A Policy for the Assessment and Recognition of Prior Learning (ARPL) by Stellenbosch University

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1. Conceptualisation

The assessment and recognition of prior learning (ARPL) is described by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA, 1997) as the assessment of learning that has already taken place by an individual (learner) (whether through prior formal studies, work and/or life experience). This learning is evaluated by experts as being valid and reliable when measured against the learning outcomes of a specific qualification, learning programme or module/learning unit for the purpose of access to or acknowledgement within a learning programme. A more formal definition (National Standards Body Regulation no. 18787 of 28 March 1998) is: "*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 specific qualification, and the acceptance for purposes of qualification of that which meets the requirements*".

2. Value

Stellenbosch University acknowledges the value of ARPL as embodied in its purpose, viz. to increase the accessibility of higher education institutions in general and the learning programmes of Stellenbosch University in particular within a framework of quality assurance. Increased accessibility in this regard refers specifically to individuals who were previously deprived of opportunities to have access to formal learning environments, whether as a result of systemic or other restrictions, but who can now provide proof that they can participate in such learning opportunities at a specific level or can be recognised in retrospect for achieving such level of learning.

3. Objectives

Although access is a primary objective, Stellenbosch University also acknowledges the following important objectives of ARPL:

3.1 Placing – to determine, by means of assessment, an appropriate level of access to a learning or teaching programme for an individual;
3.2 Accelerated status – to grant an individual access to a learning or teaching programme at an NQF level that is higher than a qualification already obtained;
3.3 Accelerated stance – to award credits for a part of a learning programme for which an individual is registered on the basis of ARPL;
3.4 Crediting – to award transferable credits, within the bounds of specified restrictions[*], for learning that meets the requirements of a module as a whole or partially meets the requirements for a learning programme or a qualification.

4. Principles and standpoints

In accordance with the values set out in its Strategic Framework, Stellenbosch University endorses the following principles for ARPL:

[*] (1) at least 50% of the credits for a learning or teaching programme must be obtained through the US;
(2) as a rule, only the credits that have been obtained during the preceding five years will be acknowledged as transferable.

4.1 Fairness and justice towards all applicants;
4.2 Validity and reliability of assessment instruments and procedures;
4.3 Feasibility (including cost effectiveness) of ARPL processes and procedures.

In addition, the US also views the following standpoints on ARPL as being particularly important:

4.4 That, in all instances, acknowledgement is granted to proven learning, and not to experience *per se*;
4.5 That precautions are taken to ensure that recognition of the same prior learning is not granted by more than one environment of the US (credits for proven learning may therefore not be duplicated and a central database will probably be necessary to avoid possible duplication);
4.6 That the assessment of learning for the purposes of ARPL must always meet standards that correspond (i.e. are not higher or lower) with normal learning assessment at Stellenbosch University;
4.7 That ARPL processes and procedures should always honour the integrity of standards, qualifications and programmes;
4.8 That Stellenbosch University endorses the fundamental values of the continuous development of individuals, lifelong learning and the redress of inequalities;
4.9 That the University puts a high premium on providing appropriate information to, as well as providing preparation and guidance for ARPL applicants and assessors (see par. 7.4 for a point of policy on the cost implications);
4.10 That the principle of adaptability/flexibility is applied in the application of ARPL policy in the different academic environments (faculties, programmes and departments);
4.11 That Stellenbosch University follows a developmental and incremental approach in the implementation of ARPL in order to establish a tailor-made ARPL model;
4.12 That recognition of prior learning is granted for a maximum of three years. If an applicant therefore does not make use of the recognition granted by the University within three years, he/she must apply anew;
4.13 That, in the case of an application for the recognition of learning outcomes, credits may be granted for whole modules only and not for parts of modules. A full learning module is therefore the smallest learning unit for which credit will be granted by Stellenbosch University within ARPL. Faculties will use their own discretion when making decisions in cases in which more than learning modules are involved (for example, learning outcomes across modules).

5. Rationale

The importance of ARPL is clearly justified within the legal framework of the SAQA and the Skills Development Act. However, Stellenbosch University accepts that the rationale or raison d'être of ARPL is not based on pressure from the government or other institutions, but on the University's conviction that it is essential to respond in fair, practical ways to the requests of individuals (e.g. individual learners) and interested groups (e.g. employers) for recognition of prior learning that was acquired in formal, non-formal and informal ways. This recognition not only benefits the individuals who request it, but also contributes to the realisation of the University's vision to be an active role player in the development of the South African society as an institution that makes a significant contribution to solving the country's most pressing issues.

