

## **Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in 2004: A snapshot**

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### **What is Recognition of Prior Learning?**

The Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) provides the following definition of RPL:

‘Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) means recognition of competencies currently held, regardless of how, when or where the learning occurred. Under the Australian Quality Training Framework, competencies may be attained in a number of ways. This includes through any combination of formal or informal training and education, work experience or general life experience.’ (ANTA, 2001, p.9).

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) was introduced into Australia as part of a National Qualifications Framework in 1993. It is now part of the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) charter and the standards for Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) delivering accredited training. Within these charters and standards it is mandatory for RPL to be offered to all applicants on enrolment.

The National Principles and Operational Guidelines for RPL, compiled by the AQF Advisory Board and endorsed in 2004, list seventeen principles for RPL. The principles, which have most relevance here are:

3. RPL is critical to the development of an open, accessible, inclusive, integrated and relevant post-compulsory education and training system, and is a key foundation for lifelong learning policies that encourage individuals to participate in learning pathways, that include formal, non-formal and informal learning;
4. There is no one RPL model that is suitable for all qualifications and all situations. In particular, different sectors give rise to different models. The model of RPL that is implemented must be aligned with the outcomes, goals and objectives of the qualification;
9. RPL assessment should be based on evidence, and should be equitable, culturally inclusive, fair, flexible, valid and reliable;
14. RPL information and support services should be actively promoted, easy to understand and recognise the diversity of learners;
16. Jurisdictions, institutions and providers should include RPL in access strategies for disadvantaged learners who are not in the workforce, or marginally attached to the workforce, and who are not already engaged with studying and training. (AQFAB, 2004, p.4)

## **How well has RPL worked in Australia?**

It has now been just over ten years since RPL was introduced and recent research has focused on whether the expected benefits have come to fruition (Bowman, et al, 2003; Wheelahan, et al, 2003; Cameron, 2004, Cameron & Miller, 2004b).

The general consensus in the literature is that RPL has failed to fulfil its promised potential of encouraging traditionally under-represented and disadvantaged groups to access formal education and training. To paraphrase a common theme within the literature, there is a gap between the promise and rhetoric of RPL and the actual reality (Cameron & Miller, 2004b).

A recent NCVET report found that the highest rates of RPL were for those students in the 25 – 39 year age range and that those with higher formal qualifications were more likely to use the RPL process (Bowman, et al, 2003, p. 37). However, the national aggregate figure for the uptake of RPL was 4% for 2001 with equity groups having relatively lower rates of RPL uptake. (Bowman, et al, 2003, p. 7)

An AQFAB report reached similar findings. In 2001 approximately 5% of students studying for a higher education qualification reported that they received RPL, while 8% of those studying a VET qualification reported that they received RPL. (This figure includes data for the ACE and VET in school sectors).

In terms of equity groups students with a disability who received RPL were slightly higher than those without a disability and students from regional areas were more likely to receive RPL than metropolitan based students.

Students from non-English speaking backgrounds were far less likely to receive RPL than students from English speaking backgrounds and Indigenous students received about half as much RPL as their non-Indigenous counterparts. (Wheelahan, et al, 2003, p. 20).

Overall, RPL was more likely to be received by older students, and by students who were studying part-time. Students who were working full-time were more likely to receive RPL. Unemployed students received the least RPL and credit transfer. Students who were not in the labour force did not achieve the same level of RPL as did students who were working part-time...those who are mid-career, established in the workforce, older, work full-time, and in associate professional, professional or managerial occupations benefit most from RPL. (Wheelahan, et al, 2003, p.20)

A Queensland Department of Education and Training report on the recognition of qualifications through multiple pathways (2003) compiled for the ANTA National Consistency Project found the majority of RTO's studied did not encourage RPL. Sixty one percent (61%) of RTOs who responded did not grant RPL for learners in any unit of competency. Twenty eight percent of RTOs (28%) granted RPL for more than 10 learners and eighteen percent (18%) granted RPL for 2-5 units of competency. (DET, 2003, p. 65)

## What is wrong with RPL?

In the Queensland report cited above, the RTOs reported a range of reasons for not encouraging RPL. Some of these included:

- the belief it was easier and 'better' for learners to revise knowledge and skills than to RPL;
- The RTO's RPL evidence structure and pre-RPL information discourages the learner to pursue an RPL pathway;
- The learner time needed to satisfy RPL evidence requests.

