultural repertoires of all participants, indicating how people make sense of their social world and of each other" and as such cannot be considered neutral.

In any qualitative study, it is critical to ensure that the most appropriate people are interviewed and that the most effective questions are asked. A common dilemma for qualitative researchers is to choose a sample – to decide how many interviews to conduct, and whom to interview. "There is growing evidence that 20–60 knowledgeable people are enough to uncover and understand the core categories in any well-defined cultural domain or study of lived experience." (Bernard & Ryan, 2010: 360)

On the other hand, Weller and Romney (1998: 77) showed that "just 10 knowledgeable informants are needed to understand the contents of a cultural domain." In my study, the potential pool of participants was limited – Rhodes is a small university with only around 300-350 academic staff, and of those only a fraction had experience of supervising students classified as AEG (admitted on the basis of RPL/not having the necessary academic qualifications for admission). As my study involved four Faculties I needed to interview the academic head (Dean) of each Faculty and I decided to add at least two other academics in each Faculty with AEG supervision experience – these individuals were chosen after establishing which academics were most active in AEG supervision according to my analysis of a ten year range (1999-2008) of Faculty minutes, and also after consultation with the Dean of each Faculty. In order to obtain institutional, strategic and practical viewpoints on the concepts of alternative access as well as graduateness, I also needed to interview senior policy makers and policy implementers in the university and was fortunate to

be able to interview RU's Vice-Chancellor, the Registrar, and the Dean of Teaching and Learning. Sixteen interviews were conducted in total.

Such a sample size might appear small to a quantitative researcher; however, participants for qualitative research are expected to represent an experience or detailed knowledge of a particular process rather than an entire population. Because one participant can provide a rich and detailed account of an experience, qualitative data from a relatively small number of participants can result in a dense and substantial representation of the experience in question. Adding participants to qualitative research is of value only when that participant can add something new to the explanation of the experience under investigation. Therefore, the importance of sample size in qualitative research is secondary to the quality and richness of the data collected.

(Arcuri, 2008)

Kvale (1996: 101) advises that interviews should be conducted with "as many people as necessary in order to gain the information sought". I am satisfied that the sample of 16 was adequate in providing the data required, and this is confirmed by the 'theoretical saturation' achieved during the analysis (see Section 5.7.5 for further details on theoretical saturation).

In-depth interviews are ideal for a qualitative study such as mine which sought deep, reflective engagement with a few people as opposed to surveys which are more suited to gathering quantitative data from large numbers of participants. Kvale (1996) identified seven stages of conducting in-depth interviews: thematising, designing, interviewing, transcribing, analysing, verifying, and reporting.

- *Thematising* involves determining the purposes of the interview – in my study the purpose of the semi-structured interviews was to be the "principal means of gathering information having a direct bearing on the research objectives." (Cohen et al, 2001: 351)
- *Designing* requires the researcher to develop an 'interview guide' which includes a 'facesheet' (which is used to record demographic and factual information about the interview such as the time, date, and place of the interview and special conditions or circumstances that may affect the interview), the *interview questions*, and a *post-interview comment sheet*, which records the interviewer's feelings, interpretations, and other comments that arose during the interview. Appendix 5 provides the facesheet and interview guide I developed for this study.
- *Interviewing*. Kvale (1996) advocates that it is important to explain the purpose of the study, obtain the necessary permissions, and put the respondent at ease at the beginning of the interview. As I wanted my interviewees to have had time to reflect on the issues arising in my study, I prepared an introductory email and attached a document (Appendix 6) which outlined the context of the study and indicated the general questions I wanted to address during the interview. I ensured interviewees received this information at least a week prior to the interview.

- *Transcribing* involves creating a verbatim text of each interview by writing out each question and response, including the interviewer's notes.
- *Analysing* involves re-reading the interview transcripts to identify themes emerging from the respondents' answers. The analysis of my transcripts was undertaken using the grounded theory methodology of coding (see Section 5.7.6 on coding) and assisted by the use of a qualitative software programme called CDC EZ-Text which was developed by the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Georgia, USA. The programme helps researchers create, manage, and analyse semi-structured qualitative databases and helps solve the problem of consistency across interview write-ups by allowing researchers to design their own qualitative data entry templates tailored to their questionnaire. EZ-Text is particularly well-suited to examining the same set of topics with each interviewee and was specifically designed for use by researchers such as myself who are collecting and analyzing semi-structured qualitative data generated through face-to-face interviews with a relatively small sample of individual respondents. I later used the software programme NVivo to assist in coding the interview transcripts as it provided additional flexibility in constant comparative analysis.
- *Verifying* involves checking the credibility of data, usually by using a method called triangulation – using multiple perspectives to interpret the data. If the different perspectives reach similar conclusions then the information is considered credible. In my study I used the constant comparative method of grounded theory (see Section 5.7.3) to identify similarities and differences in the interview data, and also compared the analysis of the Faculty motivation letters to the outcomes of the interview analyses.
- *Reporting* involves sharing the results of the in-depth interviews via a written or oral report. Kvale (1996) recommends that these reports should describe not only the results, but how the results will shape future work, claiming that when respondents see the information being used, they are more likely to participate in future data collection efforts. This was an important consideration for me as I indicated in my interview outline that I would follow up with each interviewee electronically and provide a list of 'graduate attributes' which had been identified during my research, and request further input from the participants. This will be undertaken as a separate research project and the findings will hopefully be submitted for publication in due course.

In order to ensure the most effective questions would be asked during the interviews, I developed a semi-structured interview guide based on my initial research of the field of RPL and graduateness, as well as on the results of my empirical analysis of Master's student admissions and success rates at RU from 1999-2008. The questions were designed to obtain information which I did not already have – in other words, following my initial research and readings, I was aware of 'what I did not know' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 269). After obtaining input on my draft interview guide from my supervisor, who is an ex-Dean of Education and who has great insight and experience into the research field, I undertook a pilot

interview of another ex-Dean of Education who also has many years of experience in the field of alternative admissions. This step was helpful in streamlining the questions, changing the order of the questions and refining the structure of the interview so that I was able to conduct intensely focused interviews and gather a large amount of data within the hour allocated to each interview (except for the Vice-Chancellor's interview which lasted 2 hours, and the Registrar whom I needed to interview twice after identifying issues with other interviewees on which I wanted to obtain his further input). The interview guides were slightly different for the academics (Appendix 5) than for the university executives (Appendix 7).

In preparing for the interviews I took heed of Kvale's characteristics of a good interviewer (1996: 147) which are summarized here. The interviewer needs to: Be knowledgeable; provide structure; be clear, empathetic and open; steer the interview; be critical and challenging; remember what has already been said; interpret and summarize what has been said; be balanced in terms of participation and finally, ensure the interviewee understands the purposes of the interview.

I requested the first few interviewees to provide feedback on my interview techniques and advice on areas which could be improved. I am happy to report that only positive feedback was received and I am grateful for the many years of experience I have had on higher education institutional audit panels – which involved conducting numerous interviews in often sensitive and complex areas.

Above all, I endeavoured to remain true to the grounded theory approach to interviews, where:

The GT researcher listens to participants venting issues rather than encouraging them to talk about a subject of little interest. The mandate is to remain open to what is actually happening and not to start filtering data through pre-conceived hypotheses and biases, to listen and observe and thereby discover the main concern of the participants in the field and how they resolve this concern. The forcing, preconceived notions of an initial professional problem, or an extant theory and framework are suspended in the service of seeing what will emerge conceptually by constant comparative analysis.

(Glaser & Holton, 2004)

5.6.3 Historical Documentary Analysis

“Documents are useful in rendering more visible the phenomena under study” (Prior, 2003 in Cohen et al, 2010: 201). Many different kinds of documents can be used to “establish facts and draw conclusions about past events” (Borg, 1963 in Cohen et al, 2010: 191), including field notes, diaries, formal records, minutes of meetings, memos and emails, reports and statistics, archives, policy documents,

public records etc (Cohen et al, 2010: 201). One advantage of documentary analysis is that “there is little or no reactivity on the part of the writer, particularly if the document was not written with the intention of being research data” (Cohen et al, 2010: 201). This aspect was important in my study in order to achieve validation of the interview data by triangulation or, in Newby’s words (2010: 122), to “corroborate interview evidence with documentary evidence.”

The following historical documents were analysed in this study:

5.6.3.1 Senate and Faculty Minutes

I obtained written permission from the Registrar to access and analyse the University’s Faculty and Senate minutes, which entailed spending many hours searching through the University archives in the Cory Library as RU archive records are not available electronically before the year 2002. The University Senate meets once per quarter and each Faculty has a minimum of four Faculty board meetings per annum. As there are six Faculties at Rhodes, I studied 280 sets of minutes over the 10 year period 1999-2008. It should be noted that only four Faculties – Commerce, Education, Humanities and Science - are included in the discussion as two Faculties, Law and Pharmacy, had no statistically significant AEG admissions during that period.

5.6.3.2 Formal Motivations from Supervisors

The University’s Higher Degrees Guide (RU, 2012b: 5) states that “*ad eundem gradum* students should submit a full motivation for their admission with supporting documentation to the Head of Department”, and the RPL Policy (Appendix 2) states that “Applicants lacking the necessary formal qualification (an Honours degree) may be admitted by Senate, on the recommendation of Heads of Departments, Deans and Faculties.” The recommendation of HoDs is normally presented in the form of a letter of motivation - sometimes accompanied by a CV - written by the Supervisor and signed by the HoD and Dean, and attached to the agenda of Faculty meetings. All Faculty agendas during the period under analysis, 1999-2008, were accessed by myself and any motivation letters included in the agenda documentation were photocopied and analysed (see Chapter 8 for a discussion of the results). In many instances where applicants were being proposed as AEG admissions, just a brief motivation was included as part of the agenda itself, often only one paragraph. These ‘in-agenda’ motivations were also photocopied and analysed, and are included in the discussion in Chapter 8.

The motivation letters and paragraphs were examined using a qualitative content analysis approach which is:

A set of procedures that can be applied to any medium...to identify what is being communicated, by whom and to whom. It is concerned with the significance and meaningfulness of the communication. Thus it is concerned not just with words but also on the concepts and ideas that are being communicated.
(Newby, 2010: 484)

In this method, researchers create a coding structure based on their interpretation of the meaning being conveyed in the data. A line-by-line analysis of the motivation letters and paragraphs was undertaken from which codes were generated. Thereafter a table was developed amalgamating the codes into categories implied in the documentation, and made explicit by myself.

Other historical documents used to provide context and background in this study included the University's 2005 institutional audit portfolio and draft Institutional Plan as well as various institutional and national policy documents. Personal memos and notes taken while attending Faculty and Senate meetings during the period studied (as part of my job as Director of Institutional Planning at RU) and observation of discussions on AEG admissions, were also used as research materials.

5.7 Research Methods in Grounded Theory

It is important to note once again that grounded theory differs from other qualitative research methods in that the researcher does not choose a theoretical framework and then apply it to the data, but rather collects the data and then enables the theory to emerge during analysis of the data. "Concurrent data collection or generation and analysis using codes and categories are essential methods that differentiate grounded theory from other predominantly interpretive research designs." (Burks & Mills, 2011: 94)

Burks and Mills (2011) identify two main rules in grounded theory data analysis:

- i) Everything is a concept (or, as Glaser claimed in 1978, "All is data"); and
- ii) Data analysis should always be undertaken in relation to the research question.

Grounded theory is essentially an *inductive* form of research – which "involves the search for pattern from observation and the development of explanations – theories – for those patterns through a series of hypotheses." (Bernard & Ryan, 2010: 266) In contrast, *deductive* research would begin with a theory (usually

derived from the literature or based on experience) from which hypotheses are developed and then tested against observations.

Various terms are used by grounded theorists to describe the same thing, which can be very confusing for a novice researcher. As mentioned earlier, I have used Glaser's (1978) terminology in this study, the key concepts of which are:

5.7.1 Memoing

Memos are essentially "field notes about codes and contain our running commentary as we read through texts." (Bernard & Ryan, 2010: 76) "Memos in grounded theory research are records of thoughts, feeling, insights and ideas in relation to a research project. Stern (2007) regards memos as the mortar that holds together the building blocks (data) that comprise a grounded theory". (Burks & Mills, 2011: 40). Charmaz (2000: 517), helpfully describes memo writing as "the intermediate step between coding and the first draft of the completed analysis." It is not important *how* one memos, but it is important *that* one memos (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Glaser (1998) describes 'theoretical memoing' as "the theorizing write-up of ideas about substantive codes and their theoretically coded relationships as they emerge during coding, collecting and analyzing data, and during memoing". Theoretical memos are anything written down or drawn in the process of constant comparison.

More generally, memos are an integral part of any grounded theory research approach, and include every written note or diagram relating to the research, from its commencement to its conclusion. In the case of my study, the numerous memos I had made of Senate discussions and thoughts I had on the issues of access and gradueness long prior to the formal commencement of my study, also proved invaluable.

5.7.2 Theoretical Sampling

Theoretical sampling is used to improve the depth of the data and the sharpness of the picture (Richards, 2005: 136). As the researcher proceeds with analysis of the data, it becomes apparent that more information is needed to 'saturate' the categories under development (Burks & Mills, 2001: 10). Theoretical sampling is also used to sharpen the researcher's focus during constant comparative analysis. Once I had collected the quantitative data, I was able to clarify the issues I wanted to explore and identify those RU staff members best suited to provide input. I first interviewed the Dean of each Faculty and requested advice as to the most appropriate academics (who had experience of supervising AEG students) for

inclusion in my sample. Following the interview process, I discovered during the coding of the AEG motivation letters that one particular academic (who had not been available to be interviewed due to personal circumstances) had written numerous formal motivation letters, and I was able to obtain copies which were added to the data already collected. As that particular programme (Master of Education in Environmental Education) was one of the most active in the University in terms of alternative admissions, the additional data provided deep insight and detail on the concept of RPL admissions at the Master's level in the Faculty of Education.

5.7.3 Constant Comparative Analysis

Constant comparative analysis is the cornerstone of grounded theory research methods. It involves constantly comparing data: incident to incident, incident to codes, codes to codes, codes to categories and categories to categories, and it continues until a grounded theory is fully integrated (Burks & Mills, 2011).

5.7.4 Theoretical Sensitivity

“Researchers are a sum of all they have experienced.” (Burks & Mills, 2011: 11) In other words, researchers bring to their studies all they have previously experienced as well as their personal epistemological position and any knowledge they have relating to the research area. The concept of theoretical sensitivity acknowledges this and, “As a grounded theorist becomes immersed in the data, their level of theoretical sensitivity to analytical possibilities will increase.” (ibid)

Glaser (1978) describes theoretical sensitivity as the process of developing the insight with which a researcher comes to the research situation. It is often referred to as a creative aspect of grounded theory and involves the researcher working in the area to obtain experience and expertise. By gaining theoretical sensitivity the researcher will be able to recognise important data and formulate conceptually dense theory.

5.7.5 Theoretical Saturation

Theoretical saturation is a stage reached in grounded theory research when new information does not provide further insight into a particular category. As explained by Birks and Mills (2011:10), categories can be considered theoretically saturated when “new data analysis returns codes that only fit in existing categories” and the existing categories are satisfactorily explained.

5.7.6 Coding

Coding in grounded theory refers to a form of content analysis which aims to identify and conceptualize the underlying issues amongst the 'noise' in the data.

During the analysis of an interview, the researcher will become aware that the interviewee is using words and phrases that highlight an issue of importance or interest to the research; they are noted and described in a short phrase. The issue may be mentioned again in the same or similar words and is again noted. This process is called coding and the short descriptor phrase is a code.

(Allan, 2003)

A code is "simply a name or label that the researcher gives to a piece of text that contains an idea or a piece of information", and coding is the "translation of question responses and respondent information to specific categories for the purpose of analysis. (Cohen et al, 2011: 559).

The questions constantly asked by the researcher are 'what's going on?' and 'how are participants trying to solve the issues?' Passages in the text are labelled as being 'about something' and given a code or key word/theme. Codes are then grouped into similar concepts and from these, categories are formed, related to the research question and literature, and used as the basis for a grounded theory.

Different grounded theory theorists have assigned varying names to the progressive stages of coding and analysis but all seem to agree that three specific typologies can be identified:

- **Open or initial coding** – descriptive coding which is undertaken in the initial stages: developing categories of information, assigning labels or codes and describing the properties of a category all while being open to new ideas. During this stage the data is 'fractured' by the researcher, and potential conceptual possibilities are identified (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).
- **Intermediate/axial/selective/focused coding** – where codes are generated around an identified core variable (Glaser, 1978). During this stage, relationships between categories are explored and data are put back together by making connections between and within categories and sub-categories.
- **Advanced⁷/theoretical coding and analysis** – during this stage, major categories reach theoretical saturation, and a core category is identified which is "analytically powerful and therefore has the ability to explain the phenomena under study" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008 in Burks & Mills, 2011: 115), and becomes the 'hub' of the

⁷ Strauss & Corbin (1990: 1998) refer to the advanced stage as 'selective coding' which causes some confusion in the literature as Glaser (1978) uses the term selective coding to refer to the intermediate stage. In my study I follow the Glaserian approach, of using 'selective coding' to refer to the intermediate stage.

developing theory.

Analytic codes are more interpretive than descriptive, and are derived from the literature, the topic being researched, or the data generated (Cohen et al, 2001: 561). In my study, two main data sources were coded: face-to-face, semi-structured interviews; and formal motivation records for the admission of AEG candidates as sent to Faculty Boards and Senate.

5.7.7 Theoretical Integration and Theory Generation

“The final product of a grounded theory study is an integrated and comprehensive grounded theory that explains a process or scheme associated with a phenomenon.” (Birks & Mills, 2011: 12). A ‘storyline’ is usually used to present grounded theory findings, and it often entails presenting the findings as a whole before explaining parts in depth, using data fragments and coding concepts as supporting evidence. At this stage, the significance of existing theory and knowledge may also be discussed (ibid: 134-136). “In the end, a GT analysis is a story that integrates focused codes – the main categories of events and ideas in a set of texts.” (Bernard & Ryan, 2010: 275)

5.8 Rhodes University as a Case Study

Cohen et al (2007) advocate finding a site which provides the best location for the research design, as well as for locating, identifying and approaching key participants. Rhodes University was chosen as single-site case study because of my long association with the institution (27 years of employment, 11 of which were in a senior administrative position) which enabled me to access rich, reliable data as well as secure appointments with academic and executive staff within the institution. RU provided the perfect site for “events and situations to speak for themselves” and for “combining subjective and objective data.” (ibid: 254)

5.9 Reliability and Validity

There will always be a certain amount of bias and subjectivity involved in qualitative research which is why it is important for researchers to assure readers that the research framework and methods used are reliable and valid. However, reliability and validity are not infallible concepts and, as noted by Cohen et al (2011: 179), “at best we strive to minimize invalidity and maximize validity.” In order to claim reliability, one needs to have well-validated procedures. “Your audience should be able to trust that you have used thorough and consistent methods to produce a trustworthy outcome.” (Richards 2005: 192)

Validity in quantitative research is based on positivist principles such as predictability, objectivity and replicability whereas qualitative research is more concerned with authenticity and understanding (Cohen et al, 2011: 180).

From a grounded theory perspective, methodological congruence and procedural precision are paramount in pursuing reliability and validity. Methodological congruence is achieved when there is harmony between the researcher's philosophical position, the aims of the research and the methodological approach used to achieve these aims (Burks and Mills, 2011: 36). Procedural precision - or rigour - concerns the processes used to generate and analyse data. Grounded theory methods should be rigorously applied in order to develop theory which can be considered a quality product. (Glaser, 2004) The most important elements of procedural precision in grounded theory are the use of memos, keeping an audit trail, managing data and resources, and demonstrating procedural logic. (Burks and Mills, 2011: 38)

For the qualitative data analysis, careful records and memos were kept electronically using NVivo software, and frequently returned to in order to verify claims made in the discussion section of each Chapter. Hard copies of memos made over the years as well as articles, policy documents and relevant printed materials were also kept in folders labelled according to the major focus areas of this study: Access, RPL, Graduateness, Context, Statistical Data, Interview Data and Methodology. A separate exercise book was kept to record thoughts and questions which initially did not have a thematic 'home' but warranted further consideration.

"Coder reliability" is critical aspect of grounded theory methodology. According to Richards, (2005: 98) "Reliability in qualitative research is a contentious topic... qualitative methods are all about interpretation and individual agency." The aim is to sure that you are interpreting a code the same way across time, or that colleagues/other readers/coders would interpret it the same way. In this context then, reliability means consistency. In order to achieve reliability in this area, I included a large amount of verbatim data from the interviews in the form of tables (see Chapter 7) so that readers might judge for themselves whether my interpretation of the transcripts was consistent and valid.

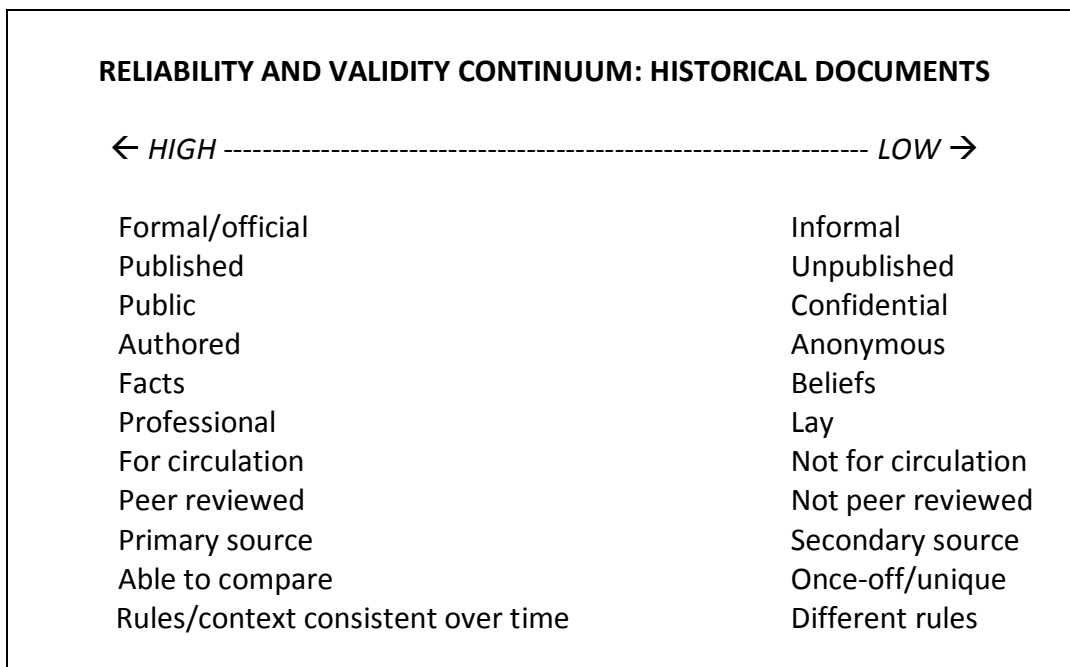
"Member checking" is another tool used to enhance reliability and validity. The researcher "produces the report and has it reviewed by those studied, revisiting it in the light of their judgement." (Richards, 2005: 140) Following one of the early interviews, I went back to one of the respondents once the interview had been transcribed and went through it with him question by question, asking if his

responses had been accurately recorded and interpreted. The interviewee was satisfied with the outcome which gave me confidence that I was able to adequately capture the content, essence and tone of each interview.

The statistical data used in the quantitative analysis in this study was produced by the University’s Data Management Unit. It was extracted from the institutional database which is externally audited and verified annually and can therefore be considered reliable. The methods used to analyse the quantitative data were simple numeric calculations which can be tested and replicated.

