



13 July 2026

Universities South Africa (USAf) Impact Case Studies 2026

Title: A Social Justice Approach to Transforming Educational Opportunities for Marginalised Adult Learners Through Recognition of Prior Learning: From Institutional Innovation to National Influence in South Africa

Submitting University: University of the Western Cape

Academic Unit: Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Unit, Directorate for Learning, Teaching and Student Success, Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Academic

Contact Person

Dr Rekha Rambharose

Head: RPL Unit

Teaching and Learning Specialist: Recognition of Prior Learning
University of the Western Cape

Email: rrambharose@uwc.ac.za

Summary of the Impact

South Africa continues to face a paradox in higher education. Although national policy recognises Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) as a mechanism for widening participation, many capable adults remain excluded from university despite extensive professional, workplace and community-based learning. Their exclusion stems less from capability than from historical educational inequalities, admissions systems that privilege formal qualifications, and institutional processes designed primarily for conventional school-leaving students.

Adult learners are often overlooked both during admission and after entry. Institutional resources, orientation programmes and academic support are typically designed for younger students entering directly from school, while the needs of working adults, caregivers, first-generation students and those returning to study after extended absences receive limited attention. Even when admitted through RPL, many lack sustained academic development and support, leaving them underprepared for university-level reading, writing, digital learning, assessment and time management, increasing the risk of disengagement and attrition.

Building on the University of the Western Cape's commitment to RPL since 2001, the RPL Unit reimagined undergraduate RPL implementation in 2019 through the Portfolio Development Hybrid Programme (PDHP). Developed under the academic leadership of Dr Rekha Rambharose, the programme integrates RPL assessment with academic literacy, reflective learning, digital capability, portfolio development, peer learning and structured learner support to create a comprehensive university-readiness pathway.

The PDHP addresses a critical gap by embedding academic development before learners enter formal degree programmes. Rather than navigating university unsupported, participants develop foundational academic skills, digital competence, reflective capacity, confidence and a stronger sense of belonging. The programme enables learners to recognise the value of their prior learning while developing the capabilities required for academic success.

Consequently, the PDHP extends RPL beyond an alternative admissions pathway to a model of educational empowerment that supports access, readiness, retention, success and lifelong learning while maintaining academic standards.

Hallmarks of the RPL PDHP

The method involves inquiry Deep reflection	Promotes authentic learning	Integrates theory and practice.
It is student-centered Developmental and transformative	Grounded in constructivism Promotes self-driven learning	Promotes the facilitation of hybrid learning.
Involves group work and collaborative learning.	Knowledge is integrated.	Promotes complex thinking skills.
Promotes lifelong learning	Technological and online upskilling	



RPL PDHP 2023 cohort certificate ceremony



RPL Faculty Champion awards- building advocates for RPL

Between 2020 and 2026, the programme generated measurable impact across multiple levels of society. Adult learners who once considered university unattainable entered programmes across diverse disciplines, achieved Dean's Merit awards, graduated *cum laude*, progressed to postgraduate study and assumed leadership roles in education, healthcare, public service, industry and community organisations. Their achievements have fostered intergenerational educational aspirations while strengthening professional capacity within historically underserved communities.



Adult learners who gained access to University via RPL graduating #iamUWCRPL

The impact is perhaps best illustrated through the lives of individual learners. [Varineeck Remley](#) entered the PDHP at 58 after retiring from a 33-year career in the Department of Infrastructure Development. Initially applying for an Advanced Diploma, her portfolio and demonstrated capability resulted in admission

directly into a Bachelor of Administration Honours programme. She graduated with



distinction, received the Dean's Distinguished Merit Award, became an RPL Ambassador, was invited to guest lecture, and has since progressed to Master's study while continuing to lead community development initiatives. Similarly, [Agnatius Stander](#) entered university through RPL and is now a qualified teacher, registered with the South African Council for Educators and pursuing postgraduate study. [Kyle Jackson](#) successfully completed Psychology through the RPL pathway and now practises as a clinical psychologist. These trajectories demonstrate that RPL changes far more than admission outcomes; it creates new professionals, community leaders and lifelong learners whose contributions extend well beyond the university.

The evidence generated through the programme also extended beyond institutional practice. During the 2025–2026 Teaching Advancement at Universities (TAU) Fellowship, it informed the development of the RPL Social Justice Framework, providing a scholarly model for socially just RPL implementation. This work culminated in a national policy brief submitted to the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), contributing institutional evidence to national discussions on strengthening RPL across South Africa's post-school education and training system.

