



Empowering Adult Learners through Interdisciplinary and Inclusive Digital Recognition of Prior Learning in Higher Education

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Abstract

Higher education in South Africa is undergoing a profound transformation driven by persistent socio-economic disparities, historical marginalisation, and the rapid expansion of digital technologies. Within this evolving landscape, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) serves as a pivotal mechanism to validate the experiential knowledge of adult learners—knowledge that is often marginalised within conventional academic frameworks. This study investigates how interdisciplinary curricula, digital platforms, and inclusive pedagogical practices can empower adult learners and enhance equitable access to academic participation. Anchored in experiential learning theory and decolonial pedagogy, the research employs a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design, integrating qualitative learner narratives and practitioner reflections with quantitative data on engagement and completion. Findings reveal that digital RPL, when supported by tailored mentorship, equitable access strategies, and interdisciplinary integration, significantly fosters learner agency, professional identity transformation, and academic success. The study culminates in the development of the IDEAL-RPL Framework, an evidence-based, institutional model that operationalises epistemic justice, digital inclusion, and relational pedagogy. This contribution advances the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) by offering a holistic and transformative approach responsive to the demands of a decolonised, digital, and interdisciplinary higher education landscape.

Keywords: Access, higher education, digital innovation, RPL, IDEAL-RPL Framework

Introduction

South Africa, like many parts of the world, faces considerable challenges in its higher education sector (Ul Hassan, Murtaza, & Rashid, 2025). These include unequal access to quality education, historical injustices related to race and class, limited funding opportunities, and the growing pressures brought on by global socio-economic challenges such as climate change, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the mental health crisis (Dlamini, 2018). As these challenges intensify, universities must reconsider their roles and develop innovative solutions that empower all learners, particularly those from marginalised or non-traditional backgrounds, such as adult learners. In the context of RPL and this study, adult learners are defined as individuals—

generally aged 23 and older—who return to or enter higher education after a significant period outside formal study. These learners often balance multiple social roles, and whose accumulated experiential, workplace, and community-based learning constitutes a substantial but frequently under-recognised body of knowledge (Bolton, Samuels, Mofokeng, Akindolani, & Shapiro, 2016; SAQA, 2019).

One promising way to address higher education challenges for adult learners is the RPL for accessing the undergraduate pathway through the development of a portfolio of evidence, which enables individuals to have their prior knowledge—acquired through formal, informal, or non-formal learning experiences—recognised and validated within academic systems (Akindolani, 2023). RPL is particularly significant

for adult learners who have diverse learning experiences but might not fit the conventional educational mould. For these learners, recognising the value of their lived experiences can bridge the gap between their existing knowledge and the academic requirements of higher education. South African higher education systems are burdened by structural inequalities that disproportionately affect adult learners (Frick & Albertyn, 2011). These include inadequate access to technology, systemic exclusion rooted in race and class, and inflexible pedagogical models that fail to recognise lived experience as a valid source of knowledge (Mantashe & Nkonki, 2019). As institutions increasingly call for transformation, RPL is positioned as a pedagogical strategy that validates non-formal and informal learning acquired through work, community engagement, and personal experience (Akindolani, 2023).

This article aims to explore the ways in which RPL can be integrated with interdisciplinary teaching methods and digital technologies to create a more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable framework for adult learners. RPL Scholars have expressed that when it is used as an educational tool, RPL allows learners to enter academic programmes based on the learning they have acquired throughout their lives, regardless of where or how this learning took place (Harris & Wihak, 2017). This approach recognises that knowledge and learning are not confined to traditional academic environments but can be drawn from a variety of experiences, including the workplace, volunteer activities, and community engagement. In this context, RPL offers a structured, policy-recognised pathway for translating such experiential knowledge into formal academic recognition, thereby disrupting exclusionary credential-based entry barriers and advancing equity within higher education systems (CHE, 2016; Mantashe & Nkonki, 2019; SAQA, 2019). Furthermore, this article will critically analyse the intersection of decolonisation, student marginalisation, and institutional practices that perpetuate inequality in higher education.

This research additionally proposes digital innovations—such as e-portfolios and online RPL platforms—as effective tools for enhancing the accessibility, efficiency, and

scalability of RPL processes. According to Ramirez and Inga (2022), the empowerment of adult learners through RPL is most effective when recognition processes are integrated with robust digital inclusion strategies (Ramirez & Inga, 2022). Their findings highlight that empowering adult learners requires not only the acknowledgement of their prior experiences but also the provision of appropriate digital tools, infrastructure, and pedagogical support to navigate contemporary higher education environments. Similarly, Motorga (2023) emphasises that aligning RPL with interdisciplinary and contextually relevant curricula transforms learners from passive recipients of knowledge into active co-constructors, fostering deeper engagement and reflective practice (Motorga, 2023). This approach situates RPL at the intersection of digital innovation, decolonial frameworks, and interdisciplinary learning in adult education.