The Senate and Faculty minutes as well as motivation records analysed in this study (see Chapter 8) are historical documents - which are “social products, located in specific contexts and have to be interrogated and interpreted rather than simply accepted” (Cohen et al, 2010: 203). Senate and Faculty minutes fall on the left hand side of the following reliability and validity continuum (adapted and expanded from Cohen et al, 2011: 203) and as such are considered to be satisfactorily reliable and valid, particularly as university minutes are “... in the public domain [and] written by skilled professionals and contain more valuable information and insights than those written by relatively uninformed amateurs.” (ibid: 201)

FIGURE 1 Reliability and Validity Continuum for Historical Documents



Triangulation is another valuable tool in the pursuit of reliability and validity. It is described by Richards (2005: 140) as “viewing the same situation through different methods or data types.” The research questions in this study were examined from

both qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, thereby strengthening the validity of the outcomes.

5.10 Ethical Issues

While various disciplines and professional bodies have specific 'codes of ethics', (Ruane, 2005; Flick, 2006; Silverman, 2010) a few general principles emerge as applicable to all qualitative research involving human subjects. These are summarized in Silverman (2010: 178) as:

- Voluntary participation and the right to withdraw
- Protection of research participants
- Assessment of potential benefits (beneficence) and risks to participants
- Obtaining informed consent
- Not doing harm (non-maleficence)

I obtained written consent from the University Registrar to access institutional documentation and student data. Student numbers were recorded during data collection in order to be able to return to the data and verify accuracy wherever and whenever necessary. However, no student numbers or names are included in my thesis, thereby ensuring anonymity of the subjects.

An email was sent to all interviewees approximately one week before the interview, explaining what I was aiming to do, providing some background and context to the research questions, and requesting participation in the study. All interviewees could therefore be considered to have given informed consent and to be voluntary participants. Fortunately none chose to withdraw. The issue of confidentiality was more problematic. While interview participants are referred to by 'respondent number' in order to ensure anonymity, in some cases it was important to record their position in the discussion (for example, the Vice-Chancellor, when analysing leadership and institutional culture as a theme, or the Deans when discussing differences amongst Faculties). However, the research topic is not of a sensitive nature, and the interviewees did not object to being identified if necessary.

From my own position as a researcher, listing my assumptions prior to undertaking the research (Section 5.4.2) assisted me in 'bracketing' my potential subjectivity and striving towards impartiality during the interviews.

Finally, in terms avoiding harm, I took Flick's advice (2006: 52) to "...take the participants role and think from their perspective", to imagine I was an academic responding to the interview questions I had provided. I also re-read the interview

transcripts to identify anything that may have been said which indicated the interviewee could be negatively affected in any way, or 'get into trouble with the university authorities' if any controversial viewpoints might be linked to them personally. I was satisfied that no harm was done and in fact, several interviewees specifically mentioned the benefits for themselves of having been involved with the research including: having to think about the issues raised, which they had not given much thought to previously; discovering national policy (such as the HEQC's 10% rule – see Chapter 7, Section 7.5.2) or having to engage with institutional policy and practice, with which several interviewees were not previously familiar.

5.11 Concluding Summary

This chapter explained how the research question was encountered and developed, and provided a rationale - the dearth of literature and theories on the concept of access to Master's degrees as well as graduate attributes at the postgraduate level - for choosing grounded theory as an overarching methodological framework. The research was undertaken within an interpretive paradigm with both qualitative and quantitative data being extensively explored and brought together, or theoretically integrated, in an attempt to develop an emergent grounded theory about *access and postgraduate readiness*.

CHAPTER SIX: QUANTITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

6.1 Introduction

This Chapter aims to provide a statistical overview of the numbers, admission status and performance of Master's students enrolled at Rhodes University during the period of this study, 1999-2008.⁸

Permission was obtained from the University Registrar to access data from Rhodes University's Data Management Unit (DMU) on the number of Master's students admitted to RU per annum, by Faculty and by admission status - either 'regular'⁹ admission or AEG admission - for the ten year period 1999 to 2008. Data was collected for all six of the University's Faculties: Commerce, Education, Humanities, Law, Pharmacy and Science. However, only four Faculties are discussed in the findings as two Faculties, Pharmacy and Law, had statistically insignificant numbers of AEG Master's admissions during the period under review.

The aim of the quantitative data analysis was to compare the numbers and success¹⁰ rates of students admitted to Master's degrees during this period, as well as dropout and distinction rates, according to the students' admission status. The quantitative data was also used as a method of triangulating the qualitative data in this study, as discussed in Chapter 5, Section 5.9.

6.2 Data Issues

The collection of statistical data was not as straightforward as anticipated and several problems were encountered. As described in Chapter 3, students who do not have an honours or four-year undergraduate degree are required to apply for AEG admission which requires a written motivation (or at least brief notes in the Faculty minutes on their suitability) from the potential Supervisor (endorsed by the Head of the respective department and Faculty Dean), and a brief curriculum vitae of each student is often also submitted for consideration by the relevant Faculty Board before a final decision is made at Senate level. The entry status of AEG students is flagged by the DMU upon registration. My data query to the DMU was "how many

⁸ An additional year of data (2009) was added during the analysis of dropout and distinction rates.

⁹ 'Formal' and 'regular' are used interchangeably to refer to students who are admitted 'normally', ie without AEG status.

¹⁰ "Success" in this context is understood as completion of the Master's degree, within the period under analysis.

students were admitted to Master's studies each year from 1999-2008 per Faculty, and of those, how many were admitted as AEG students?" Subsequently, completion times, dropout rates and distinctions awarded in each category were also requested from and provided by the DMU. By the time the writing-up stage of the thesis was reached, an additional year of data had subsequently become available, so 2009 was added to the dataset for the dropout and distinction cohort analysis (Section 6.3.3).

The first problem arose when the DMU informed me that from 2002, the entry status of AEG Master's students was *not* flagged. This was as a result of a decision taken in the Registrar's Division at that time – a decision which was reversed from 2011 as a direct result of this study. This meant that I needed to access the original Faculty agenda papers and supporting documentation for the period 2002-2008 in order to ascertain which students *should* have been flagged as AEG in the DMU database. In going through the Faculty agendas and minutes, I discovered another problem. Several students did not in fact have the required honours or four-year undergraduate degree, yet had not been identified as such in the Faculty documents and had gone through the process of admission as 'regular' or 'formal' rather than AEG admissions. Interestingly, several students were included as AEG applications but in fact already had a four-year undergraduate degree – and in some cases, even had a Master's degree already (albeit usually in a different field). It was necessary therefore, to painstakingly record the student numbers of all the AEG students who had not been flagged and provide this information to the DMU who were then able to write a programme to extract the information I required for this study. These inconsistencies in data collection and recording support the need for a clear framework on AEG admissions and this is discussed further in Section 6.5.

6.3 Student Admissions and Performance

6.3.1 Admissions Per Faculty 1999-2008

As indicated in Table 5 below, 2314 students were admitted in total to Master's degree¹¹ studies in the ten year period 1999-2008¹². Of these, 32% were in the Humanities Faculty, 18% in Education, 17% in Commerce and 29% in Science. The Law and Pharmacy Faculties, with just over 2% of all Master's registrations respectively, were excluded from the final data analysis due to the small number of

¹¹ No distinction is made in this table between full-thesis (research) Master's and coursework-and-thesis Master's degrees.

¹² This data was extracted from the RU database in 2011. As data is continuously updated in retrospect by the DMU, the figures may vary slightly depending on the actual date a query is run by the DMU.

Master's students (both formal and AEG) registered during this period. Note that AEG admissions are included in the figures in Table 5.

TABLE 5: Total New Master's Registrations at RU, by Faculty 1999 - 2008

FACULTY	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	TOTAL	%
COMMERCE	9	8	28	36	49	45	48	46	62	51	382	17%
EDUCATION	36	42	14	78	13	50	61	38	58	15	405	18%
HUMANITIES	63	87	74	101	63	73	66	53	79	91	750	32%
LAW	1	6	7	4	7	8	10	3	3	5	54	2%
PHARMACY	4	8	9	5	6	7	4	7	6	6	62	2%
SCIENCE	55	54	69	56	66	67	64	82	63	85	661	29%
TOTAL	168	205	201	280	204	250	253	229	271	253	2314	100%

Table 6 shows that 2154 students (or 93% of all Master's enrolments) were admitted via 'regular admission' to Master's degree¹³ studies in the ten year period 1999-2008. Of these, 33% were in the Humanities Faculty, 16% in Education, 16% in Commerce and 29% in Science (see Graph 1). The Pharmacy and Law Faculties each enrolled just 3% of the 'regular admissions' to Master's degrees during this time. This table also shows the number of regular Master's students admitted per annum as well as per Faculty, as a percentage of the total number of Master's admissions.

TABLE 6: Regular Master's Registrations at RU by Faculty, 1999 - 2008

FACULTY	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	TOTAL	%
COMMERCE	9	8	16	36	45	41	45	41	61	50	352	16%
EDUCATION	33	33	11	61	11	48	60	34	47	14	352	16%
HUMANITIES	59	77	62	97	60	72	65	52	79	89	712	33%
LAW	1	6	7	3	7	8	10	3	3	5	53	3%
PHARMACY	4	8	9	5	6	6	4	7	6	6	61	3%
SCIENCE	53	50	63	53	65	60	61	76	62	81	624	29%
TOTAL	159	182	168	255	194	235	245	213	258	245	2154	100%
<i>% regular p/a</i>	<i>94.6</i>	<i>88.8</i>	<i>83.6</i>	<i>91.1</i>	<i>95.1</i>	<i>94.0</i>	<i>96.8</i>	<i>93.0</i>	<i>95.2</i>	<i>96.8</i>	<i>93.1</i>	

Table 7 records the number of students admitted via the AEG rule per Faculty over the same period of time. The Table shows that 160, or 7% of the total number of Master's registrations from 1999-2008, were AEG admissions. Of these, 24% were in the Humanities Faculty, 33% in Education, 19% in Commerce and 23% in Science (see Graph 1). This table also shows the number of AEG Master's students admitted per

¹³ No distinction is made between full-thesis (research) Master's and coursework plus thesis Master's degrees.

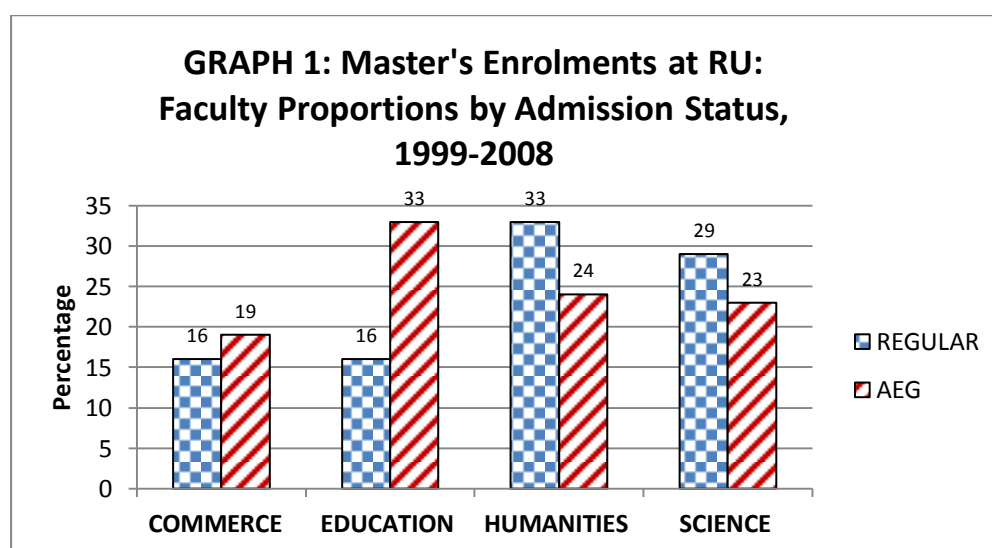
annum as well as per Faculty, as a percentage of the total number of Master's admissions.

TABLE 7: AEG Master's Registrations at RU by Faculty, 1999 - 2008

FACULTY	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	TOTAL	%
COMMERCE	0	0	12	0	4	4	3	5	1	1	30	19%
EDUCATION	3	9	3	17	2	2	1	4	11	1	53	33%
HUMANITIES	4	10	12	4	3	1	1	1	0	2	38	24%
LAW	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1%
PHARMACY	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	1%
SCIENCE	2	4	6	3	1	7	3	6	1	4	37	23%
TOTAL	9	23	33	25	10	15	8	16	13	8	160	100%
% AEG p/a	5.4	11.2	16.4	8.9	4.9	6.0	3.2	7.0	4.8	3.2	6.9	

Graph 1 shows the mode of admission (i.e. regular or AEG) by Faculty, for the period 1999-2008 by percentage. For example, during the period 1999-2008, 16% of the total number of students admitted via *regular* admission were in the Education Faculty, whilst 33% of the students admitted via AEG were in the Education Faculty. Another example is that 16% of all regular admissions between 1999 and 2008 were Commerce students, and 19% of all AEG admissions during this time were Commerce students.

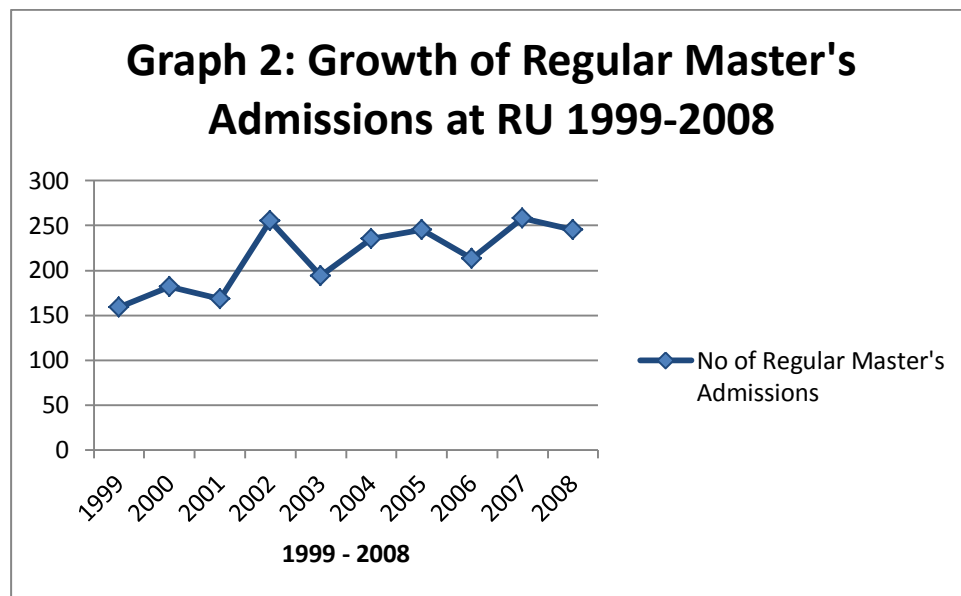
GRAPH 1: Master's Enrolments at RU: Faculty Proportions by Admission Status, 1999-2008



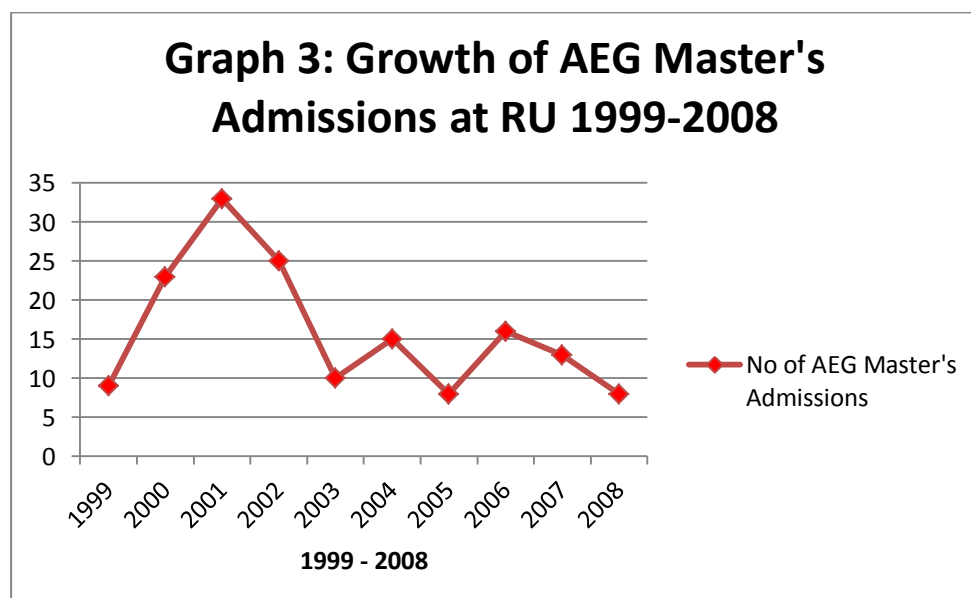
Graphs 2 and 3 track the growth in the number of Master's students enrolled at RU each year from 1999 to 2008, according to their admission status. Graph 2 shows a

steady increase in regular admissions over the ten year period, with a spike in 2002. Graph 3 reflects a sharp rise in AEG admissions from 1999-2001, followed by a steep decline in 2003 and 2004, stabilising around 1999 levels thereafter.

GRAPH 2: Growth of Regular Master's Admissions at RU 1999-2008



GRAPH 3: Growth of AEG Master's Admissions at RU 1999-2008



6.3.2 Time Taken to Completion

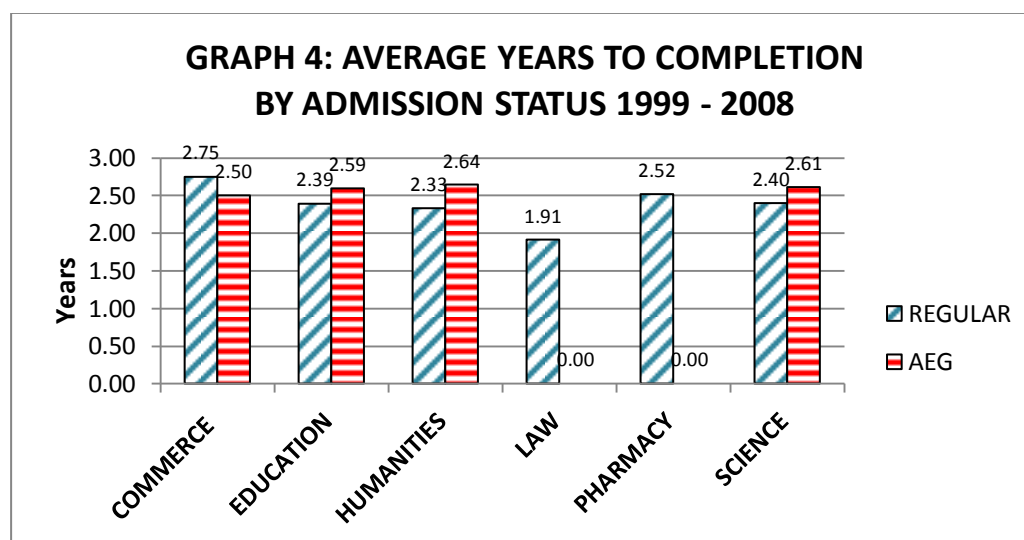
Table 8 and Graph 4 illustrate the average time taken by Master's students at RU to complete their degrees by Faculty, over the period 1999 – 2008, according to their

admission status. Note: the minimum time period for a Master’s degree in South Africa is 1800 notional credit hours¹⁴ or 180 credits (ten notional hours equal one credit). This can theoretically be completed in one year of full-time study but most Master’s students take two to three years to complete a Master’s degree. The table shows that the average number of years taken by a regular Master’s student was 2.40 years, whilst for AEG students this was 2.69 years.

TABLE 8: Completion Rates for Master’s Degrees at RU, 1999 - 2008

FACULTY	ADMISSION TYPE	
	REGULAR	AEG
COMMERCE	2.75	2.50
EDUCATION	2.39	2.59
HUMANITIES	2.33	2.64
LAW	1.91	N/A
PHARMACY	2.52	N/A
SCIENCE	2.40	2.61
AVERAGE NO. OF YEARS	2.40	2.69

GRAPH 4: Average Years to Completion by Admission Status 1999-2008



Note: Law and Pharmacy only had 1 AEG registration each during the period 1999-2008

¹⁴ Notional hours refer to the “total amount of time it would take an average learner to meet the outcomes defined in a learning experience and include, inter alia, face-to face contact time, time spent in structured learning in the workplace, time for completing assignments and research, and time spent in assessment processes.” (SAQA 2013: 5)

6.3.3 Dropouts and Distinctions - Cohort Analysis 1999-2009

During my qualitative analysis of the letters written by academics to their respective Faculties motivating for the admission of AEG students (see Chapter 8), I found myself wondering how those particular students had fared: whether they had obtained their Master's degrees or not, and how many of them had obtained distinctions. I also wondered how their achievements compared to the averages of the 'formally' admitted students. I decided to analyse a cohort of AEG students for whom motivation letters had been written, a sample of 116 students during the period 1999 to 2009. Although 160 students were recorded as having being admitted via the AEG rule between 1999 and 2008, I could only find 116 motivation letters or Senate minute notes in the course of my historical documentary analysis. It is therefore probable that the remaining students were admitted without formally recorded motivations. For this cohort analysis - which was undertaken in 2013 - I included the year 2009 as valuable 2009 data became available after my initial 1999-2008 analysis was completed in 2012.

Table 9 and Graph 5 show that 2909 students were registered for Master's degrees between 1999 and 2009, of which 2793 were formal admissions, and 116 (in the cohort sample) were admitted via the AEG rule. Of the formal admissions, 530, or 19% of the formal admissions, dropped out without obtaining the degree. Of the AEG admissions, 33, or 28% of the AEG admissions, dropped out.

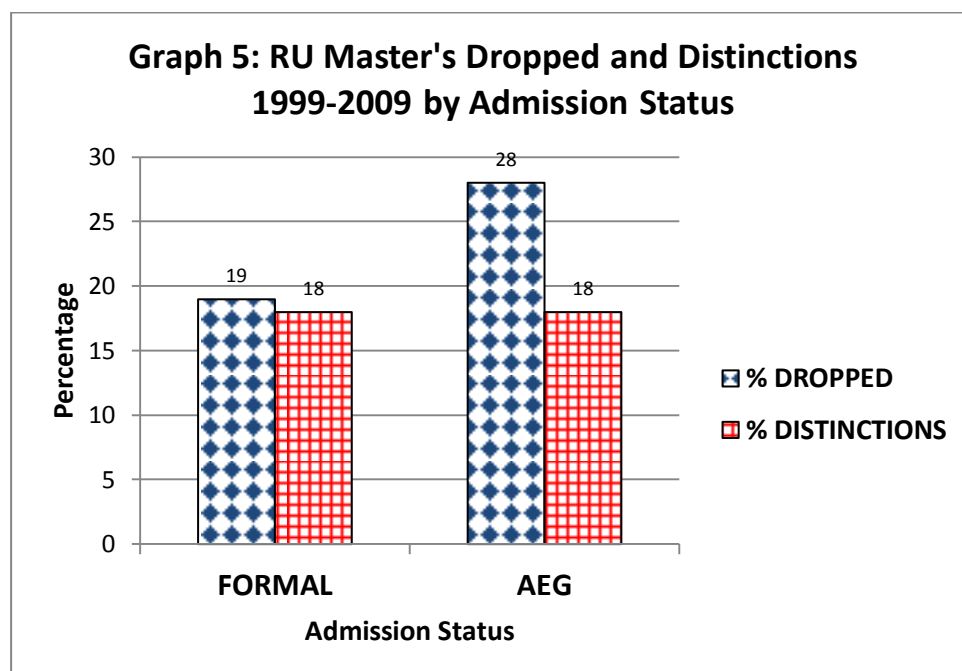
Table 9 and Graph 5 also record distinctions awarded according to category of admission. The overall distinction rate for both formal and AEG admissions during the period 1999-2009 was 18% of the total number of Master's students enrolled (dropouts are excluded from this calculation). Of the formal admissions, 399, or 18%, obtained a distinction. Of the AEG cohort admissions, 15, or also 18%, obtained a distinction.