The report also noted several aspects of the RTO RPL strategies, which were not being used and thus limiting the potential for RPL. These included:

- A broad range of opportunities to provide evidence verification eg, written, questioning, skill testing, direct referee communication
- A holistic process for mapping learner evidence
- RPL information strategies for learners' past or present employers (DET, 2003, p. 65)

The NCVER report referred to earlier, identified the following barriers to the uptake of RPL:

- Awareness and perception
- Complex processes
- Inadequate support
- Confusing language (Bowman, et al, 2003, p. 16)

The report concluded that equity group members were more likely to participate in training rather than seek recognition because of the perceived benefits they would gain by actually undertaking the training course. These benefits include the social dimension of the course itself, a supportive group environment and that the training is seen as a stepping-off point & strategy for building confidence.

The AQFAB report discusses the paradox of RPL when exploring barriers to RPL for disadvantaged groups.

The paradox of RPL is that it is assessing an individual's learning that has occurred mostly *outside* formal education and training, but it requires high levels of knowledge of these formal education and training contexts and the structure of qualifications and language used in education, to prepare a successful RPL application (Wheelahan, et al, 2003, p. 29)

In preparing this current paper a small sample of Registered Training Organisations and non-registered adult learning providers throughout Queensland were interviewed about what they considered useful or not useful about RPL. Their responses confirm the views about RPL identified in the literature, and represent their responses to RPL's usefulness for mature age job seekers: as this sample of comments shows:

If people have the time and evidence RPL can be useful and helpful. It is more useful in building confidence and encouraging them to take the first step into training.

Sometimes it is easier to do the training than the RPL application.

Clients who are long term unemployed need assistance with motivation and self esteem. They want the group activities the program offers... RPL doesn't do anything for motivation.

It is not helpful for the long term unemployed as they have no recent skills.

Providing evidence is very challenging ... how do you demonstrate or prove you have 'good interpersonal' skills or can demonstrate 'teamwork'?

RPL should be introduced ... at a point in time after commencement of the course. If they are confronted with it prior to commencement or at commencement they will walk away from it...You'll be better to judge how much you do know and don't know by starting the training.

RPL should be useful and helpful but we are not funded to encourage it. There is a high level of administration costs to do it...It is not treated as a way of getting recognised. Training providers don't see it that way. They see it as losing money through cross crediting.

RPL can be a stumbling block because of the jargon and idea of it being so overwhelming. You need to have a very supportive role in the whole process.

We have people enquiring about RPL 'off the street'. They are usually employed and wanting to obtain formal recognition. For example the building services authority industry require people employed in the building industry to have completed a TAFE course. For these people it is useful. It can allow someone better opportunities to obtain work. It allows them to go out on their own and become self employed.

People don't know it exists. It depends on the occupation stream they have been in. There is an intimidation factor for those with a lack of formal training.

The problem seems to be that the mature aged no longer have the paper based evidence to support their RPL applications ... Many of our clients have chosen to do the training itself as the RPL process is beyond them.

The cause of these responses towards RPL may ultimately lay in the observation from a National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) report into RPL and private training providers, which concluded that:

There is no clear agreement among writers, researchers and major policy-influencing agencies regarding what RPL is, does or encompasses. Views vary from quite tightly defined notions of RPL as access to a training program or qualification, through to conceptions of RPL as a reflective process that can directly impact on understandings and applications of the learning process, both for learners and trainers. (Smith 2004, p.11)

### **Can RPL be made to work?**

Several of the recent reports about RPL have attempted to provide some guidance on how RPL might be 'rescued'. For example, the NCVET report recommends:

- greater collaboration between assessors, the community & staff responsible for equity support
- the use of group processes- a modular approach
- developing & promoting RPL practical case study examples and strategies to encourage more learners to engage with RPL processes. (Bowman, et al, 2003, p. 49)

The Queensland DET report proposed a set of strategic responses including:

- Using more client-friendly and less paper-based application processes. Providing alternatives to portfolios, which take a more holistic approach to assessment.
- Using more observation, general questioning and third parties for verification of evidence.
- Making RPL an upfront & actively encouraged part of integrated planning and progression for students.
- A shift from student-driven to teacher-driven models of RPL. (Qld DET, 2003, p. 2)

The AQFAB report suggests that more support for RPL applicants is needed if RPL is to become a mechanism for social inclusion. It identifies a need for students to learn about the potential of RPL and its use. (Wheelahan, et al, 2003, p. 442).