Expanding on this perspective, the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning's fourth *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* (GRALE 4) highlights the pivotal role of digital inclusion in advancing adult education globally (Mufic, 2025). The report affirms that integrating digital technologies into adult learning enhances accessibility while promoting equity and inclusion for marginalised groups (Mufic, 2025). Complementing this, the International Labour Organisation's guidelines on digital inclusion in adult learning emphasise that the ongoing digital revolution necessitates a reimagining of learning systems, advocating for the incorporation of digital competencies as essential graduate outcomes to prepare learners for evolving workforce demands (Motorga, 2023).

These global insights reinforce the imperative for higher education institutions to adopt holistic RPL approaches that intentionally integrate digital inclusion with interdisciplinary curricula offered within portfolio development programmes. Such integration not only validates the diverse experiential knowledge of adult learners but also equips them with the digital literacy and academic skills required to thrive in a digitally driven, knowledge-based society. This alignment directly supports the broader goals of building sustainable, decolonial, and inclusive

higher education futures. While adult learners bring valuable epistemic resources that can enrich curriculum transformation, their contributions often remain unacknowledged in rigid academic systems. The objective of this study is therefore to develop a conceptual framework that integrates digital RPL with inclusive and interdisciplinary pedagogies, contributing to both theoretical and practical conversations on teaching and learning innovation. This study aims to investigate how digital RPL, supported by interdisciplinary teaching and inclusive pedagogical practices, can empower adult learners and foster equitable, sustainable futures in higher education.

Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) as articulated by David Kolb (1984), which posits that knowledge is constructed through the transformation of experience (Kolb, 1984). Within the context of adult learners engaging in RPL, ELT provides a powerful lens for understanding how prior informal, non-formal, and work-based experiences can serve as legitimate sources of academic and professional knowledge. Kolb's cyclical model, comprising concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation, aligns seamlessly with the digital portfolio development process, where learners curate, reflect upon, and narrate their lived expertise as part of the RPL journey (Kolb, 1984; Kolb, Boyatzis, & Mainemelis, 2001). The use of digital tools to scaffold reflection and evidence gathering further strengthens the learning process, transforming prior experience into validated academic credit while fostering critical reflexivity and epistemic confidence.

In parallel, this study draws from Knowles' Adult Learning Theory (Andragogy), which emphasises autonomy, self-direction, and the relevance of learning to personal and professional goals (Knowles, 1978). RPL, when digitally mediated and intentionally designed, supports adult learners in exercising control over the articulation of their life experiences, enabling them to navigate institutional structures with agency. The proposed IDEAL-RPL Framework, introduced later in this study, integrates

andragogical principles by offering a flexible, accessible, and learner-centred pathway that recognises adult learners not as deficient or lacking credentials, but as holders of valuable, contextually grounded knowledge. The self-paced, evidence-based nature of digital portfolios aligns with adult learners' desire for meaningful engagement, while supporting institutions to personalise learning and recognition processes without compromising quality or rigour (Bloomberg, 2021). Critically, this framework is also informed by decolonial pedagogy, which challenges the hegemony of Eurocentric knowledge systems in higher education and advocates for the recognition of diverse, situated knowledges (Yende, 2020). In the South African context, decolonial perspectives are essential for rethinking RPL not merely as a mechanism for access, but as an instrument of epistemic justice. Digital RPL, when designed with a decolonial lens, validates indigenous knowledge systems, lived experience, and non-traditional pathways to learning, resisting institutional norms that marginalise or erase these forms of knowing.

To support technological adoption, the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) is used to frame the institutional and learner responses to digital innovation (Davis, 1989). TAM theorises that perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use are the primary factors influencing technology adoption. In RPL settings, this implies that digital platforms and tools must be designed to be intuitive and demonstrably beneficial to learners and staff. When embedded in a values-driven, human-centred ethos, TAM complements the experiential and decolonial foundations of the framework by ensuring that technology enhances, rather than hinders, the empowerment of adult learners in diverse contexts (Nistor et al., 2014).

To enhance conceptual coherence, this study positions Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) as the primary foundation of the proposed IDEAL-RPL Framework, given its central focus on learning through lived experience and critical reflection—key components of RPL portfolio development. Andragogy intersects with ELT by highlighting the self-directed nature of adult learning and the importance of relevance and autonomy, particularly in digitally mediated

recognition processes. These learner-centred principles are embedded throughout the proposed IDEAL-RPL framework to support personalised and meaningful engagement. Decolonial Pedagogy overlays both ELT and Andragogy, offering a transformative lens that disrupts dominant knowledge hierarchies and affirms the legitimacy of indigenous and non-formal learning systems. Rather than standing in isolation, these frameworks are layered to mutually reinforce a humanising, justice-oriented approach to adult learning in higher education.