TABLE 9: Formal and AEG Master's Dropped and Distinctions at RU, 1999 - 2009

ALL MASTER'S STUDENTS	FORMAL	AEG*	TOTAL
TOTAL ENROLLED	2793	116	2909
DROPPED	530	33	563
<i>% DROPPED</i>	<i>19%</i>	<i>28%</i>	<i>19%</i>
STILL REGISTERED BY 2009	562	3	565
<i>% STILL REGISTERED BY 2009</i>	<i>20%</i>	<i>3%</i>	<i>19%</i>
DISTINCTIONS	399	15	414
<i>% DISTINCTIONS**</i>	<i>18%</i>	<i>18%</i>	<i>18%</i>

* AEG cohort ** % distinctions is of those completed or still enrolled by 2009

GRAPH 5: All RU Master's Dropped and Distinctions 1999-2009, by Admission Status

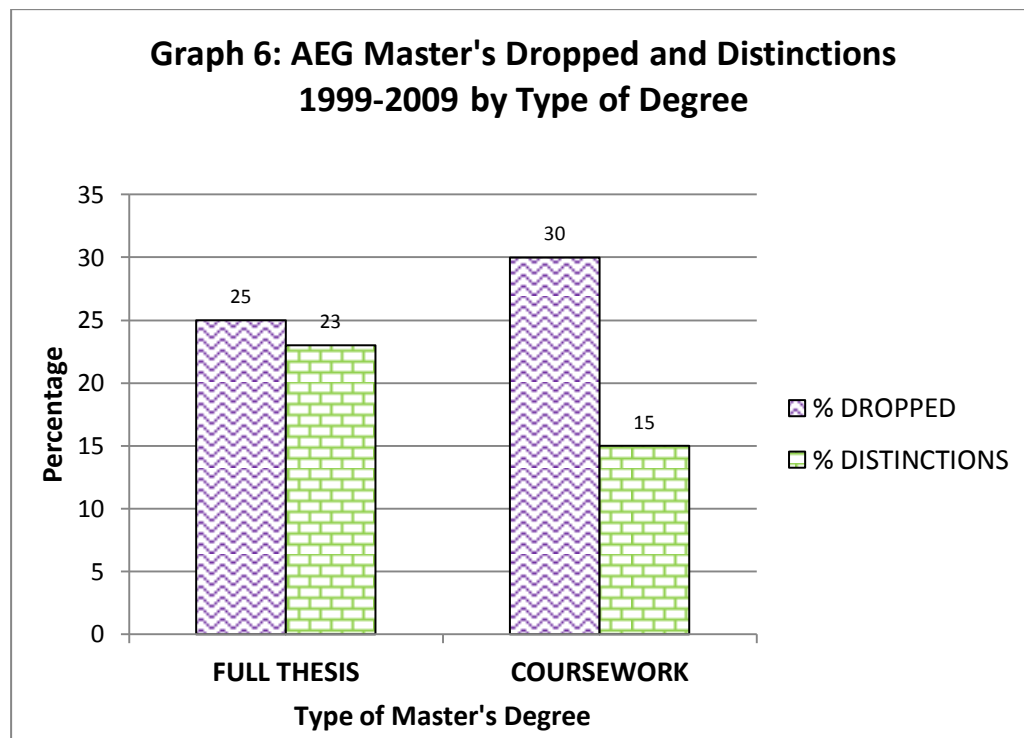


In order to ascertain whether the *kind* of Master's degree (full-thesis or coursework plus 'half' thesis) had an impact on dropout and distinction rates, I further disaggregated the AEG data according to whether the student was registered for a full-thesis Master's degree, or a coursework-and-thesis Master's degree. Table 10 shows that 40 of the 116 AEG students were undertaking full-thesis degrees while 76 were enrolled for coursework-and-thesis degrees. Ten, or 25% of the full-thesis students dropped out, while twenty three, or 30% of the coursework students, dropped out. Seven, or 23% of the remaining full-thesis AEG students obtained distinctions, while eight, or 15% of the remaining coursework-and-thesis AEG students were awarded distinctions.

TABLE 10: AEG Master's Dropped and Distinctions at RU 1999-2009, by Type of Degree

AEG MASTER'S STUDENTS 1999-2009	FULL THESIS	COURSEWORK + THESIS	TOTAL
TOTAL ENROLLED	40	76	116
DROPPED	10	23	33
<i>% DROPPED</i>	25%	30%	28%
STILL REGISTERED BY 2009	0	3	3
<i>% STILL REGISTERED BY 2009</i>	0%	3%	3%
DISTINCTIONS	7	8	15
<i>% DISTINCTIONS</i>	23%	15%	18%

GRAPH 6: AEG Master's Dropped and Distinctions 1999-2009, by Type of Degree



6.4 Discussion

It is clear from the statistics that the number of students admitted via AEG at Rhodes University was small relative to the number of regular admissions during the ten year period under scrutiny. Although in 2001 the percentage of AEG admissions was as high as 16%, the average percentage of students admitted via AEG per annum in the ten year period under analysis was just 7%. The reasons for the annual fluctuations were not explored in this study, but would be worth further investigation.

The trend during this period was a steady increase in regular Master's admissions which grew from 159 in 1999 to 245 in 2008 (an average of 215 per annum). AEG admissions remained relatively static and the average enrolment during this period was just 16 AEG students per annum. This seems to imply that the University's efforts to increase postgraduate enrolments (as discussed in Chapter 2, Section 2.4.4) were directed at formal rather than AEG admissions.

Overall, the Humanities Faculty enrolled the highest number of regular admissions (712, or 33% of the total number of regular admissions), while the Education Faculty enrolled the highest number of AEG admissions (53, or 33% of the total number of

AEG admissions). I expected the Science Faculty to have stricter requirements regarding prior qualifications and to enrol fewer students via AEG than the Humanities Faculty. This personal bias is based on an understanding of the natural sciences as more positivist and having a great deal of ‘concrete content’ in undergraduate degrees (which would presumably be required as building blocks for postgraduate degrees), whereas the humanities are more interpretivist – so I assumed it would be more important to have that ‘taught foundation’ in Science before embarking on higher level study, than in the Humanities. Surprisingly however, the Sciences enrolled practically the same number of AEG admissions (37, or 6% of the total AEG admissions in the Sciences) as the Humanities Faculty (38, or 5% of the total admissions in the Humanities) over the ten year period. This seems to indicate that ‘foundational knowledge’ is not an overriding requirement for postgraduate readiness in the natural sciences as I had originally assumed. This unexpected finding is discussed further in Chapter 9: Conclusions.

The most revealing finding in this analysis was the fact that there was no significant difference between regular and AEG admissions in the time taken to complete a Master’s degree. This is even more noteworthy considering that AEG students are usually mature, part-time students, often with families and work commitments which one would expect would result in these students taking a substantially longer period of time to complete their degrees. However this was not the case, as the average time taken by regular students to complete was 2.4 years whilst AEG students took an average of 2.7 years to complete. Interestingly, in the Commerce Faculty, the AEG students took *less* time to complete (2.5 years) than the regular students in that Faculty (2.8 years). As most of the AEG students in the Commerce Faculty were enrolled in Master’s in Business Administration (MBA) degrees, it appears the MBA programme¹⁵ is better suited to AEG students than Master’s degrees in other Faculties.

In addition, the evidence that AEG students are likely to complete in a similar amount of time as regular students implies that AEG students are not a ‘higher risk’ in terms of potential success than students who have completed a four-year undergraduate or honours degree. This finding contradicts the inference given by some academics (discussed in Chapter 7), that AEG students are a higher risk and are somehow inferior to regular students.

An additional point worth noting is that the South African national average ‘time to degree’ for Master’s students is three years (see Chapter 2, Section 2.3.3). In

¹⁵ The MBA degree at RU is offered as a part-time, coursework-and-thesis programme, where students attend intensive ‘blocks’ of contact teaching and discussion for two weeks at a time, twice per annum, over three years.

comparison, the RU regular admission average time to degree of 2.4 years and the AEG average of 2.7 years, both outperform the national average.

The cohort analysis of 116 AEG students over the period 1999-2009 in terms of dropout rates and distinctions obtained offers three interesting findings:

- 1) AEG students are *less likely* to complete their degrees than formal registrations (28% of the AEG students dropped out compared to 19% of the formally admitted students);
- 2) However, of those students who don't drop out, regular and AEG students take a similar amount of time to successfully complete.
- 3) AEG students are *as likely* to obtain distinctions as formally admitted students (the distinction rate was 18% for both formal and AEG students).

Furthermore, although AEG students had a higher dropout rate than regular admissions, they were *less likely* to remain in the system for extended periods: of the AEG cohort, only 3% remained enrolled by 2009 whereas 20% of the formally admitted students were still enrolled by 2009. Students who remain enrolled longer than the average time period for completion of a degree reduce an institution's throughput rates and adversely affect the subsidy paid to universities by the State as the throughput rate is one of the elements used to calculate annual subsidies paid to individual institutions. Ideally therefore, universities would like students to complete their degrees in the shortest possible time (which also frees up places for new students) and in this regard, AEG Master's students could be regarded as a 'better bet' than regular Master's admissions.

When the data was disaggregated further, according to the *type* of Master's degree (full-thesis or coursework-and-thesis), *none* of the full-thesis AEG students were still in the system by 2009 (as mentioned above, the figure was 3% for coursework-and-thesis AEG students, and 20% for regular admissions). In addition, the full-thesis AEG students were significantly *more* likely to obtain a distinction than both the formally admitted students and the coursework-and-thesis AEG students - the distinction rate was 23% for full-thesis AEG students as opposed to 18% for formal admissions and 15% for coursework-and-thesis AEG students. The reasons for the greater likelihood of a full-thesis AEG student (as opposed to formal and AEG coursework-and-thesis students) obtaining a distinction were not explored in this study but would be an interesting area for further analysis in future.

6.5 Concluding Summary

This chapter aimed to record the number of Master's students registered at RU for the ten year period 1999 – 2008 and to compare the admission and completion rates of students admitted via RPL (known at Rhodes as AEG) to those of the mainstream or 'regular' admissions. A cohort analysis of 116 students was also undertaken for the period 1999-2009 to examine dropout and distinction rates of AEG students compared to regular admissions.

The number of students admitted to Master's degree studies via the AEG rule at RU was small: an average of just 7% per annum over the ten year period 1999-2008. However, in the final analysis, there was no significant difference in the performance of those students admitted without the formal pre-requisite qualifications, except in terms of dropout rates where AEG students had a slightly higher dropout rate than those students who had a four-year undergraduate or honours degree. Full-thesis AEG students were *more likely* to obtain a distinction and *less likely* to linger in the system, and it therefore appears from the data analysis that full-thesis AEG students perform better than coursework-and-thesis AEG students and indeed, better than formally enrolled students as well in terms of the likelihood of obtaining a distinction. These findings are similar to the outcome of a national study of 48 colleges in the USA, undertaken by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, which found that students who had been admitted on an RPL basis had higher graduation rates and also completed their degrees faster. (Hoover, 2010)

The time and effort required to correct inconsistent data before the analysis and comparisons could be undertaken provided additional insight into the misunderstandings and inconsistencies surrounding the implementation of the AEG rule at Rhodes University, and highlighted the need for clear institutional guidelines in this area. The reasons for the low numbers of AEG admissions should be investigated further (eg weak or non-existent advertising of this option to potential students, lack of enthusiasm or knowledge of this option amongst academics etc), as increasing AEG admissions may be a viable opportunity for the University to expand and diversify its postgraduate student body as it has indicated in its strategic plans it wishes to do. Another area worthy of further investigation is how the dropout rates at Master's level at Rhodes University (19% overall, and 28% for AEG admissions during the period 1999-2009) compare to national and international norms, and whether dropout rates could be reduced by providing additional support to all Master's students, regardless of their admission status.

CHAPTER SEVEN: QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

7.1 Introduction

This chapter considers the findings emerging from a grounded theory analysis of interviews undertaken with senior staff members - Deans, academics and members of the executive management - at Rhodes University. The individuals interviewed for this study were all highly qualified staff members with a great deal of experience in higher education and as such, their opinions and insights provide a rich and reliable data source. All interviewees had doctoral degrees and collectively, the sixteen participants had 280 years of experience at Rhodes University specifically. Their personal experiences and opinions were sought on the concept of RPL at the national and institutional level, and on the skills and attributes they believed potential students should demonstrate in order to gain access to and successfully complete a Master's degree at Rhodes University.

7.2 Analysis of Semi-Structured Interviews

As mentioned in the methodology chapter (Chapter 5), this study was undertaken from an interpretive perspective, where meaning is actively created and;

[T]he subject behind the respondent not only holds facts and details of experience, but, in the very process of offering them up for response, constructively adds to, takes away from, and transforms the facts and details. The respondent can hardly 'spoil' what he or she is, in effect, subjectively creating.

(Holstein and Gubrium, 1995: 117 in Silverman, 2010: 227).

In contrast to a normative approach, where human behaviour is assumed to be rule-governed and should be investigated according to natural science methods, an interpretive approach is concerned with individuals and action (Cohen et al, 2011: 17). The aim of this qualitative interview analysis then, was to access and examine the experiences and opinions of the individuals most directly involved in evaluating applications for alternative admission to Master's degrees at Rhodes University: senior academics and university executives at RU. Sixteen semi-structured interviews were held, and the interview transcripts were coded and analysed using grounded theory methods.

7.3 Coding the Interviews

Grounded theory coding methods were used to analyse the interview transcripts (see Chapter 5 for a detailed discussion of grounded theory coding methods) and

NVivo software was used to capture and disaggregate the data. It is important in grounded theory research to approach the data without preconceptions, in order that categories and themes may emerge from, rather than be imposed upon, the data. Open or initial coding was undertaken to break up the interview data until categories and patterns began to form. Ideas and observations were noted as memos for later iterations with the data, and data units were identified and described with a code, for example “access” or “postgraduate readiness”.

Constant comparative analysis was used to compare incidents (recurring actions, characteristics, experiences, phrases etc) and extract underlying concepts which could be coded further (Birks & Mills, 2011: 174). Comparisons were also made between extremes and in different contexts. Axial coding was then used to refine and differentiate the categories resulting from open coding. Major categories were selected by their fit with as many passages as possible and by their relevance to the research questions, for example “resistance to change”. Relations between categories and their subcategories were explored and clarified. Evidence of the codes and categories within the text were sought to substantiate the story of the case, and to begin building a grounded theory.

7.4 Themes and Categories emerging from the Interview Data

Ten questions provided the framework for the semi-structured interviews (see interview guide, Appendix 5). In order to address the main research questions, the interview questions were designed to:

- Explore the interviewees’ opinions on RPL/alternative access at the postgraduate level;
- Understand and compare the process of alternative admissions at RU between Faculties;
- Relate current practices at RU to national and institutional policies and attitudes to RPL;
- Identify the skills, attributes and personal qualities interviewees valued and expected to see in potential Master’s students – in other words, to give substance to the term ‘postgraduate readiness’.

In addition, an open-ended question at the conclusion of each interview provided an opportunity for interviewees to make any additional comments they felt were relevant, and to indicate whether they felt anything had been overlooked in the discussion.

Two over-arching, multi-dimensional categories were used during the initial or open coding stage: “RPL” and “Postgraduate Readiness”. Intermediate or selective coding,

using a line-by-line analysis, generated additional codes which were later integrated into sub-categories as reflected in the following two organizational charts:

FIGURE 2: Recognition of Prior Learning Categories and Sub-Categories

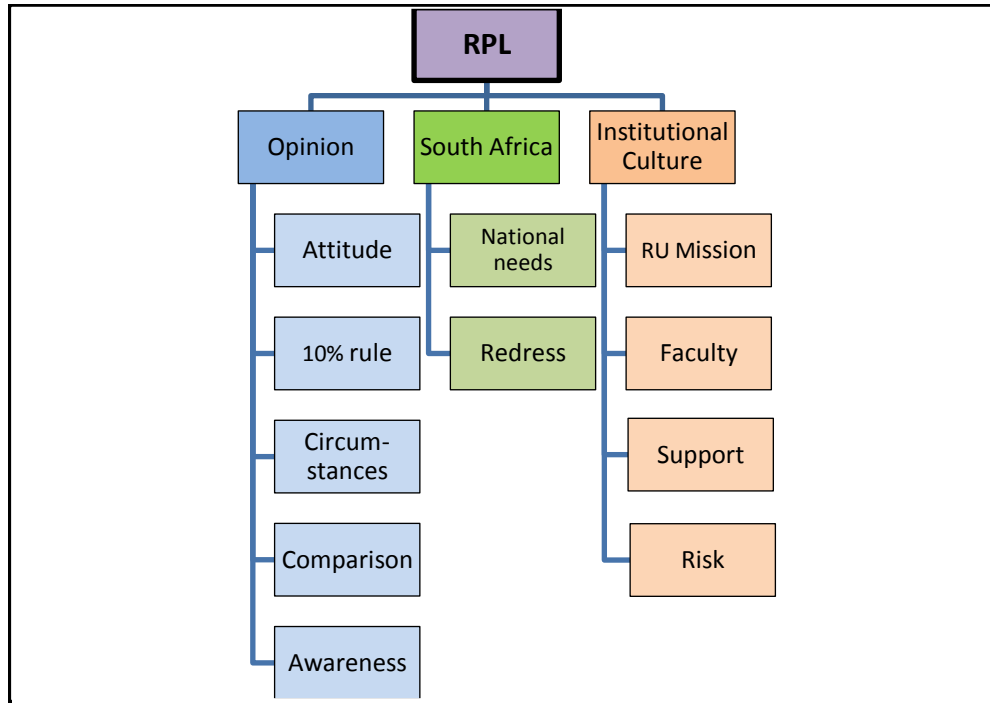
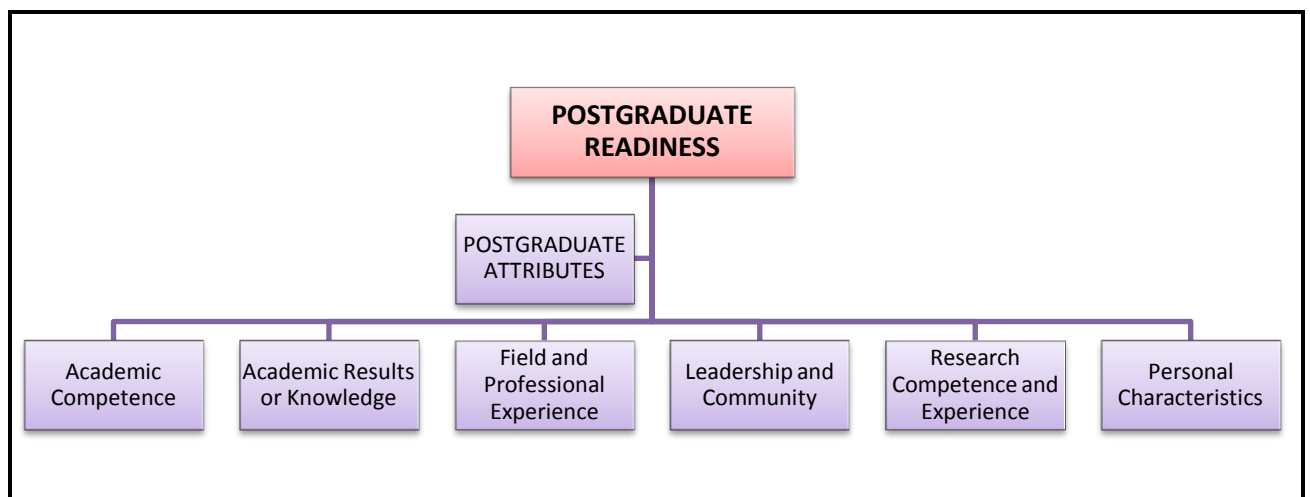


FIGURE 3: Postgraduate Readiness Categories and Sub-Categories



A further analysis of the data, now rearranged into categories, generated themes and codes on which memos were written and ultimately used to reintegrate the data into a storyline, in other words, to develop a grounded theory on RPL access and postgraduate readiness at the Master's level at Rhodes University.

7.5 RPL at the Master's Level at Rhodes University

All interviewees were asked the opening question “*What is your understanding of, and personal attitude to, the concept of alternative access (i.e. RPL or AEG) to Master's level study?*” The transcribed answers were collated, and added to comments relevant to the theme ‘RPL opinion’ during the course of the remainder of each interview. It was fascinating that more ‘opinions on RPL’ were given while answering OTHER questions than during the one specific question on each interviewee’s opinion of RPL. It seemed that, as interviewees started talking about issues surrounding RPL (i.e. answering subsequent questions about process, comparisons, circumstances etc), they were able to explicate opinions and ideas about RPL which did not emerge during the first question. It was almost as though they did not know their own opinions on the matter until they began discussing RPL in its various dimensions. In fact, several interviewees suggested this was indeed the case by admitting “I have not given it much thought” or stating early on in the interview that they “had no strong feelings on the matter” before proceeding, in later questions, to offer strong feelings on the matter. Any comments made in questions two to ten which reflected ‘opinion on RPL’ were therefore also identified and added to the sub-category ‘RPL opinion’ for coding purposes.

While discussing their opinions on RPL, several respondents outlined their understanding or personal definition of the concept:

It is about epistemological access [Respondent 1]

In order to recognise prior learning for access, one needs to have some notion of equivalency - AEG is crediting the individual with an honours degree, in effect. [Respondent 7]

Alternative access is for those not formally qualified. Formal access is for people with a good honours in the right subject area at a decent level. [Respondent 9]

It is about recognising learning achieved outside formal education. [Respondent 14]

It is taking whatever the person has got and 'adding something'... It is a useful way of admitting people with good experience, plus some academic qualification. Not 'off the street'... it means "if you can find equivalence (ie experience or qualification) you are OK." [Respondent 15]

One interviewee felt strongly that “recognition of current competence” would be a better measure for making access decisions than RPL, implying that prior learning may have a limited lifespan and that applicants should be assessed on their current abilities and skills rather than past achievements. [Respondent 16]

7.5.1 Attitudes towards RPL

All sixteen interviewees were in favour of recognising prior learning for the purposes of admission to Master's level study. Two *in vivo*¹⁶ codes were allocated to the sub-category "Attitude to RPL" to differentiate between those who embraced RPL without qualification, and those who were supportive in principle, or with a proviso. The codes were: "Very Positive/Adds Value" (69%), and "A Good Idea in Principle" (31%). Three respondents who indicated they were 'very positive' about RPL added that they had evidence or experience of RPL "working well". Ten of the interviewees specified positive traits which they felt RPL students (in contrast to regular admissions) brought to their studies including "enthusiasm", "practical knowledge", "a set of skills and experience", "a different angle and understanding" and the "ability to add value as rounded human beings who see a greater role for themselves in society".

The five interviewees who felt RPL at the Master's level was a good idea 'in principle' offered the following justifications for their caveat: RPL students "needed more support", they were "harder work for supervisors", they might "negatively impact on academic standards" and they may display negative traits (in contrast to regular admissions) such as "rigidity in thinking, being less flexible in terms of new ways of looking at things", having "gaps in the required knowledge", and "lacking conceptual frameworks for talking about what they do and why they do it". Three interviewees explicitly considered RPL students a higher risk for the University, with one stating expressly "These students are a risk. One is making a value judgement about their ability to succeed. You may be wrong. You don't want a supervisor to have a failed student." [Respondent 15]

Five interviewees felt that RPL was an opportunity for redress or for providing a 'second chance' to those who had not had the same opportunities to further their education as regular admissions. One respondent was especially anxious to retain the "flexibility and judgement" currently associated with AEG access at Rhodes and felt that "rules cannot be used to define access". [Respondent 5]

7.5.2 The National Ten Percent RPL Rule

South Africa's Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) stipulates that a maximum of 10% of any programme's admission cohort could be admitted on the basis of RPL. In a national document entitled A Framework for Programme Accreditation (CHE,

¹⁶ In Vivo: "Participant's words used to encapsulate a broader concept in the data" (Birks & Mills, 2011: 174)

2004a revised 2012: 9) it is stated under *3.1.2 Student recruitment, admission and selection* that:

(iii) The programme's admission criteria are in line with national legislation. Equity targets are clearly stated as are the plans to attain them. Provision is made, where possible, for flexible entry routes, which includes RPL with regard to general admission requirements, as well as additional requirements for the programme, where applicable. *Admission of students through an RPL route should not constitute more than 10 percent of the student intake for the programme.* (italics added)

A footnote in the HEQC document adds that:

Only in exceptional circumstances and only in undergraduate programmes will admission of students through an RPL route be allowed to exceed 10% of the total number of students in the programme.