The programme has also received international recognition. In 2022, it was awarded the [European Centre for the Validation of Prior Learning Global Award for excellence](#) in innovation, implementation and societal impact. Collectively, these achievements demonstrate how a university-based RPL Unit integrated teaching, research, community engagement and policy development to generate measurable educational and societal impact at institutional, national and international levels. The case demonstrates how teaching, research and community engagement can operate together to address educational inequality and strengthen South Africa's social and economic development.

Underpinning Academic Work

This scholarship was continuously informed by the lived experiences of adult learners whose educational journeys shaped ongoing curriculum renewal, practitioner development and policy innovation, creating a reciprocal relationship between research and practice.

The impact described in this case study is underpinned by a sustained programme of scholarship, pedagogy and community-engaged practice undertaken within the University of the Western Cape's RPL Unit between 2019 and 2026.

The University has been a national pioneer in RPL since 2001, establishing one of South Africa's earliest institutional systems to widen access for adult learners. Building on this legacy, the RPL Unit strategically redesigned undergraduate RPL implementation in 2019 to address persistent challenges relating to equitable access, student preparedness and academic success.

Led by Dr Rekha Rambharose, the redesign moved beyond conventional portfolio assessment by integrating adult learning, academic literacies, digital pedagogy, transformative learning and social justice into a coherent educational model. This resulted in the [Portfolio Development Hybrid Programme \(PDHP\)](#), a structured six-month university-readiness programme that combines RPL assessment with academic development before admission. As the first programme of its kind in South African higher education, it embeds a level of academic preparation not typically associated with RPL assessment.



The PDHP is informed by ongoing research on RPL, digital transformation, adult learning and socially just access to higher education. Evidence generated through implementation has informed peer-reviewed publications, conference presentations, practitioner development, curriculum innovation and the RPL [Social Justice Framework developed during the 2025–2026 Teaching Advancement at Universities \(TAU\) Fellowship](#). The framework reconceptualises RPL as an integrated ecosystem linking assessment, academic development, learner support, digital innovation and social justice.

Beyond scholarship, the Unit has collaborated with national stakeholders, including the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), the Council on Higher Education (CHE), the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), Universities South Africa (USAf) and the UCDP-funded [Unfurling the Post-School Education and Training \(UPSET\)](#) initiative. These partnerships have ensured that institutional innovation contributes directly to national RPL policy and practice.

The impact presented here therefore emerges from an integrated programme in which teaching, research, curriculum innovation, community engagement and policy development reinforce one another. Rather than viewing RPL as a once-off admissions mechanism, the Unit has developed an evidence-informed model that recognises experiential learning while building the academic capabilities required for long-term success.

Narrative Description of the Impact

Responding to a National Challenge

RPL was introduced in South Africa to address historical educational inequality by recognising learning acquired through work, professional practice and community engagement. Despite progressive policy, implementation across higher education has remained uneven, with many institutions treating RPL primarily as an admissions assessment rather than a developmental educational process. Consequently, adult learners often faced a double barrier: capable applicants struggled to gain admission, while those admitted frequently entered university without adequate academic preparation, limiting student success. Recognising this gap, the University of the Western Cape's RPL Unit reframed the central question from how adults gain admission to how RPL can enable them to succeed once admitted. This shift led to the development of the Portfolio Development Hybrid Programme (PDHP) in 2019.

Reimagining Recognition of Prior Learning

The PDHP represents a significant innovation in RPL practice. Rather than concluding with portfolio assessment, it integrates academic literacy, critical reading and writing, reflective practice, digital capability, peer learning and structured academic support before admission. University readiness not simply university entry, therefore becomes its primary outcome.

Delivered through a flexible hybrid model combining online and face-to-face learning, the programme expanded access for adults balancing employment, family responsibilities and community commitments while maintaining continuity during the COVID-19 pandemic. The model demonstrated that recognising prior learning and developing future academic capability are complementary processes that strengthen lifelong learning, student success and educational mobility.



Transforming Educational Trajectories

The programme's most direct impact has been on adult learners. Participants entered with substantial professional and community expertise but often limited confidence in their academic ability. Through structured preparation they developed competence in university-level reading, writing, critical reflection, digital learning and independent study. These capabilities translated into measurable educational and professional outcomes. Learners gained admission to programmes across multiple faculties, achieved Dean's Merit Awards, graduated *cum laude*, progressed to postgraduate study, and assumed leadership roles in education, healthcare, government, industry and community organisations. These achievements reflected broader patterns of educational mobility rather than isolated successes. Individuals who had once been excluded from university became teachers, psychologists, public servants, healthcare professionals and postgraduate researchers, demonstrating that widening access through RPL can be accompanied by academic excellence. In doing so, the programme challenged long-held deficit assumptions about adult learners by demonstrating that experiential knowledge, when recognised and appropriately supported, can lead to academic excellence. RPL was therefore repositioned from an [alternative admissions mechanism](#) to a credible pathway for educational excellence, professional advancement and lifelong learning.