Interdisciplinary Approaches to Teaching and Learning

In the contemporary higher education landscape, the need for interdisciplinary approaches is more pressing than ever (Repko & Szostak, 2020). The world is rapidly changing, and the globalised job market increasingly demands graduates with multi-disciplinary skills who can think critically and solve complex, cross-cutting problems. In South Africa, this is particularly relevant given the socio-economic challenges the region faces, including high unemployment rates, poverty, and inequality. Interdisciplinary teaching is not simply about combining subjects; it is about creating learning environments where students can draw connections between disciplines, develop a deeper understanding of complex issues, and apply their learning to real-world problems (Badat, 2010; Hendrowati, Badrun, & Istiani, 2025). Adult learners are particularly suited for such an approach, as they often bring a wealth of practical experience from the workplace or other life experiences. When they engage with academic content, they are not just passive recipients of information but active contributors, drawing on their own knowledge to enrich the learning process (Peters & Romero, 2019).

The value of interdisciplinary teaching is amplified when combined with RPL. Through RPL, adult learners can have their prior work experience, life skills, and informal learning recognised, allowing them to bypass some of the traditional academic entry requirements (Frick & Albertyn, 2011). This recognition not only validates their previous learning but also allows them to engage more effectively with

interdisciplinary academic pathways that take into account their existing knowledge and experiences.

Furthermore, interdisciplinary approaches promote critical thinking and problem-solving by encouraging students to explore issues from multiple perspectives. This is particularly important in South Africa, where the challenges of socio-economic inequality, racial disparities, and environmental degradation require solutions informed by multiple fields of knowledge. Adult learners, with their broad perspectives, can bring a level of insight that enriches interdisciplinary learning environments (Frick & Albertyn, 2011). Interdisciplinary teaching fosters deep learning by integrating multiple perspectives and contextual knowledge. Adult learners, due to their life experience and work histories, are particularly suited to interdisciplinary pedagogies (Bloomberg, 2021; Knowles, 1978).

Interdisciplinary, challenge-based curricula significantly improve engagement and relevance for adult learners (Bloomberg, 2021; Love, Labay-Marquez, & Valadez, 2023). For instance, a community health worker applying for a public health programme through RPL benefits from a curriculum that integrates sociology, health sciences, and ethics. Some studies also highlight that interdisciplinary approaches promote critical consciousness in adult learners, allowing them to situate their personal narratives within broader social, political, and historical contexts (Love et al., 2023).

In South Africa, RPL is formally recognised under the National Qualifications Framework Act (No. 67 of 2008) and operationalised through the *South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) RPL Policy* (2013) and the *Council on Higher Education's (CHE) 2016 report on Recognition of Prior Learning, Credit Accumulation and Transfer, and Assessment in Higher Education (CHE, 2016)*. The CHE (2016) outlines that RPL serves three main purposes:

1. **Access** – admission to programmes for candidates who do not meet conventional entry requirements but can demonstrate equivalent competence through prior learning.

2. **Advanced Standing / Credit Recognition and Transfer** – granting credits toward a qualification based on assessed prior learning, reducing the time and cost to complete a programme.
3. **Personal and Professional Development** – formally recognising learning that contributes to career advancement or personal growth, even outside qualification-bearing pathways.

RPL processes in South African universities typically involve a structured assessment of a candidate's prior learning against programme outcomes or qualification standards. This may include the submission of a portfolio of evidence, competency-based assessments, interviews, and, in some cases, challenge examinations (CHE, 2016). The aim is to ensure that the knowledge, skills, and competencies gained through work experience, informal learning, or community engagement are evaluated with the same rigour as formal academic achievements.

Despite its transformative potential, the implementation of RPL in South African higher education faces persistent challenges. Research identifies procedural complexity, lengthy timelines, and inconsistent application across institutions as key barriers (Cooper, Ralphs, & Harris, 2017; Ralphs, 2012). Many prospective candidates are deterred by substantial documentation requirements, unclear communication about processes, and the costs associated with compiling and assessing a portfolio of evidence (Frick & Albertyn, 2011). Furthermore, RPL is still often perceived as an “alternative” rather than a mainstream route into higher education, which can inadvertently reinforce hierarchies between traditional and non-traditional learners (Mantashe, 2023).