(ibid: 9)

All interviewees in this study were asked for their opinion on this '10% rule'. The responses were fascinating. Four interviewees (25%) agreed that there should be a limit and that 10% was appropriate. Nine, or 36%, felt there should be some limit but were sceptical that a prescribed percentage was required. The remaining three (19%) disagreed that there should be any form or quantity of restriction. Almost all the interviewees felt that the prescribed figure of 10% was a "thumbsuck" and an "arbitrary number" with "no scientific basis" and that 10% for Rhodes would be "generous" as "we are way below that".

In summary, most (80%) of the interviewees felt that there should be some form of restriction on RPL admissions. Several commented that a restriction was necessary to prevent universities "taking students off the street" and to "put boundaries on bad practice, subsidy games and unsavoury behaviour" [Respondent 16]. One interviewee, although agreeing that there should be some form of restriction, pointed out that "theoretically, if they [RPL admissions] have demonstrated they can succeed then they should be treated the same as other students." [Respondent 15]

7.5.3 Circumstances under which RPL should be considered

Interviewees were asked about the circumstances under which they felt RPL should be considered for admission at the Master's level. Most respondents mentioned various attributes and skills which they would expect applicants to have, and these closely mirrored the answers given to question 9 (see Chapter 8, Section 8.4) which explores 'postgraduate readiness'. One interviewee succinctly captured the expected attributes in the term "skills of scholarship".

Valued personal characteristics mentioned by respondents included:

- the ability to understand concepts
- the ability to debate
- commitment, interest and passion
- motivation
- maturity
- life experience

Most respondents felt actual evidence of skills and attributes should be provided such as:

- A portfolio of evidence
- Proof of ability to write, research and conceptualise
- A formal research proposal
- A full curriculum vitae
- Evidence of what the student has previously written and read
- Evidence of contributions made to the field
- A favourable judgement from the potential supervisor

One interviewee summed up the prevailing sentiments by saying “Staff don't always realise in their motivation that evidence of academic readiness is needed - a track record argument should be made. We need hard evidence, not length of service in their job or 'connections'.” [Respondent 4]. This approach ties in with the statement on RPL principles in the Government Gazette on RPL (RSA, 2012: 10) which states that “credit is awarded for knowledge and skills acquired through experience and not for experience alone”.

Some respondents felt that RPL admissions should be limited to certain circumstances, saying:

It is more suited to the Sciences than the Humanities. [Respondent 10]

Only for certain projects. [Respondent 10]

It depends on the discipline. [Respondent 16]

The academic who believed RPL was more suited to the Sciences than the Humanities felt that the two fields had different scholarly expectations: “In Science you are not expected to understand the last 3000 years.” He added that it was less a question of access than “different kinds of access.” Respondent 16 felt that certain study fields were more suitable for RPL students, saying “some disciplines are more appropriate - for example creative writing, fine arts, journalism, music, drama, english literature than, for example, chemistry.” In effect, Respondent 10 felt RPL

was more suited to the Sciences, whilst in contrast, Respondent 16 believed RPL was more suited to the Humanities. Interestingly, the academic background of both respondents was in Humanities.

Only for coursework Master's, not full thesis. [Respondents 8 and 10]

The reason provided by Respondent 8 for directing RPL candidates towards coursework-and-thesis rather than full-thesis Master's programmes, was that almost all the students admitted via RPL in her department were 'practitioners' and had extensive industry experience but little academic experience. Respondent 10 felt that "skills of scholarship" were needed for full-thesis Master's, and that RPL students were more suited to coursework-and-thesis programmes where, he said, such skills of scholarship could be taught.

Where a co-supervisor can be appointed. [Respondent 12]

Respondent 12 pointed out that most RPL students (in his department) are located off campus, and appointing a co-supervisor who was in the student's organization or in some way 'on site' was of great benefit to the student.

For students that have been disadvantaged by political, economic or social circumstances. [Respondent 16]

Respondent 16 elaborated thus: "The starting point should be that it should be open to anyone who thinks they are able to meet the criteria, but it should be especially designed for those who missed out because of The Struggle or were misplaced by conflict or life circumstances (for example married at 18)".

Only if they stand out at the start, or are someone we already know.
[Respondent 11]

Respondent 11 felt it was important to "know they are good, know they are interested" and personal knowledge was an essential factor in ascertaining that.

Where we have evidence of what they have read and written.
[Respondent 10]

Where a portfolio with evidence can be provided. [Respondent 12]

Several respondents mentioned the need for RPL applicants to "show the university he or she is going to do well" by providing evidence of their "ability to write, research, conceptualise things." Producing a formal research proposal was also mentioned as desirable by a number of respondents.

Only where there are not enough formally qualified applicants.
 [Respondent 11]

In direct contrast to Respondent 11 who felt RPL should only be considered where there are not enough formally qualified students, one interviewee [Respondent 16] said RPL should NOT be used by departments having too few Master’s students applying, saying that supervisors needed to be able to “vouch for” the students they accepted.

Another area in which there were opposing views was that of personal knowledge of applicants. One interviewee said RPL should only be considered for “students we know” [Respondent 11] whilst another stressed that RPL should be considered for “anyone who is able to meet the criteria. There should be fair and just treatment for all, no lobbying.” [Respondent 16]

Two respondents felt strongly that applications should be evaluated on an “ad hoc, case by case basis” but overall, there was a high level of agreement amongst interviewees as to the circumstances under which RPL should be considered.

7.5.4 Comparison of RPL Admissions to Regular Admissions

Interviewees were asked to discuss their personal experiences of how students admitted via alternative routes (i.e. RPL or AEG) compared to those who had an honours or 4 year degree (i.e. regular admission) in terms of preparedness, motivation, commitment, likelihood of succeeding, and any other points of difference or similarity they wished to mention. Comments were divided into “positive”, “negative” and “applies to all students” categories. The results are presented in Table 11 below.

TABLE 11: Attributes of RPL Students compared to Formal Admissions

RPL POSITIVES	RPL NEGATIVES	ALL STUDENTS
*Clearer *More motivated *Don’t stuff around *More independent *A pleasure *Mature *Highly motivated *Keen *Majority complete with distinction	*Have a lower level of understanding *Need financial and emotional support *Can’t always write *Conflict with employment pressures *Can’t always use and analyse data *More effort for supervisors	*Underprepared in some areas *Not familiar with the literature *Gaps in knowledge *Relationship with supervisor can be tricky *No guarantees *Can’t write critically *Need remedial writing

RPL POSITIVES	RPL NEGATIVES	ALL STUDENTS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Really want to be here *Add huge value *Have a sense of self *Do very well *Achievers *Have already overcome barriers *Produce a better thesis *Fare the same as mainstream *Often in senior positions *Very vocal *Appreciate 'being believed in' *Have more to prove *As well if not better prepared *At least as successful *Easier to supervise *Recognise have been given a special opportunity *Seldom a disappointment *Understand deadlines *High throughput rates *Never had one who didn't finish *Some of our best students *All graduate (in creative writing master's) *Often at a higher level than honours *Doing better than formal students *Very intelligent *Well-read/better-read *Able to theorize *Committed *Excellent writers *Wise *We have the least issues with them *Well-rounded *See a greater role in society 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Can't write and speak academically *Oversensitive to the way academics treat them *Often bomb out on thesis (do well in coursework) *Have rough edges *Need lots of support if from disadvantaged backgrounds *Missing some depth in foundation knowledge *Often from disadvantaged school system *Difficult personal circumstances/challenges *Rigid, strong opinions *Overconfident if older *Need a support network 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> and reasoning skills *Need more grounding in the study area *May need pushing and shoving *Age brings a different atmosphere to the class *Need support

As can be seen at a glance, there were more positive than negative comments about RPL admissions and on those occasions where negative traits were mentioned, most interviewees qualified their statements by saying "but that would also apply to

formal admissions”. One interviewee perhaps best captured the sentiment of many respondents by concluding that “one really can’t generalize about either group”.

A follow-up question was asked to determine whether RPL students were treated any differently from formally admitted students. Five respondents said RPL students were treated differently in that:

- RPL students admissions (in the Science Faculty) were required to submit a formal proposal before acceptance whereas regular admissions (in the Science Faculty) were not. [Respondent 12]
- There were stricter controls for RPL students (in the Commerce Faculty), especially for full-thesis RPL students. [Respondent 3]
- RPL students required less input than those with formal qualifications (in Accounting) as the RPL students usually had work experience and were more mature. [Respondent 3]
- RPL students (in the Education Faculty) needed much more support, especially in terms of methodology. [Respondent 5]
- RPL students (in Journalism and Media Studies) were given a second chance and were allowed to rewrite failed assignments. [Respondent 8]

One respondent indicated that conditions were sometimes attached to RPL admissions (usually a requirement to attend additional courses), but added that this applied to *all* Master’s students where staff felt there were gaps in the student’s academic knowledge, not just RPL students [Respondent 7]. Several interviewees commented that RPL students were only treated differently in terms of application and admission procedures, but that thereafter there was no difference in terms of how they were treated administratively or academically.

7.5.5 Awareness of RPL at the Master’s Level amongst RU Staff and Students

Interviewees were asked how information on alternative access routes was provided to potential students, and what the level of awareness of alternative access routes was amongst staff and students at Rhodes University. Answers were categorised as ‘good awareness’, ‘poor or no awareness’, or ‘unsure’ and grouped according to the relevant Faculty of the respondent. The Vice-Chancellor, Registrar and Dean: Teaching and Learning were classified as ‘executive’ staff. (Note: in some universities Deans may be regarded as members of the executive. However, at Rhodes University Deans are considered academic before executive, and their first priority is expected to be their Faculties – Deans were therefore included in the Faculty groups rather than classified as executive).

As can be seen from Table 12 below, most respondents felt little to no effort was put into advertising or raising awareness of the RPL access route within or without the

University – with the specific exceptions of the RU Business School, and the Environmental Education programme. Several added that the reason the alternative access route was not publicised was because they already had “enough” or “too many” Master’s applications from formally qualified students. Eight respondents mentioned that students’ awareness was mostly a result of supervisors knowing or working with people in the field or research area, and suggesting to them that they enrol for a Master’s at RU via the AEG route (three of these respondents were in the Science Faculty, two in Education, two in Humanities and one in the Executive grouping).

Most interviewees felt that academic staff were probably aware of alternative access routes but that students in general were unlikely to be aware of this form of access. Tellingly, an advertisement entitled “Postgraduate Opportunities in the School of Journalism and Media Studies” which appeared in Edition 8 of the RU student newspaper *The Oppidan Press* on 30 August 2013 (Appendix 8) did not mention RPL or AEG as an access option for any of the postgraduate programmes mentioned, including Master’s degrees. This is particularly interesting as the RU Journalism and Media Studies School is one of the most active departments at RU in terms of enrolment of AEG students at the Master’s level.

TABLE 12: Awareness of RPL at RU, Interviewees’ Opinions

	GOOD AWARENESS OF RPL	POOR OR NO AWARENESS OF RPL	UNSURE
Marketing and Advertising	<u>Commerce</u> *Info in RU Business School Brochure and FAQ’s on RBS website <u>Education</u> *Advertise in newspaper and lots of word of mouth (Environmental Education) <u>Humanities</u> <u>Science</u> *Info in Higher Degrees Guide on website <u>Executive</u>	<u>Commerce</u> *Badly *Nothing in Calendar *We never advertise *Dare not advertise <u>Education</u> *Never advertise, people approach staff *No specific marketing materials <u>Humanities</u> *We don’t make a big thing about it *No formal strategy *No strategic publicising <u>Science</u> *We don’t tell people <u>Executive</u> *Not publicised	<u>Commerce</u> <u>Education</u> <u>Humanities</u> *Think in calendar <u>Science</u> *Think on website <u>Executive</u> *Don’t know *Not aware of what RU provides

	GOOD AWARENESS OF RPL	POOR OR NO AWARENESS OF RPL	UNSURE
Staff	<u>Commerce</u> *Heads of Departments, yes *All staff on board and supportive in RUBS *Some aware of RPL but not many aware of AEG <u>Education</u> *Very well known in Environmental Education *All staff in Education know but not formally or actively encouraged <u>Humanities</u> *All staff are aware as discussed in Faculty <u>Science</u> *Yes, high awareness *High amongst staff in Zoo & Ento <u>Executive</u> *Maybe 70% of academics are aware	<u>Commerce</u> *Academics generally, no <u>Education</u> *Not formally discussed, only between colleagues *Staff know but don't utilise it much <u>Humanities</u> <u>Science</u> *Not all staff, especially new staff, know about AEG <u>Executive</u> *Currently only those 'in the know' are aware – this is inequitable	<u>Commerce</u> <u>Education</u> *Most staff have a neutral attitude <u>Humanities</u> <u>Science</u> <u>Executive</u>
Students	<u>Commerce</u> <u>Education</u> <u>Humanities</u> <u>Science</u> <u>Executive</u>	<u>Commerce</u> *Generally not aware <u>Education</u> <u>Humanities</u> <u>Science</u> *Not aware <u>Executive</u> *Students hardly know this option exists – maybe 5%	<u>Commerce</u> <u>Education</u> <u>Humanities</u> <u>Science</u> <u>Executive</u>

7.5.6 RPL and Redress

Interviewees were asked for their responses to the national and institutional approaches to RPL as a form of redress. At the national level in South Africa, RPL is considered a key strategy for achieving the original National Qualifications Framework (NQF) objectives of integration, access and redress, mobility and progression (SAQA, 2013). Specifically, “RPL/alternative access is intended to be an effective and viable method of ‘redressing past unjust educational practices that prevented people from furthering their learning’” (SAQA, 2007).

Several respondents referred to a growing demand for access to higher education and the need to widen the skills base in South Africa. One Dean observed that less than 50% of academics in South Africa have doctoral degrees and that additional Master's students would ultimately generate growth in PhD student numbers, another area in which he believed the country required improvement. An academic in the Business School noted that many people in senior positions in SA did not have the academic qualifications normally required at that level, that universities had an important role to play in enabling such people to obtain Master's degrees in mid-career, and that RPL was an appropriate means of doing so. An academic in the Science Faculty commented that the "premise is good but we just cannot have 'access for all' as some politicians would like, and RPL as a strategy will do little to change the national skills base."

One area of agreement amongst all respondents was their feeling that the national strategy on RPL was aimed at undergraduate rather than postgraduate access and redress. This is supported by the analysis of national RPL documents as noted in Chapter 3.

Several respondents felt that even prior to the change of government in 1994, there were no 'unjust educational practices' at the Master's level as all students at Rhodes University had access to postgraduate studies, although this view was contradicted by others who felt there were and still are unjust practices in higher education – one member of the executive said "you just have to look at the current demographic profile of students to see this." In contrast, an academic in the Commerce Faculty felt that "the opposite is true at Rhodes. In some cases an entire cohort of Master's students was brought in based on RPL, such as in Education and the MBA."

One academic pointed out that 'unjust educational practices' are not defined in the SAQA national statement quoted and added "what would be unjust is passing someone who doesn't deserve it, or taking in someone who has no hope of succeeding." Another commented that he was involved in programme accreditation at the national level and had not come across one university in SA that had implemented RPL in the way in which it was intended in the SAQA policy on RPL.

From an institutional perspective, the University's vision and mission statement indicates that "Rhodes University aims to 'ensure that appropriate corrective measures are employed to redress past imbalances' and in its RPL policy, the University commits itself to 'the careful and responsible use of RPL to improve access to higher education in accordance with quality assurance objectives.'" (RU Vision and Mission Statement, Appendix 1)

The overwhelming response from interviewees was that, whilst they did not disagree with the sentiment, the reference to RPL at RU was a 'symbolic' rather than substantive part of the University's vision and mission statement. A Dean summed up the general feeling as follows: "If this were an active part of our mission, we should advertise and make the public aware of this route rather than leave the initiative to the individual." Several interviewees commented that there were "no criteria or reference points for evaluating RPL applications", there were "no strategies to ensure the implementation of RPL" and they were "yet to hear" an institutional or Faculty discussion on RPL at the postgraduate level.

One respondent felt that those drawing up the vision and mission statement in the late 1990's (of which the respondent was one) did not have 'access to postgraduate study' in mind when using the term "corrective measures" but were referring more to "the provision of extended studies programmes at the undergraduate level". Interestingly, a member of the Executive elaborated on the University's approach to RPL thus:

It comes down to the level of strategy. What can we accommodate at Rhodes? If we are already reaching our goals - increasing black intake, increased intake from rural schools etc - we don't need to splash everywhere 'we want you at Rhodes University'. We can only cope with about 800 Master's students - if we are finding them in the formal categories then we don't need RPL.

This statement appositely leads on to a discussion of RPL in the context of the University's prevailing institutional culture.

7.5.7 RPL and Institutional Culture

Institutional culture is conceptualised in Rhodes University's 2005 institutional self-evaluation report as being "the general ethos of the institution, its characteristic forms and practices and its dominant value systems which are embodied in the structures through which institutional life is pursued." (RU Audit Portfolio, 2005: 11-12) The context and self-identified institutional culture of RU is outlined in detail in Chapter 2. In short, the University describes itself as small, collegial, transparent, well-governed, financially stable, effectively managed and having widely representative decision-making structures and good leadership. Furthermore, Rhodes sees itself as a liberal arts institution with an African identity as well as an excellent research record, and claims that it is supportive of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. (Ibid: 8) It is clear from the University's audit portfolio that the 'Rhodes experience' engenders fierce loyalty and pride from most students and staff, and that quality and excellence are seen as core components of the institutional culture.

However, aspects of the institutional self-perceptions were challenged both by the external institutional audit held in 2005 (CHE, 2006) and by the current Vice-Chancellor, Dr Saleem Badat, as recently as 2011 (see Chapter 2, Section 2.4.2).

Interviewees were not asked any *specific* questions about their perceptions of the University's institutional culture. Instead, their responses to *all* the interview questions were analysed once again to identify and code any references to, or reflections of, their manifestations of institutional culture at Rhodes.

While most staff in leadership positions at RU are aware of the dangers of complacency, one overarching theme emerged during the analysis of institutional culture at Rhodes: "resistance". Several sub-themes were subsequently developed. The first is "resistance to change and difference". As pointed out by the Vice-Chancellor in his 2011 discussion document (and by several of the interviewees during this study), the prevailing culture within the institution seemed to be a satisfaction with the status quo, a sense that things are working well and should not be disturbed. In addition, it was clear that students admitted via alternative access routes were seen as 'different' and in many cases, inferior, to regular admissions by the academic and executive staff. The following comments are presented as evidence of this interpretation:

TABLE 13: Resistance to Change and Difference at RU

RESPONDENT	COMMENTS – RESISTANCE TO CHANGE AND DIFFERENCE
1	<p>There has been fairly strong resistance in the Commerce Faculty against this kind of admission.</p> <p>The Commerce Faculty takes a deficit approach, probably because of the overwhelming number of undergraduates.</p> <p>We only let in those who can do AEG as a "cake walk", or in a revolving door MBA.</p> <p>We expect students to wade through the calendar or rely on word of mouth.</p>
3	<p>We dare not advertise as we already have too many applicants (25 in 2012). However, there is a high attrition rate. We have never advertised but are still flooded with applications.</p>
4	<p>Not sure we want to publicise too much - would be 'hordes' of applicants and we don't have much spare capacity.</p>
5	<p>We have many more applicants than places.</p> <p>Potential AEG's need to work hard at convincing Faculty they should be admitted. They must "shape up or ship out". We don't and won't offer a second rate Master's.</p>
6	<p>It shouldn't be 'easy' - one doesn't need a stick to beat oneself with. I'm comfortable with the current situation ie AEG is not the rule but the</p>

RESPONDENT	COMMENTS – RESISTANCE TO CHANGE AND DIFFERENCE
	exception.
7	In effect this would be like extended studies at Master's level. But the Faculty has not considered this in a serious way.
8	We have enough who are formally eligible but also, AEG comes with problems.
9	The typical English university lecturer will say "if they can't read and write properly there is nothing I can do with them" Boom. Gate closed.
10	We don't make a big thing about it as we are not short of Master's students. My personal view is we should allow it if we are approached, but it is not ideal to canvass potential students.
11	We get loads of applications from people who DO meet the formal criteria. We are not desperate to find people... alternative access is very rare.
12	At RU alternative access is seen as a 'poor cousin' – we only accept them under exceptional circumstances but don't really want it known. Quality at RU comes from a conservative academic cohort. They are not particularly receptive to alternative access. For example AEG applications have to go to Senate - often sent back because 'more documentation is needed'. Many will stand up and question AEG admissions in Senate. I have fights against 'academic arrogance' in this department all the time. Others' attitude is 'we will only take the best'.
13	There seem to be assumptions made about RPL students as not adding value, being a burden rather than adding diversity, richness and new ideas. But the Faculty has enough formal MSc students. There is a great deal of 'academic snobbery' about taking on RPL students.
14	But what does it mean to do a half or a full-thesis? What do you need to be able to DO to undertake a thesis? Most people here are not willing to engage with this question... RU occupies a privileged/protected space. The numbers are very small.
15	RU has AEG, but many other institutions have "RPL" which is much more formalized, requires a portfolio of evidence. RU is culturally resistant to formalized RPL.
16	One area of concern for me would be where departments are taking RPL students because they have too few Master's students applying.

Another sub-theme which emerged was a strong resistance to rules or policing of any sort. Whilst a number of respondents said they would welcome guidelines or criteria for evaluating potential AEG students, there was a widespread concern that any formalized RPL system or externally imposed 'bureaucracy' would result in a loss of individual freedom to make academic judgements. The following selection of comments illustrates this mindset:

TABLE 14: Resistance to Rules and Policing at RU

RESPONDENT	COMMENTS – RULES AND POLICING
4	What is a rule? It is a sweeping attempt to regularise some common

RESPONDENT	COMMENTS – RULES AND POLICING
	wisdom. We must ask "what is the motivation for the rule? Rather leave it to supervisors to identify potential students. I trust the supervisor's professional and academic judgment of the candidate. I would welcome guidelines in this area, but am very wary of policing/prescription. I come from an era where one trusts the judgement of colleagues, especially those with a track record and who have the necessary insights. We can become better at providing access to those deserving candidates, but we don't want a prescriptive 'hurdle jumping' exercise. Experienced colleagues' opinions are more valuable than bureaucrats or people in managerial positions.
5	I have a fair degree of contempt for bureaucracy. The 10% rule is a bureaucratic thumbsuck which I would ignore. We cannot use rules to define access. It (RPL) should be done on a case by case basis... "to treat all equally is oppressive".
6	I don't like feeling "held down by red tape".
7	The need for rules is probably to ensure the former technicians don't go haywire and take anyone who applies, which is a danger in the system but doesn't apply at RU. Applying a 10% rule at Rhodes would be very strange.
14	RU doesn't don't like to be tied into criteria, especially Deans
15	Also, these students are a risk - one is making a value judgement about their ability to succeed.
16	The judgement of the supervisor is critical. Much goes on the judgement of the supervisor - 'earned respect'.

A common thread running through the responses was a general agreement that AEG or RPL students require additional support and this appeared to be viewed in a negative sense rather than, for instance, a redress sense or an 'opportunity to widen access' sense. The perception that alternative access students posed more of a risk than regular admissions to the University's, and - even more importantly - the Supervisor's reputations, also emerged. The resistance seemed to be towards the additional effort that taking on RPL students would entail, and the risk that their (perceived) higher likelihood of failure would damage the reputation of individual supervisors as well as of the institution.