The Butterfly Effect: Adult Learners' Voices

The programme's impact can also be understood as a "*butterfly effect*", in which apparently modest educational interventions generated consequences extending far beyond portfolio completion. Developing an academic narrative, learning to use digital platforms, receiving encouragement from peers and recognising the value of prior experience became catalysts for renewed confidence, further study, professional advancement and wider social contribution. One learner described the portfolio experience as "a positive outcome" that would "open many doors in the future", while another identified the most rewarding element as learning to craft a compelling personal narrative and present previous work effectively. Learners also emphasised the relational dimension of the programme, with one stating, "I got a lot of help from the peers in my cohort."

These voices reveal that the PDHP did more than prepare candidates for admission. Participants reported becoming more confident, academically aware and capable of managing increasingly complex learning tasks. One learner reflected that, although initially lacking confidence, the online learning process contributed to growing self-assurance; another explained that completing RPL had made them more attentive to academic conventions and better able to manage formal reports. Learners also described peer relationships as sources of encouragement during periods of uncertainty, with support operating reciprocally as participants motivated one another to continue. The resulting transformation was therefore cumulative: recognition strengthened identity, support built confidence, confidence enabled academic success, and academic success created new possibilities for families, workplaces and communities.

Creating Intergenerational and Community Impact

The programme's impact extended well beyond graduation. Many participants returned to schools as qualified teachers, to healthcare settings as professionals, to government departments as managers and leaders, and to community organisations as advocates for lifelong learning. Varineek Remley's continued leadership in community development following



retirement exemplifies how educational opportunity generated renewed civic contribution rather than marking the end of a professional career. Others became role models within their families, with children witnessing parents and grandparents graduating from university for the first time. Student reflections consistently described these achievements as transforming not only individual identities but also family aspirations and perceptions of what higher education makes possible. The impact therefore extended beyond individual graduates to reshape educational aspirations, strengthen professional practice and build community capacity.

From Institutional Innovation to National Influence

As implementation matured, the Portfolio Development Hybrid Programme generated a substantial body of evidence on socially just RPL practice that extended well beyond the University. During the 2025–2026 Teaching Advancement at Universities (TAU) Fellowship, this evidence informed the development of the [RPL Social Justice Framework](#), integrating Recognition of Prior Learning, academic development, digital innovation and social justice into a coherent higher education model. The scholarship subsequently informed a national policy brief submitted to the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), the [policy brief was formally acknowledged by SAQA](#) and will be utilized in several national policy initiatives within SAQA, CHE and DHET proposing a socially just digital ecosystem for RPL in South Africa. In doing so, institutional evidence contributed directly to national policy discussions on strengthening RPL across the Post-School Education and Training sector.

The impact extended beyond research and policy to sector-wide capacity building. Through national practitioner development initiatives, assessor training, curriculum innovation, the UPSET Articulation Hub and collaborations with the South African Qualifications Authority, the Council on Higher Education, the Department of Higher Education and Training, Universities South Africa and other higher education partners, the work contributed to strengthening institutional capability, improving RPL practice and expanding educational pathways for adult learners across the sector.

The national significance of this work has been independently recognised through the [South African Qualifications Authority National Qualifications Framework Champion Award](#). This award honours individuals and institutions that make outstanding contributions to advancing the objectives of the National Qualifications Framework through inclusive leadership, stakeholder collaboration, articulation, capacity building, lifelong learning and improved learner pathways. The recognition provides independent validation that innovations developed within the University of the Western Cape's RPL Unit have contributed not only to institutional transformation but also to strengthening South Africa's broader post-school education and training system.

The programme has also received [international recognition](#). In 2022, the Portfolio Development Hybrid Programme was [awarded first prize and recognised as the World Champion by the European Centre for the Validation of Prior Learning](#), following competition with entries from 24 countries. The award recognised excellence in innovation, implementation and societal impact, positioning the University of the Western Cape's RPL Unit as an internationally recognised contributor to lifelong learning, educational inclusion and socially just higher education.



Collectively, these independent national and international recognitions demonstrate how teaching, research, community engagement and policy development can work together to address complex societal challenges. By enabling adults who were previously excluded from higher education to become graduates, teachers, psychologists, public servants, community leaders and postgraduate scholars, the University of the Western Cape has shown that RPL is far more than an alternative admissions mechanism. It is a catalyst for educational mobility, academic excellence, professional advancement, intergenerational transformation and stronger communities. The impact extends from individual learners to families, workplaces, national policy and international scholarship, illustrating how a South African university can generate meaningful and lasting societal change.

Signed off on behalf of UWC by *Monwabisi Ralarala*