RPL policy implementation, in conjunction with interdisciplinary teaching, can help create more holistic educational pathways for adult learners. It enables a broader, more inclusive curriculum, where learners can progress through academic pathways based on their real-world knowledge, rather than just traditional qualifications. For instance, a learner with

experience in community-based health work might enter a public health programme through RPL without having a formal academic background in the subject. This process ensures that knowledge gained through work and life experience is valued and that learners can apply their existing knowledge to academic pursuits. Addressing the current limitations of traditional RPL processes—particularly those related to access, flexibility, and scalability—requires exploring enhancements such as digital RPL, which can reduce administrative barriers, expand access for geographically distant learners, and provide more flexible, multimodal evidence submission options. This pedagogical synergy between RPL policy implementation and interdisciplinary curricula creates a structured platform for transforming prior experiential knowledge into new academic learning, offering a natural alignment with established adult learning theories such as Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle.

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984) further supports this approach, emphasising that learning is a continuous cycle that begins with concrete experience, followed by reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. By integrating effective RPL policy implementation and interdisciplinary learning, adult learners are given the opportunity to engage in all stages of Kolb's cycle, beginning with their prior experiences and utilising interdisciplinary methods to expand their learning. This process not only benefits the learners but also enriches the educational experience for the entire class, as diverse perspectives are brought to bear on complex issues.

Digital Innovation and the Future of RPL

The digital transformation of higher education is one of the most significant changes facing institutions globally, more especially in the post-pandemic context (Hendrowati et al., 2025). Digital technologies offer new opportunities for enhancing the learning experience, expanding access to education, and improving student outcomes. For adult learners, digital innovation can be a game-changer. Platforms such as e-portfolios, online learning systems, and virtual classrooms can offer flexible, accessible learning

pathways that accommodate the diverse needs of adult learners, who may be balancing study with work and family commitments (Ramirez & Inga, 2022). Digital RPL can serve as an essential tool in this transformation. By using digital platforms, adult learners can present their prior learning in the form of e-portfolios, which document their experiences, competencies, and skills. These digital portfolios can be reviewed by academic institutions to grant learners advanced standing, placement, or credit for formal prior learning (Benavides, Tamayo Arias, Arango Serna, Branch Bedoya, & Burgos, 2020). Such a process offers flexibility and accessibility, as learners can manage their portfolios remotely, both synchronously and asynchronously, and at their own time.

Moreover, digital innovation can facilitate peer learning, collaboration, and knowledge-sharing among adult learners, especially those from diverse backgrounds. By using digital tools, learners can connect with peers and educators across geographical boundaries, creating a global community of practice that enhances the learning process (Awashreh & Hassiba, 2025). The use of artificial intelligence (AI), learning analytics, and adaptive learning technologies can also personalise the learning experience for adult learners. AI can help track learners' progress, suggest resources, and provide real-time feedback, enabling self-directed learning that fits the unique needs of adult learners. Additionally, virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies can provide immersive learning experiences, particularly for fields that require hands-on training (Adarkwah, 2024).

While digital innovations may promise to transform RPL processes, they also bring intrinsic challenges—particularly around the digital divide, digital literacy, and technophobia (Chaffin & Harlow, 2005). In the post-COVID-19 era, South African higher education has witnessed a rapid shift to digital teaching and assessment modalities, revealing persistent inequalities in infrastructure, connectivity, and technological proficiency among students and staff (Crawford, 2023; Mhlanga & Mloi, 2020). Research indicates that insufficient digital infrastructure, high data costs, and inadequate device access disproportionately affect

marginalised adult learners, undermining the promise of digital inclusion (Aleandri, 2022).

To ensure equitable participation in digital RPL, research indicates that institutions must make substantial investments in infrastructure, learner and educator training, and user-friendly platforms. Digital inclusion requires not just access but also effective support, including low-literacy design, ongoing digital literacy training, and simplified tools to overcome technophobia in adult learners (Butcher & Curry, 2022). Only through such comprehensive strategies can digital RPL fulfil its potential and avoid perpetuating existing inequities. Digital innovations in RPL offer flexible, learner-driven pathways that expand access for adult learners. Through e-portfolios and asynchronous platforms, candidates can document experiential learning on their own terms, using multimodal evidence such as written narratives, photographs, audio reflections, and video demonstrations. Studies show that e-portfolio users report higher self-efficacy and perceived academic legitimacy compared to those assessed via paper-based systems (Butler, 2010; Cameron, Travers, & Wihak, 2014).

However, technology alone cannot guarantee equitable participation. Cameron et al. (2014) emphasise that digital RPL must be paired with relational supports—such as in-person contact teaching, WhatsApp mentoring, peer feedback, and video tutorials—to mitigate digital anxiety and unfamiliarity (Cameron et al., 2014). UNESCO (2020) similarly warns that the digital divide can exclude the very learners RPL seeks to empower (Osborne, Hernandez Mendoza, Torres Gomez, & Wheeler, 2020). To address this, it recommends hybrid RPL models that incorporate community-based access points—including local libraries, community learning centres, University-designated RPL Units or Centres and TVET college hubs—where learners can access devices, internet connectivity, and in-person guidance. These decentralised hubs are particularly vital in rural and peri-urban contexts, ensuring that digital RPL remains inclusive, rather than exclusionary (Mufic, 2025).