TABLE 15: Resistance to Extra Effort and Risk at RU

RESPONDENT	COMMENTS – EXTRA EFFORT AND RISK
1	If we're really honest, a lot of disadvantaged students...would be actively discouraged from doing Master's simply because of the hassle factor/pressure on supervisors.

RESPONDENT	COMMENTS – EXTRA EFFORT AND RISK
	Having additional Master's students inevitably impacts on RU's capacity to supervise students - and there are currently enough formally qualified applicants in all departments in the Faculty.
3	It is much safer to admit RPL students to coursework Master's as the assignments are like mini-dissertations and there is much more time/opportunity to "beat students into submission and ensure they are able to write properly."
5	AEG students need a great deal of support, especially in terms of methodology. Those with disadvantaged backgrounds especially need 'lots and lots of support'.
6	It is a very expensive mistake and waste of resources to take on Master's students who are not going to succeed.
8	The logic (of limiting the numbers of RPL students) is so that AEG students can be given time and attention as they absolutely need more than other students.
9	The apartheid legacy does impact because those students need more work and support, they are not aware that their brilliant writing still needs editing into shape.
10	We must take into account all factors, especially the supervision load, because AEG IS much harder work, it is much more time-consuming.
12	We have to spend a lot more time with these (AEG) students
13	We assume students who have a 4 year degree can write a thesis without too much support. I know what I can expect of my own students or those who have come through a system where I externalled. They are not such a gamble (as AEG students).
14	We don't support those RPL students we admit. That's why too many is too risky
15	Also, these students are a risk - one is making a value judgement about their ability to succeed. You may be wrong. You don't want a supervisor to have a failed student
16	I suspect most RPL people would require help with academic writing as it is a different kind of writing. We have learned over time which departments are 'high risk' for the student.

7.6 Summary and Conclusion

The level of agreement amongst interviewees regarding the concept and implementation of RPL at the postgraduate level was surprisingly high. Whilst the issue does not appear to be a priority on the institutional or academic agenda, a significant finding was that *all* those interviewed were in favour of retaining this alternative form of access to Master's degrees at Rhodes University, albeit with

certain conditions. The conditions include limiting the proportion of RPL students, ensuring they possess the necessary graduate attributes and can provide evidence of their prior learning, directing them towards appropriate disciplines and degree structures, and ensuring they do not take the places of formally qualified students. At the same time, interviewees were anxious to retain maximum flexibility in terms of admission procedures and selection decisions, and avoid prescriptive, externally imposed rules at all costs.

The overall impression interviewees had of RPL candidates was favourable and many positive comments were made about their performance, contribution and attributes. Where negative points were made, the interviewees were usually quick to add that these comments would probably apply to all students, not just RPL students. While in some regards RPL students were treated differently, it was emphasized that this would only be in terms of access procedures and support, not in terms of exit standards. However, despite interviewees' affirmative feelings and experiences, RPL students were viewed as being deficient, a higher risk and needing more supervision and support than regular admissions.

Interviewees identified a national need for increased numbers of postgraduate students and also for the upgrading of qualifications of academics as well as those in senior positions in the workforce but, while they felt RPL could be an important redress strategy, they believed the current national as well as institutional RPL policies were aimed at undergraduate rather than postgraduate access. Several interviewees felt there was no need for redress at the Master's level at RU as the University was already reaching its strategic goals, and did not have place for additional students. The University's approach to RPL was seen as symbolic rather than active, and many respondents noted a lack of formal discussion, criteria or guidelines for RPL within the Institution.

In terms of institutional culture, interviewees saw the University as high quality, better than or different to other institutions, and doing well, especially in terms of the numbers of applications being received from Master's candidates with the requisite academic qualifications for regular admission. Although they believed most staff were aware of the existence of RPL or AEG as an access route, students were not likely to be aware unless they had some personal involvement or contact with the University, and this form of access was seldom advertised or marketed – with the exception of the MBA and Environmental Education programmes.

Resistance emerged as a dominant theme during the interviews: resistance to rules, bureaucracy and policing as well as to change, accountability and extra effort. Although some might consider this a negative trait, many believe the reluctance to

easily give up aspects of its functioning and culture have served the University well over many years, and have prevented the University from following fashionable national or international trends which were often later abandoned (such as the move towards pre-determined programmes in place of generic qualifications). This conservativeness or 'resistance' is a key dynamic in the issue of alternative access to the Master's degree. While interviewees were open to guidelines being provided regarding RPL at the Master's level, there was a strong call to retain the subjective judgment, flexibility and 'personal touch' which characterised the University's *de facto* approach to postgraduate RPL.

CHAPTER EIGHT: POSTGRADUATE READINESS

8.1 Introduction

This Chapter presents the results of an analysis of motivation records (letters and paragraphs in Faculty minutes) written by academics in support of students' applications for alternative admission to Master's degree studies at RU over the period 1999-2008. It draws together data gathered from the motivation records as well as the interviews in order to identify and explicate the attributes academics assume Master's level students already possess upon entry to the degree. Potential evidence sources are then explored based on the attribute categories identified. Examples of anomalies in the implementation of the University's AEG rules are presented before the chapter findings are summarised in the discussion and synthesis.

8.2 The Concept of Postgraduate Readiness

The concept and context of 'graduateness' - the skills, values and characteristics a graduate is expected to possess upon completion of a qualification - is discussed in detail in Chapter 4. The term graduateness is traditionally used in reference to graduates about to join the workforce as opposed to those proceeding to further study and increasingly, universities are drawing up lists of graduate attributes they expect students who have studied undergraduate qualifications at their institution to embody upon graduation.

A few universities, most notably in Australia, are also beginning to formulate 'postgraduate graduate attributes' which describe the more advanced graduate attributes which students who have completed a *postgraduate* qualification could be expected to demonstrate. The University of Queensland, for example, describes the "set of qualities, skills and abilities that a University of Queensland [post]graduate may demonstrate in addition to specific knowledge in the field studied" under five headings:

- In-depth knowledge and skills in the field of study
- Effective communication
- Independence and creativity
- Critical judgement
- Ethical and social understanding

(<https://ppl.app.uq.edu.au/content/3.10.06-postgraduate-coursework-graduate-attributes>, accessed 1 December 2013)

In another example, the University of Western Australia's Faculty of Education expects postgraduate students, "according to different course contexts, to develop and demonstrate various attributes" under four headings:

- Disposition
- Cognition
- Communication
- Application

<http://www.education.uwa.edu.au/students/postgraduate-attributes>

In a document entitled 'Graduate Attributes for Postgraduate Research', CQ University in Queensland, Australia, sets out the skills and qualities graduates of Master's and doctoral degrees will (sic) be able to demonstrate, under eight headings:

- Knowledge
- Thinking skills
- Research skills
- Communication skills
- Ethical and professional responsibility
- Self-management
- Technical skills
- International perspective

http://www.local.cqu.edu.au/academic_board/graduateattributes/Graduate%20Attributes%20for%20Postgraduate%20Research%2031%20May%202012.pdf

In effect then, various lists of graduate attributes have been developed to characterise students who have completed *undergraduate* degrees and are about to join the workforce, and various lists of postgraduate attributes have been developed to characterise students who have completed *postgraduate* degrees. However, the attributes expected of a graduate who wishes to *enter* postgraduate level study appear to be relatively unexplored in the literature.

The term 'postgraduate readiness attributes' is therefore used in this Chapter in order to differentiate the attributes relevant to undertaking *further study* as opposed to the attributes desired in graduates about to join the workforce (commonly referred to in the literature as 'graduate attributes') or attributes expected of those who complete postgraduate qualifications (postgraduate attributes).

8.3 Interviewees' Comments on Postgraduate Readiness

The final question in the interviews undertaken in this study aimed to identify and explore the attributes which *the interviewees* felt could be expected or assumed of

someone who is about to enter Master's level study, regardless of their formal or informal background. Before discussing the attributes themselves (See Section 8.4), it is worth noting some preliminary comments on the concept of readiness for postgraduate studies, extracted from the interview transcripts.

One academic felt intellectual initiative, curiosity and passion - and the ability to put these into practice - were essential qualities in preparedness for postgraduate study:

One looks for initiative, particularly intellectual initiative. In undergrad study you build the engine but in postgrad study you need to run it! The spark of intellectual liveliness is the motor running. You cannot be a lump of dough, awaiting instructions. You cannot passively climb the academic ladder. Many have writing and thinking skills but no curiosity or passion. One can get some going, others not. Often they say and do the right things but there is a vacuum. Critical thought often results in wafflers. You need to be able to DO at some stage. You must be able to move from conception to praxis. (Respondent 9)

Another interviewee felt it was important to "look at the 'whole person', not just here is a 'senior manager with five years' experience'. We should provide a range of criteria which takes the whole person into account" and added that some people could be regarded as scholars even without a formal education. (Respondent 2)

A pertinent point was raised by one respondent who noted that graduate attributes were not necessarily the same for different levels of postgraduate study and that "the concept of graduate readiness to me would normally include having an honours degree." (Resp. 4) In a similar vein, a Science Faculty academic felt "One must look at what one looks for in a graduate after third year, Honours, Master's, PhD, and THEN look at the curriculum to see how that can be achieved." (Respondent 12)

Whilst one interviewee felt the experience of "having gone through a qualification is more important than content" (Respondent 5), another pointed out that "the ability to succeed is hard to demonstrate if there is no academic qualification." (Respondent 15)

Several interviewees commented on the practical challenges of measuring postgraduate readiness:

Academic acumen or capability can only be assessed by subjective judgement, based on the student's motivation and interview. (Respondent 5)

Critical thinking skills is a nebulous concept. How do we measure this?
(Respondent 11)

Graduate attributes are difficult to capture. It is done on an individual basis. One can pick up graduate attributes from interviews with applicants, not from their qualifications. (Respondent 13)

It is difficult to implement a uniform policy across all disciplines. (Respondent 7)

The lack of a framework, guidelines and/or criteria for assessing postgraduate readiness was also mentioned as problematic:

The question we should ask is “What do you need to be able to DO to undertake a thesis?”... The problem is that the motivation letter says this person is very good, but there are no explicit criteria or guidelines. BUT, there are no explicit criteria or guidelines [for graduate attributes] for formal admissions either! (Respondent 14)

There should be an exercise or test set to measure 'current competence' rather than graduate attributes. For example, an essay or task which is assessed at a Master's level. We should also require a formal proposal which must be the basis on which the final decision is made. (Respondent 16)

More important than the possession of specific attributes, according to one respondent, was having the *potential* to develop such attributes:

Practical work is descriptive. Academic work is deeply conceptual. What is more important than possessing graduate attributes is having the *potential to acquire* the necessary skills and sophistication to do a Master's. (Respondent 8)

In summary, a common thread running through the interviewees' opinions on postgraduate readiness was that there is no 'recipe' or 'one-size-fits-all' approach to identifying and assessing a student's preparedness for undertaking Master's level study. In addition, it seems that whilst guidelines and generic assessment exercises would be helpful in the process, the ultimate judgement on whether a student is suited to Master's level study is best left to experienced academics' professional wisdom on a case-by-case basis.

8.4 Interviewees' Opinions on Graduate Attributes for Postgraduate Readiness

As mentioned in the previous section, at the end of the interviews, all sixteen respondents were asked to consider the concept of 'graduateness', and share their thoughts on the attributes they would expect or assume of someone who is about to enter Master's level study, regardless of the students' formal or informal background and admission status.

One interviewee kindly provided a copy of a standard letter (Shackleton, 2009), which that particular Department sent to referees of potential doctoral students, saying the qualities referees were asked to comment on would be similar to those they would expect to find in Master's level students (referees were not required by the Department for Master's level applicants). The graduate attributes identified in this letter (which the referees were asked to assess the student on) were:

- Prior research experience

- Research competence
- Ability to work alone
- Ability to work under pressure
- Personal motivation, discipline, attention to detail
- Proficiency in quantitative studies and analysis of data
- Leadership capabilities and qualities
- General character and how work colleagues view him and his work
- Strengths and weaknesses regarding his abilities to design research protocols, execute the work and analyse the data (areas that may require support and attention from his supervisors).

After the interview transcripts were coded, several categories emerged which were based on an amalgamation of key words and concepts found during the course of this entire study. They represent my cumulative interpretation of the ‘attribute groups’ used implicitly or explicitly by academics in formal motivation records as well as when considering whether or not a student should be admitted to Master’s level study without the formal qualification requirements, as identified from the interview transcripts. The eight categories finally settled on for postgraduate readiness attributes were:

- Academic Record or Results
- Professional/Field/Work Experience
- Reputation or Contribution to the Subject or Field
- Research Experience or Potential
- Academic Capabilities or Potential
- Leadership or Multiplier Potential
- Personal Characteristics
- Other

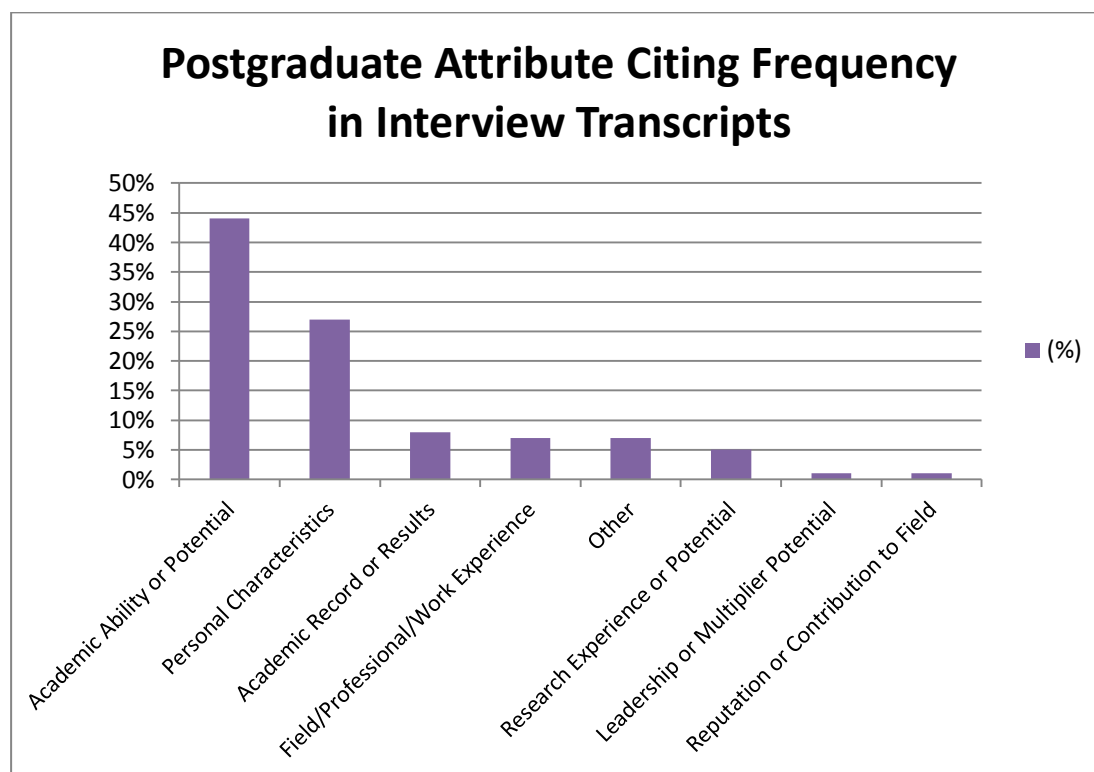
Once the responses had been categorized, a quantitative analysis of the results was conducted, as reflected in Table 16. A total of 113 distinct postgraduate readiness attributes were captured in total from the interview transcripts. Of those, 50, or 44%, referred to the category “Academic Capabilities or Potential”, whilst the second most frequently mentioned attribute was “Personal Characteristics”, at 27%. Least cited were “Leadership or Multiplier Potential” and “Reputation or Contribution to Field” at 1% frequency respectively (see Graph 7).

TABLE 16: Attribute Frequency in Interview Transcripts

POSTGRADUATE READINESS ATTRIBUTE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Academic Ability or Potential	50	44%
Personal Characteristics	30	27%
Academic Record or Results	9	8%
Field/Professional/Work Experience	8	7%

POSTGRADUATE READINESS ATTRIBUTE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Other	8	7%
Research Experience or Potential	6	5%
Leadership or Multiplier Potential	1	1%
Reputation or Contribution to Field	1	1%
TOTAL	113	100%

GRAPH 7: Postgraduate Attribute Citing Frequency in Interview Transcripts



The actual attributes cited under each category are shown in Table 17 below:

TABLE 17: Postgraduate Readiness Attributes Identified by Interviewees, by Category

POSTGRADUATE READINESS ATTRIBUTE CATEGORY	SPECIFIC POSTGRADUATE READINESS ATTRIBUTES (including duplications)
1. Academic Ability or Potential	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Ability to back up claims (not dinner table/street opinions without evidence) *Ability to conceptualise and describe *Ability to deploy information *Ability to make connections between disparate things *Ability to make critical arguments from passive information *Ability to move out of the practice of doing, and reflect on their own practice

POSTGRADUATE READINESS ATTRIBUTE CATEGORY	SPECIFIC POSTGRADUATE READINESS ATTRIBUTES (including duplications)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Ability to 'repurpose knowledge to serve a particular purpose' *Ability to study independently *Ability to substantiate an argument/differentiate *Ability to think and reason, debate and engage, and a willingness to do so *Ability to understand structure *Ability to write *Ability to write *Ability to write well in English *Able to engage in academic discourse *Able to lay out an argument and critique it *Able to move from conception to praxis *Able to put their case confidently and defend and justify that. *Able to talk, listen, debate, negotiate, engage, read and understand research articles *Able to write clearly *Abstraction of generic *Academic acumen/capability *Academic discourse - being able to think critically and in an academic mode *Academic literacy *Academic literacy- able to read fast enough/summarize/work out what's most important *Academic skills on non-linear thinking *Academic writing skills - ability to analyse, critique and conceptualise *Academically literate in English/Use English for academic purposes *An ability to formulate a question *An innate curiosity that can be proven *Analytical skills *Articulate ideological position *Articulate spoken and written form *Awareness of the role of theory and ability to question or change theory, not just using common sense *Be able to debate *Be on top of the literature *Capacity to undertake research and develop an argument *Capacity to write academically/English skills - especially given that the official language of HE is English *Clear reasoning abilities, think through using clear, concise logic *Conceptual skills *Construct an argument *Critical awareness - ability to think and evaluate *Critical engagement *Critical skills or the POTENTIAL to acquire the necessary skills/sophistication to do M *Critical thinkers *Critical thinking skills

POSTGRADUATE READINESS ATTRIBUTE CATEGORY	SPECIFIC POSTGRADUATE READINESS ATTRIBUTES (including duplications)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Depth and breadth of knowledge *Familiarity with literature *Good understanding of both the discipline as well as the educational implications of the field (even if practice-arrived) *Have engaged independently *Have the potential to contribute to the body of knowledge in the discipline *Intellectual *Intellectual autonomy *Interest in the topic *Interest/enthusiasm in the topic/discipline, furthering their understanding *IT literacy *Know how scientists think *Know what you are trying to achieve, how to achieve it, and how it relates to what has been done before. *Language abilities *Look critically from every angle *Looks at causes not symptoms *Numeracy *Numeracy *Numeracy *Numeracy/stats (if required by discipline) *Problem solving ability *Proper referencing *Quality of thinking *Rigour *Scholarly writing ability *Scholars *Some experience of writing *Speak and write in English properly *Statement-evidence examination *Theorising of things *Think critically *Think independently not stereotypically *Understand how to write and how to complete things *Use theoretical knowledge to talk about things - Must be able to get out of being IN a field to talking ABOUT a field *Writing ability *Writing skills *Writing skills (NB but not most NB) *Writing skills and experience
<p>2. Personal Characteristics</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *A basic skills set *Ability to handle complexity at a high level *Ability to think logically *Ability to work in a group (Science) *Attention to detail/meticulous

POSTGRADUATE READINESS ATTRIBUTE CATEGORY	SPECIFIC POSTGRADUATE READINESS ATTRIBUTES (including duplications)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *BICS - basic interpersonal communicative skills - academics may be seduced by a student's ability to speak well but they need CALP - cognitive academic language proficiency *Capacity to recognise and respond to advice *Commitment *Committed, passionate, interested *Curiosity *Dedication *Diligence *Discipline *Discipline *Emotional maturity *Enquiring mind *Enquiring mind, want to explore *Enthusiasm/interest/fire *"Fire in the belly, glint in the eye" *Have a real interest in pursuing the questions *Initiative, particularly intellectual initiative. *Look at the world in a measured way *Maturity *Maturity *Motivation *Motivation *Passion *Passion *Perseverance *Personal attributes *Problem-solving skills *Realistic in terms of time and commitment required given current work and personal circumstances *Self-motivated *Self-vision *Skills around self-motivation, drive, getting things done *Teamwork *Willingness to be wrong *Wisdom *Work independently
3. Academic Record or Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Conceptual foundation in the relevant undergraduate field *Disciplinary knowledge *Experience of having gone through a qualification *Familiar with the language of the discipline *Have a reasonable grasp of the concepts of the discipline *Have read in the field *Scholarly awareness and history *Strong grounding in the discipline, and some courses *Understand disciplinary foundations and concepts
4.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Continuity in employment history - change jobs every 3 months? mid-

POSTGRADUATE READINESS ATTRIBUTE CATEGORY	SPECIFIC POSTGRADUATE READINESS ATTRIBUTES (including duplications)
Field/ Professional/ Work Experience	life crisis? *Experience in the field *Experience in the field - professional experience/knowledge *Job security (eg based at research institute or in conservation - not 'selling washing machines by day and studying after hours) *Must be active in or have experience in the particular field they want to study in *Relevant experience *Work experience *Years of hands-on experience
5. Other	*Ability to accept authority of supervisor *Ability to think is what makes a graduate different to a non-graduate *Aware of formal structures beyond their own work environment *Financial attributes - ability to pay *Involvement in extra-curricula activities *Knowing 'what's at stake' *No waffling *Right preparation
6. Research Experience or Potential	*Ability to use and analyse data, not just collect it *Be familiar with scientific method *Must have authored or co-authored at least 2 publications *Research exposure and experience *Satisfactory ability to undertake research *Understand how science is done and how to do research *Presented at a conference or workshop
7. Leadership or Multiplier Potential	* Potential to supervise others
8. Reputation or Contribution to Field	* Professional contribution/contribution to the field or profession

8.5 Documentary Analysis of Motivation Records at Rhodes University

As indicated in the University's Higher Degrees Guide (RU 2012b: 5):

Where a candidate has extensive experience and/or is judged to have considerable potential as a researcher, but lacks the formal qualifications normally required for registration for a Master's degree, admission to a research programme as an *ad*

eundem gradum candidate may be possible.... Such a recommendation is subject to the approval of Senate.

The HDG states further that “*ad eundem gradum* students should submit a full motivation for their admission with supporting documentation to the Head of Department” and refers readers to the University’s Recognition of Prior Learning Policy for further details.

The University’s RPL policy states that “Applicants lacking the necessary formal qualification (an Honours degree) may be admitted by Senate, on the recommendation of Heads of Departments, Deans and Faculties, to Master’s degree study as *ad eundem gradum* candidates” and that “Recognition of prior learning for purposes of access will focus on a candidate’s capacity to succeed”. (RU RPL Policy 2007, Appendix 2)

However, no further information on the process, or on how a candidate’s ‘capacity to succeed’ is understood and assessed, is provided in the RPL policy.

The recommendation of HoD’s is normally presented in the form of a letter of motivation - sometimes accompanied by a CV - written by the Supervisor and signed by the HoD and Dean, and attached to the agenda of Faculty meetings. All Faculty agendas during the period under analysis, 1999-2008, were accessed by myself and any motivation letters included in the agenda documentation were photocopied and extensively analysed.