6. Recognition of existing forms of ARPL

At its meeting on 22 August 2003, the Senate of Stellenbosch University approved an extensive access plan for the undergraduate level (Access with success: A new access model, June 2003).

This plan describes the existing criteria for admission, supplementary access measures and a pilot project for new access measures. In addition, the University accepts that all ARPL applications are dealt with according to these measures and that ARPL procedures, especially at the undergraduate level, honour the requirements of the University's access plan.

However, Stellenbosch University also took a strategic decision to position itself increasingly as a research-oriented institution and it therefore makes sense, with regard to ARPL, and particularly in the initial phase, to focus on the postgraduate level. Postgraduate access and pass requirements differ significantly from programme to programme, are directed specifically at proven research competence and are therefore more easily accommodated by the uniquenesses of academic environments. Stellenbosch University therefore accepts that ARPL at this University will be given priority at the postgraduate level, rather than at the undergraduate level.

Forms of ARPL that are currently found in the faculties of the Stellenbosch University include:

6.1 Access assessment instruments (for example: access or placement tests and challenge examinations that are primarily assessed quantitatively);
6.2 Learning portfolios (for example: the applicant submits an extensive set of documents and/or other proof to illustrate his/her prior learning. This documentation is then evaluated qualitatively by expert academic staff at the University);
6.3 "Conditional" access (for example: a student is granted special admission and then allowed to "perform" himself/herself into a learning programme);
6.4 Supplementary work prior to enrolment (for example: a student is granted access to a learning programme on the condition that he/she completes supplementary work according to specific requirements before being allowed to enrol for a learning programme);
6.5 Supplementary work during the learning programme (for example: a student is enrolled on condition that he/she will complete supplementary work during the course of a learning programme);
6.6 Recognition of formal learning in the form of parts or the whole of learning programmes that were taken or completed at other institutions (for example: technikon diplomas or degrees);
6.7 Recognition of formal learning in the form of professional short courses, in-service training courses, etc. (for example: learning that is not certified as a qualification or as part of a qualification at another higher education institution);
6.8 Recognition of non-formal or informal learning (for example: learning that was undertaken in work or other environments at the initiative of the individual).

Where these ARPL mechanisms have already been established and are functioning well, they are to be continued and constantly refined qualitatively. However, faculties themselves decide which forms of ARPL will be given preference in the light of contextual variables.

7. Procedures

The application of ARPL policy and the allocation of credits for proven prior learning are the responsibility of the faculties and their programme committees. It is taken for granted that the faculties will provide sufficient information on ARPL to applicants and potential applicants by means of documentation, such as faculty year books, marketing material for programmes and, where relevant, course and module guides.

In addition, each faculty is also expected to have

7.1 a clearly defined ARPL process that has been approved by the faculty (cf. Appendix 1 for an example of a generic ARPL process);
7.2 suitable staff to facilitate, administer and assess ARPL applications (in this regard there should also be cooperation with support staff, such as the staff of the International Office);
7.3 mechanisms to support and provide feedback to applicants (handled with the necessary administrative support and uniformly between all departments);
7.4 reasonable and clear parameters relating to the costs of services provided in respect of ARPL application, guidance and assessment procedures, to be determined annually (the costs related to ARPL are therefore for the account of the applicant);
7.5 guidelines for applicants regarding the requirements of assessment instruments (for example the guidelines for learning portfolios, and ways in which tests, examinations, interviews and other faculty-specific instrumentation are dealt with);
7.6 guidelines for the process according to which unsuccessful candidates lodge an appeal and in relation to alternative possibilities for study that could by used by unsuccessful applicants.