Current research highlights emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI) and virtual reality (VR), that present opportunities to further enhance RPL assessment. Simulation-based evidence collection, for instance, could enable learners in practice-based fields such as nursing, teaching, or artisanal work to demonstrate competencies in immersive, authentic contexts (Aithal & Aithal, 2024). When combined with relational and community-based supports, such technologies can expand the scope and credibility of RPL while maintaining its human-centred ethos.

Fostering Inclusivity, Equity, and Diversity Through RPL

One of the most powerful features of RPL is its potential to foster inclusivity, equity, and diversity within higher education (Frick & Albertyn, 2011). Adult learners, particularly those from marginalised communities, often face systemic barriers to accessing formal education. These barriers include financial constraints, a lack of formal qualifications, and the challenges of balancing work, family, and study. RPL helps to remove these barriers by acknowledging the value of informal learning, workplace experiences, and life skills (Cooper et al., 2017).

In South Africa, historical injustices have resulted in significant racial, gender, and socio-economic disparities in higher education. For example, black South Africans, women, and those from rural areas have had limited access to formal education due to the legacy of apartheid and colonialism (Du Plessis, 2021). Through RPL, universities can provide an equitable pathway for learners who might not otherwise meet the conventional entry requirements but who bring valuable life experiences to their studies. By integrating RPL into teaching practices, institutions can create more inclusive and diverse learning environments where learners from different backgrounds contribute their unique perspectives to academic discussions. Inclusive pedagogy, which values diversity and promotes culturally relevant teaching, can help create learning spaces where all students, regardless of their background, feel respected and supported (Love et al., 2023).

Moreover, RPL can help address gender inequities by providing non-traditional learners, especially women, with the opportunity to access education and gain qualifications that may have previously been unavailable to them. In a region like South Africa, where gender-based violence and gender inequality remain pervasive, the empowerment that comes with recognising women's prior learning can have transformative effects not only on the learners themselves but also on their families and communities (Burke et al., 2025).

RPL Digital Portfolio Requirements and Expectations at the University

Central to this study is the RPL for access to the Portfolio Development Hybrid Programme, which required candidates (adult learners) to compile a comprehensive digital portfolio demonstrating the breadth and depth of their prior experiential, non-formal, and formal learning. The completed portfolio was then assessed for placement and admission into specific undergraduate programmes at a university. The portfolio functioned both as an evidentiary record and as a reflective learning artefact. Each submission was expected to include:

- I. **A personal learning narrative**, articulating the candidate's educational journey, key experiences, and motivations for pursuing higher education.
- II. **Evidence of competencies** aligned to the target programme's admission requirements, such as workplace outputs, project reports, certificates, published works, or creative artefacts.
- III. **Critical reflections** on how these experiences contributed to the development of discipline-relevant skills, knowledge, and attributes.
- IV. **A mapping document** linking each piece of evidence to the relevant learning outcomes or competencies, thereby making the case for advanced standing or access.

Submissions were completed on an asynchronous digital platform, Google Classroom,

that allowed candidates to upload multimodal evidence—text documents, images, audio recordings, and short video demonstrations. While the format offered flexibility, it also required candidates to engage with a structured set of prompts and guiding questions, designed to elicit both descriptive detail and analytical reflection. The process encouraged iterative refinement through peer and facilitator feedback, thereby fostering digital literacy, academic writing skills, and self-efficacy. Importantly, the expectation extended beyond simply listing past achievements; candidates were required to construct a coherent academic argument for the recognition of their prior learning, demonstrating readiness for access to undergraduate study in both cognitive and professional terms.

Methods

This study adopted a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design (Creswell & Poth, 2016) integrating qualitative narrative inquiry with descriptive quantitative measures. Data were triangulated from three primary sources:

- I. **Student reflections:** Thirty-four adult learner reflections were sourced from digital RPL portfolio submissions completed between 2019 and 2024. The cohort ranged in age from 23 to 59 years, representing diverse employment backgrounds in community development, education, health services, and informal sectors. Approximately 70% of the participants were female, and 60% resided in peri-urban or rural areas. The portfolio narratives were subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which involved inductive coding followed by theme refinement. Analysis focused on identifying patterns in learner experiences of digital RPL, particularly in relation to access, academic readiness, and self-efficacy.
- II. **Practitioner Reflective Journals:** Over a seven-year period, the author kept practitioner reflective journals as an RPL facilitator, assessor, and academic mentor. These autoethnographic entries captured

pedagogical strategies, the affective labour of facilitation, and critical incidents. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis—familiarisation, coding, theme generation, theme review, defining/naming themes, and reporting—the journals were coded to identify recurring patterns related to the ethics of care, feedback practices, and learner agency.