Scrutiny of all Faculty minutes over the period 1999-2008 showed that in many cases the candidate’s curriculum vitae as well as a written motivation from the potential Supervisor was included in the documentation. However, in several instances just one brief paragraph supporting the candidate’s application was provided as part of the Faculty agenda. For example, one motivation ‘paragraph’ comprised just one sentence: “student X has had many years of experience in the field after completing her BSc degree.” (Faculty of Science minutes, 8 Aug 2007)

In a few cases, no motivation whatsoever was provided even though the candidate was identified as an AEG admission. A Faculty of Science Minute from 28 September 2005 provides insight into the ongoing lack of detail provided in AEG motivations:

Noting that the original motivation had been uninformative, the Board REQUESTED that departments and supervisors in *ad eundem gradum* applications provide more specific, detailed information about the applicants’ experience.
(Rhodes University, Faculty of Science Minutes, 2005.4.15)

In some instances, candidates who did NOT have the required formal qualifications were not identified as AEG in the agenda documentation and as such, ‘slipped through’ without being considered or recorded as AEG students. Every effort was

made to include these students, once identified during my analysis of all 1999-2008 Faculty minutes, in the quantitative analysis data (see Chapter 6) but they could obviously not be included in the motivation analysis as no supporting documentation was available in the University's archives.

It is clear that over time, more effort and rigour has been introduced by Faculties into the AEG motivation process. In the early years of the study (1999 – 2001) the motivation letters were generally short, unstructured and provided relatively little detail. From 2002 however, more relevant and detailed information began appearing, particularly in motivation letters in the Faculty of Education. Special mention should be made of the Environmental Education Programme, where the Chair, in a 2001 letter to the then Dean, outlined the purpose of the programme as being "...to develop environmental educators with a sound academic grounding... a critical orientation and the ability to use and produce well-informed research" (Appendix 9). The letter went on to identify the criteria used in the selection of AEG applicants for the programme as follows:

- Academic track record and academic capability
- Track record in environmental education
- Multiplier potential
- Evidence of research experience

All subsequent letters of motivation submitted for AEG applicants in the Environmental Education programme thereafter followed this structure and provided detailed arguments and evidence of the applicants' suitability for alternative admission. This approach will be discussed further in Section 8.8.

Overall, 55 formal letters of motivation and 29 'in-agenda' motivation paragraphs from the period 1999-2008 were analysed – a total of 84 students or 'motivation records' in this sample. The motivation letters and in-agenda motivation paragraphs were analysed using a qualitative content analysis approach (See Chapter 5, Section 5.6.3.2). Each motivation record was read and re-read to obtain a sense of the whole, following which a line-by-line examination was undertaken and descriptive words or phrases were extracted, coded and recorded according to the frequency of their appearance in the motivation letters (See Table 19). Each code was applied only once so, for instance, a motivation record may have included several examples of a candidate's leadership potential, experience or achievements but the frequency chart (example letter in Table 18 below) simply indicates that 'leadership' was identified by the letter writer as an attribute in support of the candidate's application for AEG admission. An actual motivation letter is used as a brief example of how the initial coding was undertaken:

TABLE 18: Example of Line by Line Coding of one Motivation Letter (for Student X)

IN VIVO STATEMENT or CLAIM	ATTRIBUTE CODE
Student X holds a BA (English and Fine Art) from the University of X	<i>*Undergraduate qualification</i>
(Marks average between 65-75%)	<i>*Academic record/results</i>
She also has an HDE from the University of X	<i>*Postgraduate qualification</i>
She has completed a diploma in nature conservation through Technikon X	<i>*Other undergraduate qualification</i>
And is currently enrolled for the Rhodes/Goldfields course	<i>*Personal knowledge of candidate</i> <i>*RU course</i>
As a teacher, student X works with numerous young learners	<i>*Trains/tutors/teaches others</i>
She shows commitment to her own professional development	<i>*Motivation/commitment</i>
And has engaged in numerous projects involving young learners in environmental education activities	<i>*Practical/professional/work experience</i>
She has recently been offered a position in company X where she will provide materials development and other services to hundreds of environmental educators	<i>*Relevant position/employment</i> <i>*Multiplier potential</i>
In the SADC region	<i>*National contribution</i>
Student X has been teaching for seven years	<i>*Maturity/age</i>
And is involved in numerous environmental education programmes at her school	<i>*Subject/specialist knowledge</i>
She has enrolled in studies at the Technikon to learn more about conservation and has embarked on the Rhodes/Gold Fields course to further her understanding of environmental education	<i>*Lifelong learner</i>
Student X has not conducted formal research as yet, but shows an interest in materials development research	<i>*Research potential</i>

After completing the coding I decided to disaggregate the attribute ‘research experience/potential/course’ further into three separate attributes: ‘research experience/competence/skill’, ‘research potential’, and ‘research methodology course’ which required me to go through all the letters and paragraphs once again in order to capture this distinction and present a fuller picture of research attributes. In addition, several elements which I originally coded as attributes (for instance “give the student a chance” or “needs to upgrade qualification”) were later discarded as not being actual postgraduate readiness attributes.

Ultimately, 59 different postgraduate readiness attributes were identified and coded. Whilst most attributes relate directly to the individual student, several relate to the dynamics of the context in which the research would be undertaken – for example, whether or not the candidate would be supported by their employer

(attribute 33) and whether or not an appropriate supervisor or co-supervisor is available (attributes 40 and 48). At least one example of each graduate attribute identified in the motivation letters is provided in Table 19 below to illustrate the kinds of evidence provided by the motivator:

Table 19: Postgraduate Readiness Attributes Identified in Motivation Letters and Paragraphs: Frequency and Examples

No	POSTGRADUATE READINESS ATTRIBUTE	FRE-QUE NCY*	EVIDENCE EXAMPLE/S
1	Undergraduate qualification	63	"The BTech (Nature Conservation) is an appropriate preparation for postgraduate research in large mammal field ecology, which is the field that Ms X will enter." (Science, 2008)
2	Practical/professional/work experience	56	"For the past ten years he has been employed in the ecotourism/nature conservation field." (Science, 2006)
3	Relevant or senior position	46	"Mr X holds a senior position in the Finance Division at University X." (Commerce, 2008)
4	Personal knowledge of applicant	41	"I have had numerous interactions with her exploring possible research options." (Education, 2006) "I have had several meetings with her and she is clearly capable..." (Science, 2008)
5	Leadership/multiplier potential	35	"As South coordinator of the ENO, Ms X will be in a leadership position in conceptualizing and maximising the research component of ENO, and this work has potentially enormous multiplier effects given the range of ICT's within such a partnership programme. The ENO programme involves 130 schools from 51 countries worldwide." (Education, 2006)
6	Other qualifications or courses	34	"... a Teachers Diploma at Wesley Training College... She is currently completing the ACE in EE at RU ... she has also completed the RU Certificate in EE. She has completed a wide range of other courses including courses in horticulture, OBE, youth development and leadership training programmes..." (Education, 2007)
7	National contribution	33	"In this position Mr X has a significant role to play since he will be linked into the rest of the NRF SAEON nodes in other parts of the country, and will contribute specifically to environmental education activities in the Cape Floristic Region which is South Africa's most threatened diversity hotspot." (Education, 2007)
8	Research experience/competence/skills	32	"Whilst working for Professor X, she has developed all the skills necessary to complete a research MSc." (Science, 2006)
9	Trains or teaches others	25	"... she has tutored and supported the RU/SADC two month international certificate course, and has run a number of short courses and attachment programmes." (Education, 2004)
10	Age/maturity	24	"As a 50 year old MBA applicant, RBS is confident that he is highly motivated to read for and complete the degree." (Commerce, 2008)
11	Motivation	23	Motivated, committed, enthusiastic, passionate, energetic, perseverance

No	POSTGRADUATE READINESS ATTRIBUTE	FRE-QUE NCY*	EVIDENCE EXAMPLE/S
12	Contribution to field/discipline	23	"I believe her research contribution to education in general and this department in particular, will be very valuable." (Education, 2006)
13	Academic results/record	21	"He passed his fourth year subjects with 75% in each and gained a mark of 77% for research methodology." (Science, 2004)
14	Other qualification from RU	20	"Mrs X has a B Com (Accounting) degree from Rhodes University." (Commerce, 2003)
15	International experience	19	"Ms X has participated in and represented youth forums and activities in a wide range of youth consultations in Kenya, Sweden, Russia, Egypt, Denmark and South Africa." (Education, 2006)
16	Postgraduate or graduate qualification	18	"She also holds two postgraduate diplomas – one in Health Education from Leeds Polytechnic in the UK and one in Population and Sustainable Development from the University of Botswana." (Education, 2004)
17	Reputation/recognition in the field	16	"Mr X received the award for the best student in 1996 from the University of Namibia." (Education, 2007) "Mr X's standing in the Botswana community has resulted in several directorships... (Commerce, 2004)
18	Academic/conceptual skills	16	Critical, reflexive, articulate, insightful, considered views, creative, analytical, intellectual
19	Publications	13	"He has two refereed publications, one as a first author..." (Science, 2004)
20	Research Proposal	13	"The project is very focused and, as you will see, Ms X has presented a detailed project proposal." (Science, 2006)
21	Performance on set task	13	"He is articulate and performed well in the assignment required from all our applicants as part of the selection process." (Education, 2007)
22	Lifelong learner	13	"I consider these extraordinary qualities proof of him being a dedicated and committed life-long learner..." (Science, 2002)
23	Research potential	13	"Ms X's experience as a journalist provides her with research capabilities." (Humanities, 2002)
24	Specialized/subject knowledge	12	"... I believe Mr X is ideally placed, from his vast experience of these two analytical techniques in particular, to successfully complete an MSc degree." (Science, 2003)
25	Attended/presented at conferences	12	"Mr X has presented a number of papers at the annual EEASA Conferences, focusing on aspects of his work." (Education, 2004)
26	Social change/community upliftment	12	"During this time Mr X also established a community-based paper making training programme...which provides jobs for many local women." (Education, 2004)
27	Writing ability	11	"Her writing and conceptual skills are further demonstrated by her merit award for being the top English student in her first year, and her writing of an award-winning play..." (Humanities, 2008)
28	Potential/ability to succeed	11	"Although he does not have a degree, he has successfully attended a Certificate course in IEM... and the Department are now convinced that he has the potential to complete the entire programme." (Science, 2001)

No	POSTGRADUATE READINESS ATTRIBUTE	FRE-QUE NCY*	EVIDENCE EXAMPLE/S
29	Contribution to class/programme	10	"Mr X ought not only to hold his own in this work, but also contribute well to the class as a whole." (Humanities, 1999) "I think too that she will be a most interesting and potentially valuable addition to the group given her background and experience." (Education, 2006)
30	Capable/competent	9	"I believe he is capable of producing a thesis in the next year to 18 months." (Science, 2005)
31	Professional qualification	8	"Institute of Administration and Commerce – Company Secretarial Diploma" (Commerce, 2002)
32	Equivalent to or better than formal admissions	8	"...his understanding of classical political theory is on par with, or perhaps even more fundamental and sophisticated than, that of an average honours graduate." (Humanities, 2006)
33	Support of workplace/organization	8	"The project proposal has been accepted by SAN Parks..." (Science, 2004)
34	Initiative	8	"She has already started a network of EcoClubs in rural areas." (Education, 2007)
35	Exceptional/stands out	7	"During her participation on the Rhodes/Gold Fields participatory certificate course, Ms X stood out as an excellent student (she often re-worked her assignments up to 8 times to make sure that they kept on improving! As a result, Ms X was by far the best student on this course." (Education, 2004)
36	Research methodology course	7	"He attended the departmental Research Methodology course and has been able to work through relevant literature successfully." (Education, 2000)
37	Recommended by referees	5	"...his application is strongly supported by his two referees, Mr X and Ms X." (Commerce, 2008)
38	Volunteer work	5	"She has extended her environmental education work to include voluntary work at the River of Life Assembly Church, where she is actively involved in various social development work and community mobilization activities focusing on human wellbeing and environmental care." (Education, 2005)
39	Part of an established network	5	"She is well networked in the field – both nationally and internationally..." (Education, 2006)
40	Appropriate supervisor	4	"Dr X is willing to act as his academic supervisor and I as his 'technical supervisor'." (Education, 2004)
41	RU can provide extra support/courses	4	"... Rhodes can provide additional training in any new skills which he may need, such as GIS and statistical analysis." (Science, 2006)
42	Funding available	3	"The project is a two-year NRF funded project in estuarine biology." (Science, 2004)
43	Innovative	3	"...he has shown clear evidence of innovative contributions, for example..." (Education, 2004)
44	Opened/ran own company	3	"Small business owner for some eight years." (Commerce, 2004)
45	Asset to Rhodes University	2	"He is a mature and motivated individual whom I believe will be an asset to Rhodes University." (Science, 2008)
46	Statistical ability	2	"She has an understanding of some of the statistical tests that she will use." (Science, 2008)
47	Proposed research project is applied	2	"Our programme marries academic skills with the experience of working journalists..." (Humanities, 1999)

No	POSTGRADUATE READINESS ATTRIBUTE	FRE-QUE NCY*	EVIDENCE EXAMPLE/S
48	Co-supervisor	2	"There will also be an on-site co-supervisor for additional day-to-day guidance." (Science, 2005)
49	Redress	2	"The project is a two-year NRF funded project in estuarine biology for which applications were invited from formerly disadvantaged candidates. Mr X was the successful applicant." (Science, 4 March 2004) "Mr X's lack of the appropriate qualification should be seen as indicative of the context of academic tuition and professional development in environmental education in the region." (Education, Sept 2000)
50	UG qualification from a respected institution	2	"He has a National Diploma in Mass Communications from Harare Polytechnic, which is a well-respected institution and one that does teach more than just the technical skills." (Humanities, 1999)
52	Self-awareness	1	"...more importantly, he is aware of what he knows and does not know, and also of his need to develop research skills and knowledge." (Education, 2007)
55	IT literate	1	"Mr X's written motivation is rich with evidence of one who ... is IT literate" (Education, 2005)
56	Willing to attend additional courses	1	"Further to this, Mr X has agreed to attend relevant undergraduate and postgraduate courses in organic chemistry..." (Science, 2003)
57	Has overcome personal obstacles	1	"...during these studies he contracted a serious viral infection. Despite this he persevered and completed these studies... He has shown evidence of being able to initiate new projects and see them through in spite of hardships and difficulties along the way." (Education, 2002)
58	Has broad life experience	1	"...and through travel and a broadening of his life experience, has made a clear personal commitment to environmental work." (Education, 2002)
59	National need	1	"These motivations need to be prefaced with some remarks on the status and current position of Technology Education on a national level... very little has been done to supply the country's schools with technology teachers." (Education, 2001)

**Frequency indicates the number of times each postgraduate readiness attribute was mentioned in the complete set of motivation letters and paragraphs.*

8.6 Evidence of Postgraduate Readiness Attributes

Many suggestions were provided during the course of the interviews on what kinds of graduate attributes would be desirable in order to successfully undertake a Master's degree; less forthcoming were ideas on how such attributes could be *assessed*. The final section of this Chapter explores the postgraduate readiness attributes identified during this study, and considers the elements involved in developing a Framework for RPL at the Master's level at Rhodes University.

As reported in Section 8.4, whilst there were many postgraduate attributes mentioned during the interviews, there were few concrete examples given. Suggestions on potential evidence sources or how to assess the various attributes were also scarce. The following ‘evidence’ comments were captured from the sixteen interview transcripts:

- Evidence could include: articles written, professional reports etc.
- Evidence of ability to complete Master’s level research task
- Evidence of what they have written and read
- Evidence of output of an intellectual nature/intellectual competence
- Evidence in their life story to demonstrate they can succeed
- Evidence of interest and effort, having done homework
- Evidence of getting up to speed again in their field
- Submit a viable research proposal - this demonstrates academic ability
- Portfolio of work

Although all the statements above refer to evidence, only three provide concrete examples of what the evidence could look like:

- i) Articles or professional reports written
- ii) Completion of a Master’s level research task
- iii) A viable research proposal

A portfolio of work, which could include any or all of the above, is the standard assessment tool used in RPL evaluations and will be discussed further in Chapter 9, Section 9.4.

In an attempt to identify examples of actual attribute evidence, all motivation records and interview transcripts were thereafter re-examined and the following table captures the kinds of evidence that were provided in the motivation letters and paragraphs:

TABLE 20: Potential Evidence: Examples by Postgraduate Attribute Category

POSTGRADUATE ATTRIBUTE CATEGORY	POTENTIAL EVIDENCE
Academic Ability or Potential	Recommended by referees /peers/superiors Personal knowledge of applicant Applicant’s motivation letter Prior writing evidence Specialized subject knowledge Writes or contributes to learning materials Agreed to attend additional courses Examples of reflexivity, critical thinking, reasoning and analysis skills
Personal Characteristics	Age Personal knowledge of applicant Examples of: motivation, initiative, energy, perseverance, passion,

POSTGRADUATE ATTRIBUTE CATEGORY	POTENTIAL EVIDENCE
	commitment, enthusiasm, ability to succeed, obstacles overcome, organizational skills
Academic Record or Results	Undergraduate qualification UG qualification from a respected institution Other qualifications or courses Professional qualification Postgraduate or graduate qualification Completion of a set academic writing/analysis task Marks achieved for academic work
Field/Professional/Work Experience	Employment Trains or teaches others Examiner National experience and exposure International experience and exposure Part of an established network Workshop participation Conference/workshop/expo organiser Opened/ran own company Professional membership Board / Council/Panel membership Works in a higher education institution
Research Experience or Potential	Journal publications Articles Books Completion of a set research task Research Proposal Attended/presented at conferences Prior qualification/s included research component Attended research methodology course Research Associate Member of or contact with a research team or project Assist others with research project Examples of research skills eg survey design, document analysis, focus group interviews, feasibility studies, interviews Access to research materials or subjects Evidence of interest in research field Statistical ability IT literacy
Leadership or Multiplier Potential	Social change/community upliftment involvement Volunteerism Senior Position Leadership or coordinator roles Represents others Other individuals/organizations/areas/countries will benefit
Reputation or Contribution to Field	Awards Achievements Publications Peer reviews
Other	Support of workplace/organization

POSTGRADUATE ATTRIBUTE CATEGORY	POTENTIAL EVIDENCE
	Appropriate supervisor RU can provide extra support/courses Funding available Co-supervisor

8.7 Inconsistencies, Anomalies and Curiosities

One of the most interesting aspects of this part of the study was encountering inconsistencies and anomalies in the documentary analysis of Rhodes University's Senate and Faculty minutes. One would expect institutional rules to be consistently applied across Faculties as well as in respect of individual students but the following examples suggest this is not always the case.

8.7.1 Perhaps the most fascinating was a Science Faculty motivation which cited repeated failures and low marks achieved by the candidate:

[H]e failed to obtain the degree as he was unable to complete Chemistry 1, where in 4 attempts his marks ranged between 19% and 25%... After obtaining 81% for Zoology III, he had extensive work experience (ten years) in the field of study as an aquarium biologist and aquaculturist, and has produced a very well researched MSc proposal."
 (Science Faculty minutes, 9 May 2002)

This seems to imply that a student's inability to succeed in one particular area should not disqualify potential Master's candidates.

8.7.2 At the other extreme, a candidate that already had a *doctoral* degree was put forward as an AEG Master's admission. (Education Faculty minutes, 28 July 2004.3.11). This seems to imply that succeeding at a doctoral level in one field does not automatically mean that a student would be competent to undertake Master's level study in a different field.

8.7.3 Several examples were found of students being identified as AEG admissions when in fact, they met or exceeded the formal admission requirements. For instance, one student who had a 4 year BSc (Montreal), a 3 year BA (Western Ontario) and a Graduate Diploma in Education (Murdoch) was included as an AEG candidate (Education Faculty minutes, 23 Sept 2005).

8.7.4 Several instances were recorded of students being proposed for AEG admission to *Honours or PhD level*, even though AEG admission at RU is supposedly reserved for *Master's level* admission only (RU 2012b: 5, see also Chapter 3 Section 3.6):

Application for admission as a BSc Honours candidate in Botany... I know that it is not usual to accept students without degrees into Honours, but I believe that Mr X would make a worthy exception.

(Science Faculty minutes, 30 Sept 2004)

The Board NOTED that the Dean, acting on behalf of Faculty, RECOMMENDED for APPROVAL the following applications for admission as *ad eundem gradum* candidates to *doctoral* studies in 2004

(Science Faculty minutes, 6 May 2004 – italics added)

8.7.5 The application of the term *ad eundem gradum* in Faculty minutes was confusing: in some cases, students who already HAD an Honours degree but from another institution were “admitted to the status of Bachelor of X (Honours)” as in the following example:

The Board APPROVED the application for admission to master’s degree studies in 2000 from the following candidate:

Ms X (student number) BA(Hons)(University of Washington)

(a) Application for admission as a MA candidate in the Department of X (full-time, in attendance)

(b) Field of Research/Thesis Title: XXXXXX

(c) Appointment of Dr X as supervisor

(d) *Admission to the status of Bachelor of Arts (Honours)* [italics added]

(e) Submission of a research proposal by the Humanities Higher Degrees Committee within four months of the commencement of the year 2000, or sooner.

(Humanities, 24 May 1999 - italics added)

Whilst in other cases, students were admitted to the status of Bachelor of X (Honours) without having obtained an Honours degree elsewhere. In most cases however, the term “Admission to the status of Bachelor of X (Honours)” was not mentioned in the Minutes at all.

8.7.6 Many AEG candidates already had postgraduate diplomas, and one motivation even claimed that a postgraduate diploma is equivalent to a Master’s degree:

Mr X has a Masters equivalent postgraduate diploma in Forestry Management from the Institute of Forest Management (2002), with a first class pass.

(Science Faculty minutes, 6 May 2004)

This is particularly interesting as, according to the current RPL practices at RU, a four-year degree *is* recognised as equivalent to an Honours degree, whereas a postgraduate diploma *is not* recognised as equivalent to an Honours degree. According to the country’s National Qualifications Framework however, a four-year Bachelor’s degree, a Bachelor Honours degree and a Postgraduate Diploma are ALL considered to be at the same level, level 8. (RSA, 2007)

8.8 Discussion and Synthesis of the Findings

As I proceeded with the analysis for this chapter, it became clear that an entire thesis could have been undertaken on postgraduate attributes specifically, and an entire chapter could have been devoted to the detailed and thorough motivation letters submitted for the Environmental Education Programme alone. For the purposes of this study however, the resulting analysis can only be relatively brief albeit illuminating.

A wide range of postgraduate attributes were captured from the motivation records as well as the interviews, resulting in the identification of eight main categories into which the attributes could be grouped. Possible evidentiary sources were also identified. The two dominant attribute categories proved to be “academic ability or potential”, and “personal characteristics”. These are also the two categories which appeared to be most difficult to substantiate with concrete evidence. Most of the evidence statements in these two categories were based on the academics’ personal knowledge of the candidates, in other words on their subjective judgement – or professional experience and wisdom - of desirable attributes such as “motivation” or “critical thinking skills”.

A further analysis of the motivation records revealed that of the 84 records, 55 (66%) specifically mentioned personal knowledge of the candidate and 28 (33%) implied personal knowledge but did not specifically cite it. There was only one instance where the motivator stated that they did not know the candidate personally. Personal knowledge of the candidate then, clearly plays a major role in motivating for the admission of Master’s candidates who do not possess the required qualifications. The Chair of the Environmental Education Programme (the most active area for AEG admissions in the University) reflected on the personal knowledge aspect thus: “I am not sure how to articulate this, but we ‘get to know’ the good leaders, high achievers etc through these programmes and often encourage them to apply for the M Ed programme...” (personal email correspondence, 23 August 2013).