Two respondents in the Queensland survey undertaken for this paper already seems to have adopted broader approaches to conducting RPL. They talked about using third party evidence in the RPL process and a more proactive role for the assessor :

Through my activities in the last 5 years I have promoted a more liberal RPL. Evidence can be provided by a third party. It is not focused on documentation they come along with. The assessors get their own documentation through the applicants past employers. For one employer the RPL process was used as a performance review process.

I would rather use the terms 'accelerated progression', flexible learning and flexible delivery. People with life skills tend to accelerate a lot faster through the training.

## RPL the right process for the wrong job?

These uses, recommendations and strategic responses around RPL as outlined in this paper have all been made within the confines of conceiving of RPL as a form of assessment. As a consequence RPL is viewed as an access mechanism for an individual person, for a particular course, at a particular institution, at a particular point in time. This may be limiting the possibilities of RPL.

Perhaps there is a need to broaden the vision of recognition possibilities to create a model that is not limited by a direct relationship to assessment or credit exchange. A model that is focused on the learner and the learning process. A model situated in the spaces and places those members of equity groups identify with. A model framed by the wider objectives of lifelong learning (Cameron & Miller, 2004a).

What is needed is an approach to recognition, which provides those who participate in it with skills and knowledge that better enable them to make informed decisions and choices about their future plans

The table below, drawing from several international writers working on RPL in the 1990s, presents the key characteristics and features of two models described in the literature. The models are on two poles of a continuum with many variations present between the two poles.

The major differences are in the emphases and purposes. The credentialing model is focused upon the outcome and views RPL as a form of assessment while the developmental model is focused upon the learning processes and not necessarily concerned with achieving a credit outcome.

	<b>Credential Model</b>	<b>Developmental Model</b>
<b>Ideology</b>	Market orientated vocationalism	Person-orientated - associated with a form of humanism
<b>Epistemology</b>	Behaviourist - knowledge and skill acquisition as objectively measurable, aggregative	Knowledge and understanding seen as constructed by individual and integrated into their cognitive structures
<b>Discourse</b>	Human capital theory Knowledge and competence - products	Humanist language of 'Learner centeredness'
<b>Features</b>	Based on <b>frameworks of Vocational Qualifications</b> - job-role notion of competence  <b>Discourse</b> of efficiency, accreditation, competence, access, transparency, equality of opportunity and mobility  Institution driven <b>Sites</b> of formal education	Development and empowerment of the individual- confidence building, self improvement and self actualisation  <b>Reflective process</b> - act as a transformative social mechanism Self-direction basis for enhancing self knowledge Learning process in it own right - with intrinsic value

	provision and accredited training  The claimant exchanges proof of past achievements for course credits Onus is on the applicant to provide 'proof'  Claimant can receive credit	<b>Role of tutor-</b> assisting learners to make links between different learning contexts Centrality of rigorous dialogue with a supportive 'outsider' - trained educator  Claimant can receive credit plus significant personal & professional development
<b>Focus</b>	Outcome Commodity exchange 'Equivalence'	Process Learner centred Equity principles embedded

**Source: Cameron & Miller (2004a)**

Prominent researchers from Britain have called for a focus on the transformative aspects of Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL), Britain's term for RPL:

The value assigned to the APEL process should not be restricted to its use as a springboard into more formal learning. The personal value of engaging in the APEL process in terms of confidence-building and promoting self-direction should be emphasised as a key, rather than secondary outcome. The APEL process provides a basis for enhancing self-knowledge in a way which encourages personal development and prepares learners not only for further learning, but also for the labour market' (Whittaker, et al, 2002, p.6).

The dominant model of RPL currently practiced in Australia is the credentialing model. Perhaps it is necessary to extend principle 4 of the newly endorsed National Principles and Operational Guidelines for RPL (see above) and adopt, within Australia, the realisation that there is no one model of RPL, which is suitable for all situations and qualifications, to which we might add the words, *or outcomes*.

## USEFUL RESOURCES

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