- III. **Institutional Metrics:** Quantitative data were derived from institutional records, including learner engagement indicators (e.g., number of logins), online engagement within the Google Classroom Learning Management System (LMS), self-assessed digital confidence (pre- and post-programme surveys), and portfolio completion and endorsement rates. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics (means, frequencies, and percentage change) to identify trends in learner engagement and confidence over time.

Methodological rigour was enhanced through data triangulation, thematic saturation in qualitative coding, and sustained researcher reflexivity throughout the analytic process (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). Ethical clearance was obtained from the university's research ethics committee for the use of anonymised secondary data (Ref. No: 30457; permission reference: UWCRP141990). All participants provided informed consent for the use of their portfolio submissions and reflections for research purposes. Data were de-identified and securely stored.

Findings and Discussion

In the Portfolio Development Hybrid Programme, RPL candidates were required to produce a structured digital portfolio that combined narrative reflection, multimodal artefacts (photographs, audio/video, scanned documents), and explicit mapping to programme learning outcomes. Portfolios were scaffolded by a reflective template requiring candidates to (a) situate workplace or community evidence against specified competences, (b) provide interpretive

commentary linking practice to theory, and (c) present a verifiable evidence trail for assessor or faculty review, followed by placement within the respective undergraduate programmes. The Google Classroom LMS-enabled, mobile-accessible submission process allowed for asynchronous peer review, mentor feedback, and iterative revision prior to the summative assessment, thereby foregrounding ethical authorship, evidential sufficiency, and reflective depth (Peters & Romero, 2019). This approach aligns with recent evidence that structured digital portfolios enhance adult learners' capacity to demonstrate complex competencies while ensuring academic integrity in RPL processes (Love et al., 2023). Analysis of learner portfolios (n = 34), practitioner reflective journals (2019–2024), and institutional engagement metrics revealed five interdependent themes: learner transformation; digital access and inclusion; pedagogy of care; interdisciplinary identity; and technology as an enabler.

Learner transformation emerged as a key theme, with portfolio authors consistently reporting shifts in professional identity and scholarly self-conception. Reflective practice enabled epistemic recognition and a reconfiguration of prior work as legitimate academic knowledge. Learners expressed how constructing a digital RPL portfolio validated their lived experience as meaningful knowledge and repositioned them as active knowledge holders. Below are excerpts from RPL portfolios:

"I never thought my life experience was worthy of academic recognition. The portfolio made me realise that I have knowledge that matters." (Portfolio, P09)

"This process gave me the confidence to speak about my work in ways I never imagined. I am now proud to call myself a scholar." (Portfolio, P21)

These findings resonate with Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, situating reflection at the core of knowledge construction (Kolb, 1984) and are reinforced by research demonstrating that RPL participation fosters identity transformation, epistemic confidence, and a sense of belonging in academia (Harris & Wihak, 2017).

Digital access and inclusion were identified as persistent challenges despite the flexibility digital portfolios offer. Portfolios from rural and peri-urban learners documented infrastructural constraints such as unstable connectivity, high data costs, and limited device availability, as captured in the excerpts from portfolios below:

"Data was a big issue for me. Sometimes I had to walk to town to get Wi-Fi or wait until midnight for cheaper rates." (Portfolio, P15)

"I live in a rural area where the network is very poor. Uploading the portfolio was stressful but I kept trying." (Portfolio, P03)

Institutional engagement data corroborated these accounts, with 32% of rural learners reporting connectivity barriers in pre-programme surveys. This supports the assertion that digital exclusion is shaped by affordability and socio-cultural factors, and reflects current data (Butcher & Curry, 2022) on persistent global education connectivity gaps. Recent studies further confirm that without targeted support, infrastructural inequities significantly constrain participation in digitally mediated adult education (Dlamini, 2018).