Interestingly, while “leadership or multiplier potential” was the fifth most frequently mentioned attribute out of 59 in the motivation records and “contribution to the field” was the twelfth most frequently mentioned, these two attributes were mentioned as desirable only once each during the *interviews* with academics. In effect, the attributes most highly valued by academics in the motivation records were differently weighted in the attribute ‘ranking’ which emerged during the interviews. In other words, what the academics were *saying* was notably different to what they were *doing* in terms of identifying desirable postgraduate attributes. This could be due to the fact that leadership or multiplier potential is highly valued in the Environmental Education programme in particular, and the proportion of motivation

records captured for the Education Faculty was far greater (54% of the total number of motivation records) than the proportion of Education Faculty academics interviewed (25% of the total number of academics interviewed).

In conclusion, Rhodes University has an overarching RPL policy and established practices regarding the recognition of prior learning at the Master's level via the AEG rule. There is a great deal of common ground regarding the postgraduate attributes used - implicitly and explicitly - to assess potential master's students and it seems the current case-by-case system is successful; the evidence can be found in Chapter 6, where it is shown that AEG students at Rhodes University are doing at least as well as formal admissions in terms of success rates. It is also clear that some departments are more active and conscientious in this area but at the same time, there is evidence that the detail and quality of motivation letters has improved across the board over the ten year period under review. However, there is currently no institutional strategy, framework or criteria to guide the implementation of this form of admission and this is perhaps the reason for the low numbers of RPL admissions and the various inconsistencies and anomalies picked up during the research.

CHAPTER NINE: CONCLUSIONS

In many corners of higher education, the idea that meaningful learning can happen everywhere remains downright radical. To accept the legitimacy of experiential learning is to expand the definition not only of college credit, but of college. And not everyone wants to do that. (Hoover, 2010)

9.1 Introduction

The final chapter brings together the findings in relation to the original research questions, with reference to the expectations recorded at the beginning of the study. The main themes of the study are briefly discussed and a grounded theory on access to Master's level study at Rhodes University is presented. Areas for further study are noted and in conclusion, a possible outline for a postgraduate admissions framework is proposed.

9.2 Summary of the Findings

In accordance with a grounded theory approach, at the commencement of this study I explicated my assumptions and expectations of the research in relation to both alternative access to Master's level studies, and the concept of gradueness (see Chapter 5, Section 5.4.2 for details of the initial expectations). I recorded what I thought I knew or might find in order that I might remain aware of any preconceptions as I progressed. The expectations provide a useful structure for summarising the findings in relation to the primary research question which was:

What are the generic (non-certificated) attributes which Rhodes University academics expect graduates to possess in order to undertake Master's degree study?

9.2.1 Access to Master's Degree Studies

My first assumption, that very little research had been undertaken or published about access to Master's level studies in general, and RPL at the postgraduate level specifically, proved to be accurate. As discussed in Chapter 3, the concept of RPL is relatively well-defined at the undergraduate level in South Africa, and national and institutional policy in this area is indeed mostly directed towards undergraduate access. However, as anticipated, the conceptualisation and implementation of RPL at the postgraduate level was informal and left largely to the discretion of individual institutions. At the time of the study, no national or institutional framework, or guidelines for RPL at the postgraduate level, was available.

The Latin term 'Ad Eundem Gradem' is seldom used these days in higher education institutions internationally or for that matter, in South Africa. Rhodes University seems to be one of the few institutions still using the term although it is increasingly used interchangeably with the more modern term Recognition of Prior Learning. In addition, the AEG rule was not uniformly applied at Rhodes University in the ten year period under review, with several cases identified of AEG admissions not being processed via Senate, and some admissions being recorded as AEG when according to the Institution's AEG rule, the candidates already met the requirements for regular admission. As predicted, access to Master's level study via AEG was not widely known or publicised at RU – either within or without the University. As discussed in Chapter 7, inconsistencies between policy and implementation in terms of the University's mission and goals (regarding widening access and increasing postgraduate numbers) were evident - with symbolic support given for RPL in institutional documentation, but little active encouragement provided in practice. Perhaps for this reason, the number of students admitted to Master's studies at RU via the AEG rule for the years 1999-2008 was small – an average of just 7% per annum.

My assumption that the national motivation for recognizing prior learning was social or for 'the public good' (in the sense of being for the greater benefit of society) rather than having a political agenda (in the sense of being a direct strategy for addressing inequities of the past) was not supported in the early research findings. In the first formal South African national policy on RPL in higher education published in 2002, it was clearly stated that "Recognition of Prior Learning in South Africa has, unlike similar initiatives in other countries, a very specific agenda. RPL is meant to support transformation of the education and training system of the country." (SAQA, 2002: 11) In addition, the only mention of RPL in the national Higher Education Qualifications Framework (RSA, 2007: 6) is that "The recognition of prior learning should enable potential students, including those who had suffered disadvantage in the past to be admitted to particular higher education programmes depending on their assessed knowledge and skills." However, the national RPL policy was updated in 2013 (SAQA, 2013) and the revised approach, while still aiming to accelerate redress, appears to be more focused on the public good aspect, with the phrase 'RPL in South Africa has a specific transformation agenda' not appearing in the 2013 RPL policy.

My sense that many academics at RU would have strong reservations about recognizing prior learning, would not welcome an RPL framework, and may display 'academic arrogance' towards those who did not have formal qualifications was unfounded to a large extent. As shown in the report on interviews with academics and senior administrators at the University (Chapter 7), 100% of the respondents

were supportive of the concept of RPL. There was, however, a distinct resistance to the prospect of externally imposed regulations, with the majority of interviewees feeling the current case-by-case evaluation process was appropriate. The interviews did confirm, however, that little attention or thought had been given to the concept of RPL by most RU academics, and that the issue was not a priority on the institutional or academic agenda.

The overall impression interviewees had of RPL candidates was favourable and many positive comments were made about their performance, contribution and attributes. Where negative points were made, the interviewees were usually quick to add that these comments would probably apply to all Master's students, not just RPL students. While in some regards RPL students were treated differently, it was emphasized that this would only be in terms of access procedures and support, not in terms of exit standards. However, despite interviewees' affirmative feelings and experiences, RPL students were generally viewed as being deficient, a higher risk to institutional and individual supervisor's reputations, and needing more supervision and support than regular admissions.

In contrast to this institutional perception of RPL students being inferior, the statistical findings (Chapter 6) showed that in the final analysis, there was no significant difference in the performance of those students admitted without the formal pre-requisite qualifications, except in terms of dropout rates where AEG students had a slightly higher dropout rate than those students who had a four-year undergraduate or honours degree. In addition, full-thesis AEG students were *more likely* to obtain a distinction and *less likely* to linger in the system, and it therefore appears from the data analysis that full-thesis AEG students perform better than coursework-and-thesis students and indeed, better than formally enrolled students as well in terms of the likelihood of obtaining a distinction.

While I anticipated that the humanities would admit more students on an RPL basis than the natural sciences, this proved not to be the case. The proportion of RPL admissions in the natural sciences over the period 1999-2008 was 6% compared to 5% in the humanities. The Education Faculty enrolled the highest proportion of RPL students during this time (15% of all Education admissions were AEG admissions, and 33% of the total number of AEG admissions were in the Education Faculty) which could be a result of this Faculty being the most proactive in its outreach efforts and thorough in its RPL evaluation procedures.

9.2.2 Graduateness and Postgraduate Readiness

Turning now to the concept of graduateness, I assumed that the notion of 'graduateness' - the attributes university graduates are expected to possess as a result of their studies – would be becoming increasingly relevant nationally and internationally as HE resources dwindle and public accountability rises. The research found this to be the case, with various national education systems as well as individual higher education institutions formally defining the attributes they would expect their graduates to possess. However, it seems that there is no universally accepted definition of graduateness, nor is there a uniform list of generic graduate attributes. Furthermore, in all instances examined, the idea and definition of graduateness was used in relation to being 'ready for the world of work' rather than to capture the essence of being appropriately prepared for postgraduate study. For this reason, it became necessary to develop a term which reflected the attributes expected of students who are suitably prepared for postgraduate study and the term I settled upon was 'postgraduate readiness'. This will be discussed further in Section 9.4.

9.2.3 Institutional Culture and Postgraduate Readiness

This study examined Rhodes University's institutional culture from the perspective of its dominant value systems, as reflected in the interviews with academics and senior executives. However, the impact of institutional culture in the academic sense on *students* themselves in relation to readiness for postgraduate study, is surely also an important factor although it was not explicitly mentioned as a consideration during the interviews or in the motivation records. A personal correspondence from a retired Pro-Vice-Chancellor of RU explains his opinion as follows:

My personal view is that a graduate is someone who has been trained to think critically, usually within the context of a specific discipline in a university environment. The 'learning' may be the same for a full-time or distance student but the nature of the experience will be different. An RPL candidate is admitted not just to gain a qualification but to benefit from the university environment in which to learn, engage with other scholars and to criticise and be criticised.
(Smout, 2013)

This perspective sees institutional culture as the positive effect the experience of being in a particular university environment or academic discipline has on a student's readiness for postgraduate study. However, according to a current Dean at RU, "Having 'typical or formal knowledge' doesn't necessarily make you a better candidate for a Master's degree than working in a lab or living in the bush." (Dean of Science, 2010) My own sense is that critical thinking skills are not exclusive to university graduates or necessarily a result of 'training', although being in an

academic environment would clearly be advantageous in terms of developing such skills. While an important consideration, the impact of institutional culture on students (ie the transformational effect on the student of studying in a particular higher education institution) was not explored in depth with the interviewees but would be a valuable area for future investigation.

9.2.4 Access and Postgraduate Readiness at Rhodes University: A Grounded Theory

I assumed there would be significant institutional discussion and formal documentation available which captured the assumptions, expectations and criteria for assessing postgraduate RPL admissions and postgraduate readiness at Rhodes University. This was not the case. Instead, I found an ad-hoc alternative admissions system based on the AEG rule, inherited from a centuries-old English tradition and applied as a form of recognition of prior learning (see Chapter 3). This alternative access route, whilst not actively encouraged by the University, appears to be successful in that the students admitted in this manner are generally as successful as those admitted via the formal access route. However, in considering why the alternative admission option is not widely promoted and the number of alternative admissions remains small - despite an oft-stated institutional desire to widen access and increase the number of postgraduate students - I encountered a key aspect of the University's institutional culture which is resistant to change and averse to risk.

Resistance emerged as a dominant theme during the interviews: resistance to risk, rules, bureaucracy and policing as well as to change, difference, accountability and extra effort. Whilst interviewees were committed to academic excellence and integrity, and were open to guidelines being provided regarding RPL at the Master's level, there was a strong call to retain the subjective judgment, flexibility and 'personal touch' which characterised the University's *de facto* approach to postgraduate RPL.

This resistance was expressed as satisfaction with the status quo, and the lack of active implementation of both the RPL policy and the institutional goals of widening access and increasing the number of postgraduate students, was justified by most respondents as being a result of the institution already having 'enough' Master's students; students who met the requirements for formal access.

The conclusion drawn from the disjuncture between the quantitative data (which showed that RPL students are as successful as formal admissions) and the reluctance to advertise the AEG access route or actively implement the University's RPL policy, is that the overriding institutional culture (which is characterised by resistance to change and perceived risk) might be an obstacle to the University achieving its stated

strategic goals and has resulted in the number of RPL admissions over the ten year period under review being very small as well as being restricted to those ‘in the know’, in other words students who are personally known to Rhodes University academics. *The grounded theory which has emerged from this study is therefore, that the University’s institutional culture (which is characterised by resistance to change and perceived risk) has had a ‘handbrake’ impact on its approach to RPL at the postgraduate level and is the likely reason for the relatively low numbers of RPL admissions over the ten year study period.*

9.3 A Return to the Beginning

It is appropriate at this point to briefly reconsider the questions which initially sparked the desire to undertake research into RPL at the postgraduate level:

Why does *anyone* require an undergraduate degree in order to pursue higher level studies?

Several instances were encountered during the course of the study of students who had successfully completed Master’s degrees without any undergraduate qualification, which seems to imply that an undergraduate degree is not a prerequisite. In fact, in a recent case, a student who was admitted to Master of Science studies without any formal post-school qualification, graduated in minimum time and, moreover, gained a distinction (RU Science Faculty Minutes, 2006; RU graduation records, 2008). However, these cases are likely to be exceptions to the rule and although the lack of a formal academic qualification may not be an insurmountable barrier to postgraduate study, some form of academic experience undoubtedly remains desirable before embarking on high level research.

How does one measure or assess a ‘keen intellect’ and a ‘sound knowledge of the field’?

Academic skills such as a ‘keen intellect’ or ‘critical reasoning abilities’ are challenging to evaluate but appear to be best assessed by an experienced, qualified professional having personal knowledge of the applicant – either in the form of an interview or previous encounter with the student in an academic environment. Practical experience such as a ‘sound knowledge of the field’ or ‘research competence’ are easier to assess, as their evaluation can be based on concrete evidence of past performance and achievements.

Could life-, work- and/or practical-experience be as, or possibly even more, valuable as preparation for postgraduate study than a formal undergraduate qualification?

It is difficult to provide a generalised answer to this question. The findings suggest that life-, work- and/or practical experience is indeed valuable preparation for postgraduate study although academic skills are also essential pre-requisites. In the final analysis, applications should be considered on a case-by-case basis albeit within an RPL framework which provides explicit criteria and evidence-based assessment procedures.

Is it possible that students admitted on the basis of recognition of prior learning are as, or perhaps even more, likely to succeed than those entering postgraduate studies via the formal route?

Students admitted to postgraduate study on the basis of RPL do not appear to be MORE likely to succeed than those entering via the formal route. However, given that there was no significant statistical difference in the completion and distinction rates between the two groups, RPL admissions appear to be AS likely to succeed as formally qualified students.

9.4 Towards a Framework for Postgraduate Access

At the start of this research journey, I assumed that there would be general support from interviewees for the development of a conceptual and procedural framework for assessing 'postgraduateness' – or, as the term later evolved, 'postgraduate readiness' at Rhodes University. This was indeed supported by the findings, albeit with the proviso from respondents that case-by-case flexibility and the personal judgement of experienced professionals should be retained as far as possible.

While the University has an overarching RPL policy and established practices regarding the recognition of prior learning at the Master's level via the AEG rule, and although there is a great deal of common ground regarding the postgraduate attributes used to assess potential Master's students at Rhodes, no institutional framework or formal criteria to guide the implementation of this form of admission currently exists. This situation is well illustrated in a Head of Department's motivation for admission of an AEG candidate in the Humanities Faculty in 2006:

Rhodes University currently has no formal set of criteria by which to judge or interpret the admittedly complicated notion of prior learning on the basis of which one would like to admit exceptional, mature students like [student's name]. This naturally means that until such criteria have been articulated (as I believe Rhodes is now in the process of doing) we have to make what effectively amounts to *ad hoc* decisions simply on the strength of the application in question. In this case, the sole object of such a decision is to satisfy ourselves that his knowledge is comparable to that of an average honours student.

(Rhodes University, Board of the Faculty of Humanities, 2006.1.12)

This study has shown that there is no uniform international or national ‘list of postgraduate readiness attributes’ which applicants for Master’s level study are required to demonstrate and even if there were, it is dubious as to whether there would (or could) be a common or prescribed method for how to evaluate and record such attributes.

Ultimately however, and given the University’s strategic goal to increase the quantity, quality and equity profile of postgraduate students (see Chapter 2, Section 2.4.4), it would seem logical that appropriate strategies are developed by the University in order to facilitate the achievement of its aims. An important step in such a strategy would be to develop a framework and criteria for admission to postgraduate study.

Before proceeding to develop a list of criteria for assessing postgraduate RPL applications, the institution would need to consider certain pertinent issues such as whether or not it wishes to have a generic set of rules/guidelines for alternative entry, or would it be best to leave it entirely to the judgment of the academics concerned? Would one set of guidelines work across different Faculties and disciplines? Would the requirements for entry to a Master’s degree in Mathematics be the same as a Master’s in Philosophy for example?

While the detailed content would need to be provided by the institution itself, I propose the following outline and suggest elements which should be taken into consideration in developing a Postgraduate Access Framework:

FIGURE 4: Postgraduate Access Framework Outline

POSTGRADUATE ACCESSS FRAMEWORK	
1. SCOPE	<p>This section should indicate the areas and levels covered by the Framework, and should locate the Framework within, at the least, the institutional and national context. Mention could also be made of the local as well as international context regarding postgraduate admissions.</p> <p>The qualification levels involved should be clear: Will the Framework apply to Master’s degrees only and if so, both coursework-and-thesis and full-thesis Master’s? Or would it</p>

apply to all postgraduate qualifications including postgraduate diplomas and doctorates? Are senior doctorates included?

How the University's approach to postgraduate access would be publicised and also shared with potential students could also be included under this heading.

2. DEFINITIONS

The University's interpretation of both familiar and unfamiliar terms should be provided. Some examples are: Recognition of Prior Learning, disadvantaged student, *ad eundem gradum*, graduateness, scholarship etc.

A brief description of each degree level, and the expected outcomes for each qualification included in the Framework, should also be provided.

3. INSTITUTIONAL POLICIES AND STRATEGIC GOALS

The relationship of the Framework to any relevant existing University policies and practices should be explained in detail. In the case of Rhodes University, this would include the Admissions Policy, RPL Policy, Equity Policy, Postgraduate Supervision Policy, Monitoring and Assessment of Student Learning Policy, the AEG rule, and the Higher Degrees Guide. In addition, the specific institutional goals the Framework is intended to facilitate and achieve should be explicated.

4. GRADUATENESS AND POSTGRADUATE READINESS

The University's understanding and approach to the concept of graduateness as well as postgraduate readiness should be presented. The criteria used by the University to assess the suitability of potential postgraduate students should be provided and briefly discussed. (See Chapter 8, Section 8.4 as well as Table 19 for a list of potential categories and attributes arising out of this study.) Students should be made aware that additional courses or assignments may be necessary in order to address gaps in foundational knowledge, if appropriate.

5. STUDENT MOTIVATION

A covering letter from applicants motivating why they feel suitably qualified or prepared to undertake the chosen qualification and explaining how both they and academia might benefit, should be required of all applicants, formal and RPL. A brief statement of their research interests could also be requested.

6. EVIDENCE

Categories and examples of potential evidence sources, and details of how evidence could be presented, should be supplied. Whereas formal admissions require evidence of prior qualifications and academic achievements, many RPL arrangements require students to provide a *portfolio of evidence* which supports their suitability for further study. The institution may wish to require formally qualified students to also provide a motivation and additional information on their non-academic achievements. (See Chapter 8, Table 20 for a list of potential evidence sources arising out of this study.) Many departments and institutions have also developed assessment tests or assignments (such as providing an

academic article and requiring students to analyse and discuss the text) for potential students to complete before admissions decisions are made. Such 'critical thinking' exercises could provide valuable evidence of academic skills or potential. The preparation of a formal research proposal or a brief outline of the proposed research area might also be included as a requirement.

7. REFEREES

Whether or not referees will be required in support of the student's application should be clarified, and it should be indicated whether confidential reports or open testimonials will be required. If referees are required, guidance should be provided as to what the referees would be required to comment on, for example a reference written to a formula or commenting on the length of service in a particular job would not be helpful.

8. ADMISSIONS PROCEDURES

Practical steps and mechanisms for applying for postgraduate admission should be specified – according to whether the student is applying via formal admission, or RPL. Relevant contact details, time frames and an explanation of the decision-making process at the University should also be supplied.

9. SUPPORT

Here the institution should indicate the kinds and extent of support services available for postgraduate students, both formal and RPL admissions. Examples include training in research skills, including guidance on research design and methodology. Any form of assistance available in language, writing and numeracy skills should be outlined. Additional support in non-academic areas such as housing, networking, and part-time employment opportunities might also be mentioned.

10. FORMS

Relevant information and application forms (or links to their electronic access) should be provided.

9.5 Areas for Further Exploration

This study confirmed the late South African higher education researcher Dr Prem Singh's observation that higher education institutions seldom critically analyse or research their own practices from an academic perspective. This research project was undertaken in the spirit of addressing this incongruity. Many issues were raised during the course of the study to which time constraints did not permit me to do justice. Several areas warranting further investigation are noted in the relevant chapters throughout the study in the hopes that other researchers will continue to explore RPL at the postgraduate level. An area worthy of immediate further

investigation however, is how the dropout rates at Master's level at Rhodes University (19% overall, and 28% for AEG admissions during the period 1999-2009) compare to national and international norms, what factors influence dropouts, and whether the rates could be reduced by providing additional support to all Master's students, regardless of their admission status.

9.6 Concluding Remarks

A few months into the study, I realised that I had in fact taken on two distinct research projects: Access to Master's level study, and Postgraduate Readiness. While it was essential to understand the concept and context of postgraduate access in order to develop recommendations on postgraduate readiness, a separate thesis could have been written on each area. I sincerely hope that other researchers will continue to explore the field of access to postgraduate studies and will continue to interrogate assumptions made about the academic project and the people who participate in it. A quote from an institutional executive surely provides sufficient motivation for a continued interest in this area:

Appropriately qualified does not mean best qualified [for the purposes of access and success].

In conclusion, the last word belongs to an optimistic Head of Department at Rhodes University:

There could be nothing finer than people getting the opportunity and succeeding. Universities have an obligation to provide education to those with talent and ability who, for whatever reason, could not get a degree. We have to be sensitive and open-minded and give people a chance. Some won't make it but those who deserve it will prevail and succeed.

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Rhodes University

Vision & Mission Statement

(Approved by Council on 29 June 2000)

Vision

Rhodes University's vision is to be an outstanding internationally respected academic institution which proudly affirms its African identity and which is committed to democratic ideals, academic freedom, rigorous scholarship, sound moral values and social responsibility.

Mission

In pursuit of its vision the University will strive to produce outstanding internationally accredited graduates who are innovative, analytical, articulate, balanced and adaptable, with a life-long love of learning; and to strive, through teaching, research and community service, to contribute to the advancement of international scholarship and the development of the Eastern Cape and Southern Africa.

Accordingly, the University undertakes

- to develop shared values that embrace basic human and civil rights;
- to acknowledge and be sensitive to the problems created by the legacy of apartheid, to reject all forms of unfair discrimination and to ensure that appropriate corrective measures are employed to redress past imbalances;
- to create a research-based teaching and learning environment that will encourage students to reach their full potential, that is supportive of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and that will produce critical, capable and skilled graduates who can adapt to changing environments;
- to promote excellence and innovation in teaching and learning by providing staff and students with access to relevant academic development programmes;
- to provide an attractive, safe and well-equipped environment that is conducive to good scholarship and collegiality;

- to provide a safe and nurturing student support system as well as a diverse array of residential, sporting, cultural and leadership opportunities that will foster the all-round development of our students, the university and the region as a whole;
- to attract and retain staff of the highest calibre and to provide development programmes for staff at all levels;
- to promote excellence in research and other creative endeavours;
- to play an active role in promoting inter-disciplinary and inter-institutional collaboration within the Eastern Cape Province;
- where appropriate, to assist in the development of the Eastern Cape Province by making available the university's expertise, resources and facilities;
- to play a leading role in establishing a culture of environmental concern by actively pursuing a policy of environmental best practice;
- to strive for excellence and to promote quality assurance in all its activities.

RHODES UNIVERSITY

POLICY ON THE RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING (RPL)

1. POLICY PARTICULARS

DATE OF APPROVAL BY RELEVANT COMMITTEE STRUCTURE:

[Also provide name of Committee e.g. Institutional Forum, Quality Assurance Committee]

DATE OF APPROVAL BY SENATE: 9 March 2007

DATE OF APPROVAL BY COUNCIL: 15 March 2007

COMMENCEMENT

DATE: [Date Policy first implemented]

REVISION HISTORY: [Date of first approval by Senate/Council and number of subsequent revisions]

REVIEW DATE: Every three years

POLICY LEVEL: All academic staff, administrative staff, students and prospective students

RESPONSIBILITY

- IMPLEMENTATION & MONITORING: Registrar
- REVIEW AND REVISION: Teaching and Learning Committee

REPORTING STRUCTURE: Relevant HODs, Deans, Registrar, Senate → Council

2. POLICY STATEMENT

2.1 POLICY DECLARATION:

The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) furthers the democratic, human rights and transformative goals of the University's vision and mission and is also a requirement in terms of national legislation and policy. Mindful of the complexities involved, the University commits itself to the careful and responsible use of RPL to improve access to higher education in accordance with quality assurance objectives.