8. Quality assurance

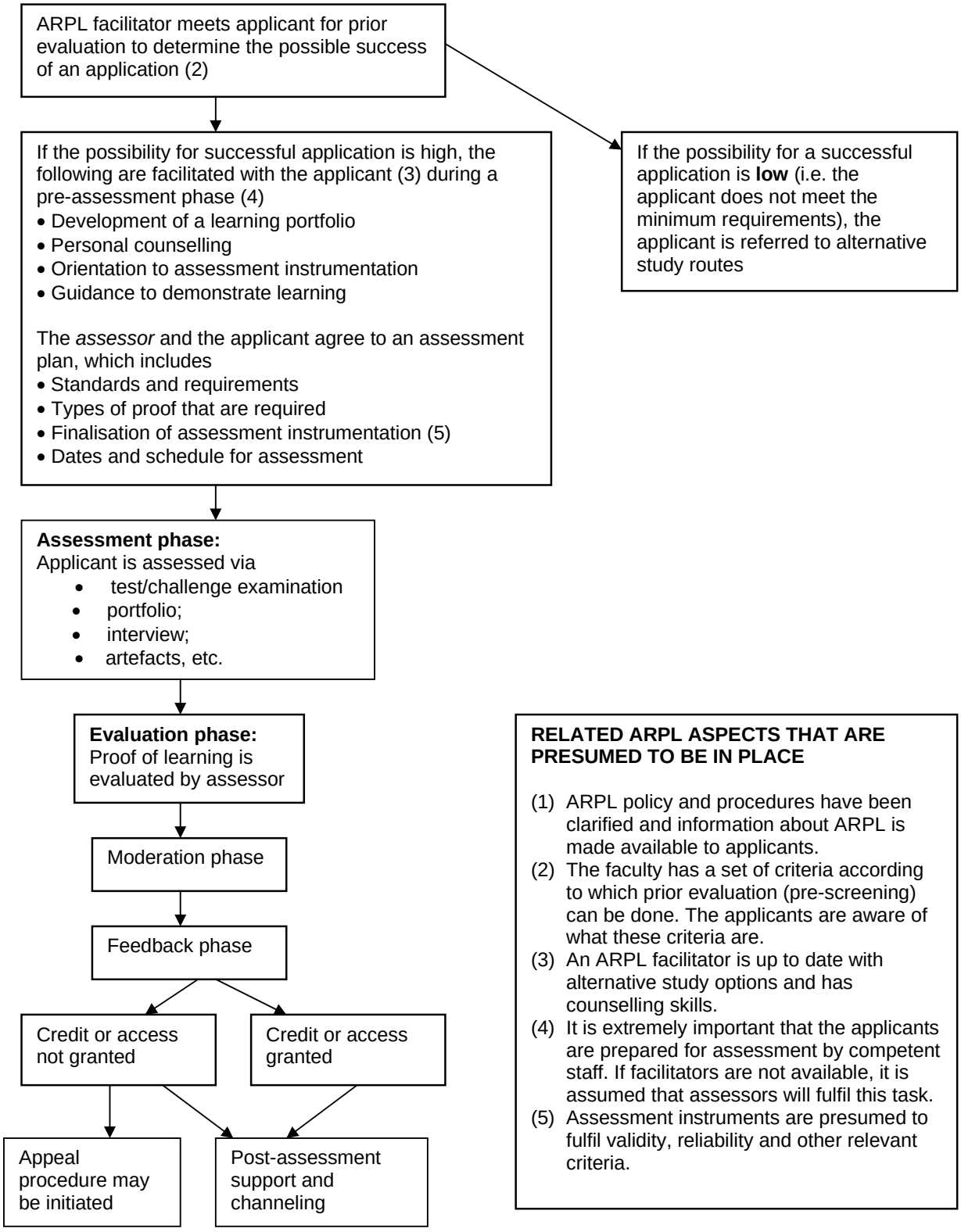
The quality assurance and continuous development of ARPL at Stellenbosch University is monitored by the faculties and their programme committees, or by committees that are appointed specifically for ARPL. The quality assurance of ARPL forms part of the continuous process of programme development. Final accountability for the quality of ARPL at Stellenbosch University resides in the Vice-Rector (Teaching), supported by the Division for Academic Planning and Quality Assurance. The Rector's management team is responsible to ensure that ARPL is given proper emphasis in the vision, mission and strategic planning of the institution.

Senate decisions (June 2004):

1. **that this policy is accepted;**
2. **that the Centre for Teaching and Learning will collect and describe more detailed forms of ARPL and make these available to the faculties (for example, guidelines for challenge examinations and ARPL portfolios);**
3. **that specialised expertise is developed within the Centre for Teaching and Learning to advise the faculties on ARPL, to provide training and to promote comparability between faculties.**

Appendix 1

An example of a generic ARPL process (1)



RELATED ARPL ASPECTS THAT ARE PRESUMED TO BE IN PLACE

(1) ARPL policy and procedures have been clarified and information about ARPL is made available to applicants.
(2) The faculty has a set of criteria according to which prior evaluation (pre-screening) can be done. The applicants are aware of what these criteria are.
(3) An ARPL facilitator is up to date with alternative study options and has counselling skills.
(4) It is extremely important that the applicants are prepared for assessment by competent staff. If facilitators are not available, it is assumed that assessors will fulfil this task.
(5) Assessment instruments are presumed to fulfil validity, reliability and other relevant criteria.

(Also see the policy document of the NQF: "Criteria and guidelines for the implementation of recognition of prior learning", 13 August 2003. Please note that this is only an EXAMPLE and that faculties may simplify this process on the basis of their specific needs and limitations)