The pedagogy of care was foregrounded in practitioner journals as critical to sustaining learner participation. The practitioner described care-based facilitation practices—emotional check-ins, peer networks, and affirming feedback—that cultivated a sense of "belonging through the screen". The following excerpts are taken directly from the practitioner journals and adult learner portfolios:

"We made time for emotional check-ins before starting digital workshops. That opened the door for deeper learning." (Practitioner Journal, 2019)

"I often reflected on my positionality, my teaching philosophy and how I could embed more care into my pedagogy especially in online settings." (Practitioner Journal, 2022)

"Peer support on WhatsApp was a game-changer. Learners helped each other more than we expected." (Portfolio, P18)

“Even though I was enjoying the online learning, being able to connect in person enriched my learning process in many ways – I felt seen and heard in class” (Portfolio, P22)

These strategies align with Noddings’ (2008) Ethics of Care framework and emphasise relational pedagogy, counterbalancing technocratic online learning approaches (Bozalek & Zembylas, 2017; Noddings, 2008). Contemporary evidence suggests that care-oriented digital facilitation enhances learner persistence and reduces attrition, particularly in post-pandemic higher education contexts (Crawford, 2023).

Interdisciplinary identity was a recurrent theme, as learners recognised their experiential knowledge often spanned multiple domains—community organising, healthcare, small business—previously undervalued in formal academic contexts, as seen in an excerpt taken directly from a portfolio:

“As a community organiser, I never thought what I do is interdisciplinary. Now I see how my work connects policy, education, and health.” (Portfolio, P07)

Such reflections support calls for curriculum reform, transcending disciplinary silos and valuing epistemic diversity (Repko & Szostak, 2020). Interdisciplinary approaches to RPL design create opportunities for more meaningful learner engagement while encouraging innovative practices within institutions (Adewale, 2024).

While digital access and inclusion were identified as a challenge, there were also benefits to be considered. Technology as an enabler, supported with guidance, was identified repeatedly. Rather than alienating adult learners, accessible and familiar tools like WhatsApp, PowerPoint, Google Meet, Google Classroom engagements, and voice-recording apps enhanced learners’ ability to narrate complex experiences:

“WhatsApp helped me stay connected to the group and ask questions, even when I didn’t have airtime for email.” (Portfolio, P11)

“Using PowerPoint for my digital story made me realise how much I have to share, being

able to stand in class and present my PowerPoint was more awakening than I could have ever imagined.” (Portfolio, P04)

Institutional metrics showed a 78% increase in portfolio submissions among learners who received structured digital onboarding and mentorship, indicating that guided use of familiar tools can reduce digital anxiety and boost engagement (Butcher & Curry, 2022). This is supported by recent studies showing that low-threshold technologies facilitate equitable participation for adult learners in resource-constrained contexts (Adu & Mkhize, 2021; West & Chew, 2023).

Framework Design

These findings, together with the theoretical framework, informed the development of the IDEAL-RPL Framework, an institutional model designed to guide the implementation of RPL policy across higher education. The framework addresses three core design imperatives: (1) portfolios as instruments of epistemic recognition and identity formation; (2) ensuring equitable digital access; and (3) institutionalising relational pedagogical labour beyond ad hoc goodwill. Operationally, it embeds narrative, reflection, and contextually relevant evidence into the portfolio process, enabling adult learners to be recognised as active producers of knowledge rather than passive recipients of dominant curricula (Yende, 2020). To address the digital access challenges identified in this study, the IDEAL-RPL Framework incorporates targeted support structures, iterative feedback mechanisms, and user-friendly digital tools that reduce cognitive load. As illustrated in Figure 1, the model’s five pillars—Interdisciplinary Curriculum Integration; Digital Access Equity; Equity-Driven Institutional Alignment; Adult Learning, Reflective Pedagogy and Care; and Learner Empowerment through Technology—link theory to pragmatic mechanisms and measurable indicators, reflecting contemporary calls for equity-oriented digital transformation in higher education (Bozalek & Zembylas, 2023). In this way, the framework advances beyond conceptual intent to provide a practical, evidence-based

mechanism for embedding epistemic justice and technological empowerment into RPL practice.