2.2 POLICY OBJECTIVES:

This policy aims to ensure that:

2.2.1 RPL is used, wherever appropriate, as an alternative means of admission to undergraduate programmes, for credit towards qualifications or courses, and for postgraduate admission on an advanced standing, or *ad eundem gradum*, basis.

2.2.2 RPL is implemented as an integral part of mainstream assessment and evaluative policies and procedures.

2.2.3 Any extension of the use of RPL beyond the areas of current practice is undertaken with sufficient planning and resources by suitably qualified staff to ensure credibility, effectiveness and sustainability.

2.2.4 RPL processes and assessment procedures are transparent and valid.

2.2.5 Research into RPL is encouraged and supported.

2.3 DEFINITION:

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) refers to the practice of awarding credit or granting educational access to students on the basis of prior learning acquired through a variety of formal, non-formal and informal means, including life and work experience. In South Africa the pursuit of a transformative agenda is of critical importance and RPL is seen as a necessary component in attaining an equitable educational system which will not only benefit young learners but also redress inequalities by providing meaningful opportunities to those denied educational access in the past.

3. POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

3.1 THE ACTIONS AND PROCESSES BY WHICH THE OBJECTIVES OF THE POLICY WILL BE ACHIEVED:

3.1.1 Introduction

The implementation of RPL is particularly complex in the field of higher education and relates to highly contested debates about the nature of knowledge and learning, pedagogy, assessment, institutional autonomy and the character of institutions of higher learning and the education they provide.

In the National Standards Body's Regulations issued in 1998 in terms of the SAQA Act 58 of 1995, RPL is defined in terms of learning outcomes, with an emphasis on credit rather than further access:

Recognition of prior learning means the comparison of the previous learning and experience of a learner howsoever obtained against the learning outcomes required for a specified qualification, and the acceptance for purposes of qualification of that which meets the requirements.

The legislature on matriculation exemption as a requirement for university entrance and prerequisite for the award of degrees is a factor which currently limits and complicates the admission and throughput of RPL-qualified candidates.

The SAQA policy, "The Recognition of Prior Learning in the context of the South African NQF" (2002), proposes the following "strategic framework" for the implementation of RPL:

1. Audit of current practice
2. The development of detailed sector-specific plans
3. Capacity building of resources and staff
4. The design and moderation of appropriate assessment instruments and tools
5. Quality management systems and procedures
6. The establishment of a research base

In line with the above framework, implementation of an RPL policy at Rhodes needs to begin with the examination and documentation of the ways in which RPL is already practised, along with investigation into possibilities for the extension of RPL in the future.

3.1.2 Current practice

RPL is currently practised in three different ways within the University:

- An admissions test is used as a means of alternative admission into undergraduate programmes for disadvantaged learners lacking matriculation endorsement.

- Applicants lacking the necessary formal qualification (an Honours degree) may be admitted by Senate, on the recommendation of Heads of Departments, Deans and Faculties, to Master's degree study as *ad eundem gradum* candidates.
- Limited use is made of RPL to award credits towards certain qualifications.

Regarding the currently limited use of RPL for credit at Rhodes, it is unlikely that there will be large numbers of potential RPL adult applicants in the short term. The entering cohort of undergraduates comprises almost entirely recent school-leavers.

3.1.3 Future implementation of RPL in learning programmes

In order to satisfy auditing and quality assurance requirements and build up a research base relating to the use of RPL at Rhodes, it is important that current practices be recorded, documented and monitored. Accordingly,

3.1.3.1 The Registrar's Division will compile an "evidence portfolio" of Senate's reasons for granting students *ad eundem gradum* admission status to Master's degrees in order to guide departments. Senate will assess applications on the evidence provided by candidates and departments in each case, relying on the professional and academic judgment of Heads of Department, Deans, Faculty Boards and members of Senate rather than on prescriptive criteria.

3.1.3.2 Those Faculties which are currently using RPL to award credit will document the principles and procedures they apply in using RPL in their programmes for approval by the Academic Planning and Staffing Committee and Senate. Once approved, these will be published on the Rhodes University Intranet.

Departments or Faculties which seek in future to introduce RPL will be required to obtain the approval of Senate on recommendation from the Academic Planning and Staffing Committee. Requests for approval should conform to the following requirements:

3.1.3.3 Appropriate assessment instruments should be specified.

3.1.3.4 The procedures by which applicants apply for RPL should be clearly indicated and, once approved, published.

3.1.3.5 Credit granted on the basis of RPL should not exceed 50% of the credits required for the qualification.

3.1.3.6 Recognition of prior learning for purposes of access will focus on a candidate's capacity to succeed whereas RPL for credit will focus on

the equivalence of the prior learning to the Rhodes credits being sought.

3.2 REVIEW PROCEDURE:

- 3.2.1** The Teaching and Learning Committee shall review the policy every three years, by June of the relevant year.
- 3.2.2** Any proposed changes to the policy would need to be referred by the Teaching and Learning Committee to the Faculty Boards for comment and then to Senate and Council for approval.
- 3.2.3** As and when the policy is revised the examinations manual and the Higher Degrees Guide will be updated.

***SOUTH AFRICAN
HIGHER EDUCATION QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK***

QUALIFICATIONS, LEVELS AND MINIMUM CREDITS

<i>HEQF/ NQF Level</i>	<i>Minimum Credits per Qualification</i>	<i>Qualification Type</i>
10	360	Doctoral Degree
9	180	Master's Degree
8	120 120	Honours Degree Postgraduate Diploma
7	480 360 120	Professional Bachelor's Degree Bachelor's Degree Advanced Diploma
6	360 120	Diploma Advanced Certificate
5	120	Higher Certificate

*Source: South African Higher Education Qualifications Framework,
Government Gazette Vol 508 No 30353, 5 October 2007*

APPENDIX 4

SOUTH AFRICAN NQF (HEQF) Level Descriptors for levels 7, 8 and 9		
LEVEL 7	LEVEL 8	LEVEL 9
<p>a. <i>Scope of knowledge</i>, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate: integrated knowledge of the central areas of one or more fields, disciplines or practices, including an understanding of and an ability to apply and evaluate the key terms, concepts, facts, principles, rules and theories of that field, discipline or practice; and detailed knowledge of an area or areas of specialisation and how that knowledge relates to other fields, disciplines or practices</p> <p>b. <i>Knowledge literacy</i>, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an understanding of knowledge as contested and an ability to evaluate types of knowledge and explanations typical within the area of study or practice</p> <p>c. <i>Method and procedure</i>, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate: an understanding of a range of methods of enquiry in a field, discipline or practice, and their suitability to specific investigations; and an ability to select and apply a range of methods to resolve problems or introduce change within a practice</p>	<p>a. <i>Scope of knowledge</i>, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate: knowledge of and engagement in an area at the forefront of a field, discipline or practice; an understanding of the theories, research methodologies, methods and techniques relevant to the field, discipline or practice; and an understanding of how to apply such knowledge in a particular context</p> <p>b. <i>Knowledge literacy</i>, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an ability to interrogate multiple sources of knowledge in an area of specialisation and to evaluate knowledge and processes of knowledge production</p> <p>c. <i>Method and procedure</i>, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an understanding of the complexities and uncertainties of selecting, applying or transferring appropriate standard procedures, processes or techniques to unfamiliar problems in a specialised field, discipline or practice</p>	<p>a. <i>Scope of knowledge</i>, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate: specialist knowledge to enable engagement with and critique of current research or practices; and an advanced scholarship or research in a particular field, discipline or practice</p> <p>b. <i>Knowledge literacy</i>, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an ability to evaluate current processes of knowledge production and to choose an appropriate process of enquiry for the area of study or practice</p> <p>c. <i>Method and procedure</i>, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate a command of and ability to design, select and apply appropriate and creative methods, techniques, processes or technologies to complex practical and theoretical problems</p>

SOUTH AFRICAN NQF (HEQF) Level Descriptors for levels 7, 8 and 9		
LEVEL 7	LEVEL 8	LEVEL 9
<p>d. <i>Problem solving</i>, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an ability to identify, analyse, evaluate, critically reflect on and address complex problems, applying evidence-based solutions and theory-driven arguments</p>	<p>d. <i>Problem solving</i>, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an ability to use a range of specialised skills to identify, analyse and address complex or abstract problems drawing systematically on the body of knowledge and methods appropriate to a field, discipline or practice</p>	<p>d. <i>Problem solving</i>, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate: an ability to use a wide range of specialised skills in identifying, conceptualising, designing and implementing methods of enquiry to address complex and challenging problems within a field, discipline or practice; and an understanding of the consequences of any solutions or insights generated within a specialised context</p>
<p>e. <i>Ethics and professional practice</i>, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an ability to take decisions and act ethically and professionally, and the ability to justify those decisions and actions drawing on appropriate ethical values and approaches, within a supported environment</p>	<p>e. <i>Ethics and professional practice</i>, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an ability to identify and address ethical issues based on critical reflection on the suitability of different ethical value systems to specific contexts</p>	<p>e. <i>Ethics and professional practice</i>, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an ability to make autonomous ethical decisions which affect knowledge production, or complex organisational or professional issues, an ability to critically contribute to the development of ethical standards in a specific context</p>
<p>f. <i>Accessing, processing and managing information</i>, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an ability to develop appropriate processes of information gathering for a given context or use; and an ability to independently validate the sources of information and evaluate and manage the information</p>	<p>f. <i>Accessing, processing and managing information</i>, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an ability to critically review information gathering, synthesis of data, evaluation and management processes in specialised contexts in order to develop creative responses to problems and issues</p>	<p>f. <i>Accessing, processing and managing information</i>, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an ability to design and implement a strategy for the processing and management of information, in order to conduct a comprehensive review of leading and current research in an area of specialisation to produce significant insights</p>
<p>g. <i>Producing and communicating information</i>, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an</p>	<p>g. <i>Producing and communicating information</i>, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an</p>	<p>g. <i>Producing and communicating information</i>, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an</p>

SOUTH AFRICAN NQF (HEQF) Level Descriptors for levels 7, 8 and 9		
LEVEL 7	LEVEL 8	LEVEL 9
<p>ability to develop and communicate his or her ideas and opinions in well-formed arguments, using appropriate academic, professional, or occupational discourse</p>	<p>ability to present and communicate academic, professional or occupational ideas and texts effectively to a range of audiences, offering creative insights, rigorous interpretations and solutions to problems and issues appropriate to the context</p>	<p>ability to use the resources of academic and professional or occupational discourses to communicate and defend substantial ideas that are the products of research or development in an area of specialisation; and use a range of advanced and specialised skills and discourses appropriate to a field, discipline or practice, to communicate to a range of audiences with different levels of knowledge or expertise</p>
<p>h. <i>Context and systems</i>, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an ability to manage processes in unfamiliar and variable contexts, recognising that problem solving is context- and system-bound, and does not occur in isolation</p>	<p>h. <i>Context and systems</i>, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an ability to operate effectively within a system, or manage a system based on an understanding of the roles and relationships between elements within the system</p>	<p>h. <i>Context and systems</i>, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an ability to make interventions at an appropriate level within a system, based on an understanding of hierarchical relations within the system, and the ability to address the intended and unintended consequences of interventions</p>
<p>i. <i>Management of learning</i>, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an ability to identify, evaluate and address his or her learning needs in a self-directed manner, and to facilitate collaborative learning processes</p>	<p>i. <i>Management of learning</i>, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an ability to apply, in a self-critical manner, learning strategies which effectively address his or her professional and ongoing learning needs and the professional and ongoing learning needs of others</p>	<p>i. <i>Management of learning</i>, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an ability to develop his or her own learning strategies which sustain independent learning and academic or professional development, and can interact effectively within the learning or professional group as a means of enhancing learning</p>
<p>j. <i>Accountability</i>, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an ability to take full responsibility for his or her work, decision-making and use of resources, and</p>	<p>j. <i>Accountability</i>, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an ability to take full responsibility for his or her work, decision-making and use of resources, and full</p>	<p>j. <i>Accountability</i>, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an ability to operate independently and take full responsibility for his or her own work, and, where</p>

SOUTH AFRICAN NQF (HEQF) Level Descriptors for levels 7, 8 and 9		
LEVEL 7	LEVEL 8	LEVEL 9
limited accountability for the decisions and actions of others in varied or ill-defined contexts	accountability for the decisions and actions of others where appropriate	appropriate, to account for leading and initiating processes and implementing systems, ensuring good resource management and governance practices

Source: Level Descriptors for the South African National Qualifications Framework, SAQA, Pretoria, 2012

ACCESS TO MASTER'S DEGREE STUDIES AT RHODES UNIVERSITY:

INTERVIEW SHEET (ACADEMICS)

Name:

Faculty/Department:

Position:

Years employed at RU:

Date:

1. *What is your understanding of, and personal attitude to, the concept of alternative access to Master's level study?*
2. *Under what circumstances, if any, do you think alternative access should be considered?*
3. *In your Faculty, what is the process for alternative access?*

[SLS follow up Q: Are such students treated any differently, ie because they are AEG students?

4. *How is information on alternative access to Master's level study provided to potential students in your Faculty?*
5. *What level of awareness is there amongst staff and potential students in your Faculty of the existence of an alternative access route?*
6. *In your personal experience, how do students admitted via alternative routes compare to those who have an honours or 4 year degree (i.e. conventional admission) in terms of preparedness, motivation, commitment, likelihood of succeeding etc.*

[SLS follow-up Q: Are any AEG students ever admitted based only on a paper application (ie not personally known in some way to the potential supervisor)?

7. *The HEQC recommends that a maximum of 10% of any programme's cohort should be admitted on the basis of RPL (HEQC, 2004). What is your opinion of that?*
8. *What is your response to the national education policy statement that RPL/alternative access is intended to be an effective and viable method of 'redressing past unjust educational practices that prevented people from furthering their learning'? (SAQA, 2005).*

9. *In its mission statement, Rhodes University aims to “ensure that appropriate corrective measures are employed to redress past imbalances” and in its RPL policy the University commits itself to “the careful and responsible use of RPL to improve access to higher education in accordance with quality assurance objectives.”? Do you have any comments to make on this?*

10. *Looking more broadly at the concept of ‘graduateness’, what are your thoughts on the attributes which could be expected or assumed of someone who is about to enter Master’s level study (regardless of their formal or informal background)?*

Any other comments:

Background to Sandy Stephenson's M Ed research area, February 2012

Access to Master's Degree Studies at Rhodes University:
A Critical Evaluation

Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this study concerning access and the recognition of prior learning at the Master's degree level at Rhodes University.

Through this study I am aiming to:

- explore the formal and informal access routes available to enter Master's level study at Rhodes, in South Africa, and internationally, as well as the motivation for offering alternative access;
- consider Rhodes University's policy and implementation thereof in this area
- find out how students admitted via the AEG (*ad eundem gradum*) route at Rhodes fare compared to those admitted 'conventionally';
- identify the generic attributes (skills, knowledge, values, attitudes etc) which RU academic staff assume or expect graduates to possess in order to undertake Master's level study;
- consider whether and how the process for evaluating eligibility for alternative access to Master's level study at Rhodes could be enhanced.

The majority of postgraduate students, both in South Africa and internationally, enter higher degree studies directly from undergraduate qualifications which enable straightforward vertical access to the next level of qualification. However, alternative or non-formal entry to postgraduate studies has historically been a feature of many countries' higher education systems although this practice does not have a universal framework or terminology and is generally not widely advertised or researched.

Alternative access to any level of credit-bearing education is usually obtained by the recognition of prior learning (RPL), a concept which is used in South Africa both for the purpose of awarding formal credit for prior learning, and also for the purpose of granting access to a particular field or level of study (Thomen 2000; SAQA, 2004). Key research into RPL policies and practices at South African higher education institutions indicates however, that much of the focus has been on RPL at the undergraduate level and very little attention has been given to non-formal access to postgraduate study (Breier and Burness, 2003). In addition, institutional and national RPL policies concentrate largely on using RPL to award academic credit rather than as a means of providing access to formal programmes of study.

This research will focus only on the use of RPL for the purpose of *access* to a particular field and level of study, in this case, specifically the Master's degree level.

Rhodes University uses the term *ad eundem gradum* (AEG) to describe admissions to Master's level study where the student does not meet the minimum formal admissions

criteria. The normal requirement for admission to a Master's degree at Rhodes is "a four-year qualification of an acceptably high standard, i.e. usually a three-year Bachelor's degree, plus a good Honours degree in a relevant subject, or a satisfactory pass in a four-year degree such as BPharm, BFineArt etc." (RU Higher Degrees Guide, 2010: 7)

Where a candidate has extensive experience and/or is judged to have considerable potential as a researcher, but lacks the formal qualifications normally required for registration for a Master's degree, admission to a research programme as an *ad eundem gradum* candidate may be possible. (RU Higher Degrees Guide, 2010: 5)

Some of the issues I would like to explore during our interview are:

1. *Your understanding of and personal attitude to the concept of alternative admissions to Master's level study, including the circumstances under which you think alternative access should be considered.*
2. *The awareness within your Faculty and amongst potential students of the existence of an alternative access route.*
3. *The process followed in your Faculty for applying for alternative access.*
4. *Your personal experience of students admitted via alternative routes compared to those students who have an honours or 4 year degree (i.e. conventional admission) in terms of preparedness, motivation, commitment, likelihood of succeeding etc.*
5. *Are AEG students treated any differently to students who enter via the conventional route? (eg additional support given or additional requirements needing to be met such as research methods courses)?*
6. *Your opinion on the fact that the HEQC recommends that a maximum of 10% of any programme's cohort should be admitted on the basis of RPL (HEQC, 2004)*
7. *Your response to the national education policy statement that RPL/alternative access is intended to be an effective and viable method of 'redressing past unjust educational practices that prevented people from furthering their learning'? (SAQA, 2005).*
8. *Your comments on the claim in Rhodes University's mission statement that it aims to "ensure that appropriate corrective measures are employed to redress past imbalances" and its RPL policy where the University commits itself to "the careful and responsible use of RPL to improve access to higher education in accordance with quality assurance objectives.*
9. *Looking more broadly at the concept of 'graduateness', your thoughts on the attributes which could be expected or assumed of someone who is*

about to enter Master's level study (regardless of their formal or informal background).

Once all the interviews are concluded, I propose to contact you again electronically and ask you to consider (and possibly rank) various criteria/attributes which are identified in the literature and which may also arise from these interviews, and which could potentially be used to evaluate 'graduateness' or readiness to embark on Master's level study.

ACCESS TO MASTER'S DEGREE STUDIES AT RHODES UNIVERSITY:

INTERVIEW SHEET (EXECUTIVES)

Name:

Position:

Years employed at RU:

Date of interview:

1. *What is your understanding of, and personal attitude to, the concept of alternative access to Master's level study?*
2. *Under what circumstances, if any, do you think alternative access should be considered?*
3. *What is the process for alternative access at Rhodes?*

[SLS follow up Q: Do you believe such students should be treated any differently, ie because they are AEG students]

4. *How is information on alternative access to Master's level study provided to potential students by Rhodes?*
5. *What level of awareness do you believe there is amongst staff and potential students of the existence of an alternative access route?*
6. *Do you have any personal experience, of students admitted via alternative routes, and if so, how do they compare to those who have an honours or 4 year degree (i.e. conventional admission) in terms of preparedness, motivation, commitment, likelihood of succeeding etc.*

[SLS follow-up Q: Do you think any AEG students should ever be admitted based only on a paper application (ie not personally known in some way to the potential supervisor)?

7. *The HEQC recommends that a maximum of 10% of any programme's cohort should be admitted on the basis of RPL (HEQC, 2004). What is your opinion on that?*
8. *What is your response to the national education policy statement that RPL/alternative access is intended to be an effective and viable method of 'redressing past unjust educational practices that prevented people from furthering their learning'? (SAQA, 2005).*

9. *In its mission statement, Rhodes University aims to “ensure that appropriate corrective measures are employed to redress past imbalances” and in its RPL policy the University commits itself to “the careful and responsible use of RPL to improve access to higher education in accordance with quality assurance objectives.’? Do you have any comments to make on this?*

10. *Looking more broadly at the concept of ‘graduateness’, what are your thoughts on the attributes which could be expected or assumed of someone who is about to enter Master’s level study (regardless of their formal or informal background)?*

Any other comments:

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Prof George Euvrard
Dean, Faculty of Education
Rhodes University
Grahamstown

17 September 2001

Dear George

Motivation for AEG Candidates: M.Ed (Environmental Education)

We wish to provide the following motivation for a number of AEG candidates for the M.Ed (Environmental Education).

The purpose and place of the Rhodes M.Ed (EE) programme

Our role in the department includes co-ordination of the M.Ed (EE) programme. As you know, the Murray & Roberts Chair of Environmental Education was established in 1991 with the aim of developing a cadre of professional environmental educators and deepening the academic foundations of EE in southern Africa. The M.Ed (EE) programme addresses the need to develop environmental educators with a sound academic grounding in both local and global environmental concerns and educational theory, a critical orientation and the ability to use and produce well-informed research. This need is as relevant today as it was in the early 90's. This need is clearly evidenced by the large number of applications we receive for this course, and for the Ph.D programme.

The field of environmental education has grown enormously over the past few years, and demand for academic professional services of the calibre produced by Rhodes EE graduates is on the increase. There is a clear need to develop a cadre of professionals with an academic grounding in the southern African region. It is thus that a track record in EE as well as 'multiplier' potential are such important considerations for choosing EE Masters students. All of the candidates being put forward for AEG have been carefully selected with these criteria in mind.

The orientation of the M.Ed (EE) favours those with fieldwork experience seeking academic grounding

Results associated with this course over the years, show clear evidence that the Masters Programme, with its strong research and academic orientation, is more suited to providing the academic/educational background to those students who have fieldwork experience and lack academic background, than it is to provide the field and practical content to students with strong educational qualifications. The benefit of the Masters Programme to environmental educators working in the field is clear from the track records of a number of our M.Ed graduates.

Past track record of AEG Students in EE

The M.ED (EE) has in the past, in each intake, accepted a number of AEG students. They have generally been successful. For example, of the eight AEG individuals accepted to the 1998 course, only one student has not yet completed his studies. Many of the past AEG students are successfully filling leadership positions in the field of environmental education.

Motivations for Individuals

We have scrutinized 39 applications for the 2002-2003 M.Ed (EE). The need to consider AEG applications has arisen only partly in the context of the above, and partly from our scrutiny of each individual application. We have used the following criteria in our selection:

- academic record & academic capability
- track record in environmental education
- multiplier potential
- evidence of research experience

We therefore attach motivations for each of the individuals concerned. I would urge you also to scrutinize the full applications and CV's of these applicants. Supporting documentation is available should it be required.

Applicants being put forward for AEG status include.

- Mr Vladimir Russo
- Mr Brian Wright
- Ms Megan Britton
- Ms Janis O'Grady
- Ms Mba Manqele
- Ms Elizabeth Motsa
- Ms Lausanne Olvitt

Thank you for considering the above. We are confident of the possibility of running a good course with successful outcomes based on the above selection of students, despite the general lack of higher qualifications. In particular, we look forward to drawing on the impressive experience within this group, and engaging them in challenging academic work.

Thank you

Prof Heila Lotz-Sisitka

Murray & Roberts Chair of Environmental Education

Prof Pat Irwin

Professor of Education

In partnership with the Gold Fields Environmental Education Service Centre
In association with the Environmental Education Association of Southern Africa