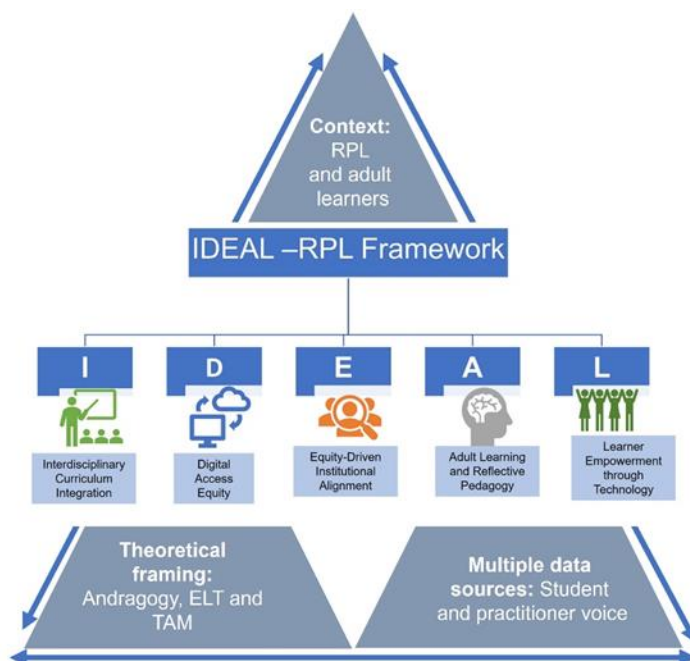


Figure 1: Illustration of key pillars in the IDEAL-RPL framework

Furthermore, the findings strongly resonate with the theoretical foundations outlined earlier in this study, emphasising the relevance of andragogy, experiential learning theory, and decolonial pedagogy to RPL practice. The IDEAL-RPL Framework, as evidenced in the learner narratives and practitioner reflections, translates andragogical principles into practice by offering a flexible, accessible, and learner-centred pathway that recognises adult learners not as deficient or lacking credentials, but as holders of valuable, contextually grounded knowledge. This was observed in the ways learners articulated shifts in identity and epistemic confidence through the construction of their portfolios. The framework operationalises these principles by embedding narrative, reflection, and contextually relevant evidence into the portfolio process, enabling adult learners to be recognised as producers of knowledge rather than passive recipients of dominant curricula (Love et al., 2023). Furthermore, in direct response to the digital access challenges reported—such as unstable connectivity, high data costs, and device limitations—the framework incorporates targeted

support structures, iterative feedback loops, and accessible digital tools designed to reduce cognitive load and minimise digital exclusion. By integrating these theoretical commitments into practical design, the IDEAL-RPL Framework demonstrates how policy-aligned RPL processes can simultaneously advance epistemic justice, enhance learner agency, and close the gap between recognition and equitable participation.

Embedding care as an organising principle

Care is institutionalised as formal programme features—structured formative feedback, scheduled emotional check-ins, scaffolded reflective prompts, designated peer-mentor cohorts, and workload-recognised pastoral roles—rather than informal, variable practices. This approach mitigates the affective toll of portfolio work and amplifies learner agency, consistent with scholarship advocating care-centred digital pedagogy (Noddings, 2008) in post-pandemic higher education. Studies emphasise that formalising care in programme design increases learner resilience and retention, especially in blended and online RPL programmes

(Feldman, 2020; Rabin, 2021). Underpinning this approach is a humanistic teaching philosophy that positions care as a non-negotiable foundation for RPL facilitation. From this perspective, policy implementation extends beyond procedural compliance to embrace a pedagogy of care—one that affirms learner dignity, validates lived experience, and nurtures the confidence to claim academic space. Embedding care as an organising principle not only strengthens learner persistence but also provides a critical foundation for the staged, evaluative implementation of the IDEAL-RPL Framework.

Significance, adaptability, and evaluation

The IDEAL-RPL Framework advances epistemic justice by legitimising multimodal, situated knowledges grounded in adult learners' lived experiences. Its modular design allows for pragmatic adaptation: resource-limited institutions can prioritise low-bandwidth delivery and peer mentoring, whereas larger research universities may focus on interdisciplinary credit articulation and cross-faculty pathways. Implementation is best undertaken as a staged pilot of the Portfolio Development Programme, typically spanning two academic terms—equating to approximately six to twelve months depending on the institutional calendar and learner cohort needs. This phased approach enables a rigorous mixed-methods formative evaluation, combining engagement analytics, pre- and post-programme self-efficacy measures, and thematic analysis of learner reflections. Insights from this evaluation should inform subsequent policy integration and longitudinal monitoring, including completion rates, academic progression, and labour-market outcomes for adult learners. Existing evidence demonstrates that structured mentoring and onboarding substantially increase participation and retention in digitally mediated programmes, a finding reinforced by contemporary research in adult learning and digital education policy (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020).

Conclusion

Digital RPL integrated with interdisciplinary and inclusive pedagogies presents a transformative pathway for adult education in South Africa. As higher education institutions

embrace digital innovation, prioritising equity, cultural relevance, and learner agency is imperative. The IDEAL-RPL Framework proposed in this study offers a strategic, human-centred model that validates experiential knowledge, advances epistemic justice, and institutionalises relational pedagogical labour. This approach fosters sustainable educational futures by focusing on the lived realities and knowledge contributions of adult learners within teaching and learning processes. While the findings are grounded in robust mixed-methods data from a purposive sample within a single institutional context, further research is necessary to test the framework's applicability across diverse institutions, regions, and disciplines. Such future work will be essential for scaling and sustaining equitable digital RPL practices across varied higher education landscapes.

Declarations

The author declares no competing interests. The author did not receive funding for this work. There are no financial implications to declare. The author confirms that no artificial intelligence tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript. All writing, analysis, and intellectual contributions were completed solely by the author.

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