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RPL: Why has it failed to act as a mechanism for social change?

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Recognition of prior learning (RPL) was introduced into Australia as part of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). A major tenet and driver of RPL relates to social justice and its promise to act as a mechanism for social inclusion. RPL was seen as a means to offer those groups who traditionally did not participate in post compulsory education and training an opportunity to have their work and life experiences recognised. Initially, the rhetoric was full of promise however, over the ten or so years since its inception recent research paints a different picture. The identified barriers to the up take of RPL, who applies for it, at what qualification level and in what sectors attests to the fact that the promise has not been realised (Wheelahan, et al, 2003; Bowman, et al, 2003).

Keywords: RPL; equity; access

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Introduction

With the introduction of recognition of prior learning (RPL) in Australia and overseas came the promise of creating greater inclusion in formal education and training for those who have gained little benefit from the education system in the past. The social justice rhetoric surrounding the introduction of RPL anticipated RPL providing a mechanism for individuals to gain confidence from their own and the formal learning system's recognition of the knowledge and skills they acquired through life and work experiences. This paper will examine the gap between the promise and the reality of RPL's claim to social change.

Background to RPL

RPL was introduced in Australia as one of ten principles of the National Framework for the Recognition of Training (NFROT) in 1991 and subsequently as part of the charter establishing the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) in 1995. The Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board (AQFAB) commissioned a report into the policy and practice of RPL in Australia across the four sectors of post-compulsory education and training in 2002. The report concluded that due to the historical development and application of RPL in each of the sectors, differing sectoral definitions have arisen. The funding frameworks, policy, governance, accreditation and missions of each of the sectors have influenced the way in which RPL has been implemented. This in turn has contributed to a level of conceptual confusion (Wheelahan, et al, 2003). The AQFAB report along with two other research reports into RPL in Australia will be drawn upon to establish the state of play in Australia in reference to RPL up take and its promise of social change.

Recent Australian research

The following three reports have looked specifically at RPL policy and practice in Australia. The first report listed was commissioned by AQFAB to map RPL policy and practice in Australia, and to develop National Principles and Operational Guidelines for RPL in post-compulsory education and training. This report covers four sectors; higher education (HE); vocational education and training (VET); adult and community education (ACE) and secondary schools. The Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) commissioned the second report. The purpose of this report was to identify and analyse what drives and creates barriers to effective implementation of RPL in the VET sector. It has been used to provide advice to the National Training Quality Council on how to best support registered training organisations (RTOs) compliance with the Australian Qualifications Training Framework (AQTF) *Standards for registered training organisations*. The third report provides a strategic response by the Queensland Department of Employment and Training (Qld DET) to the findings of the first two reports.

These three reports focus on policy frameworks and implementation issues, as does much of the Australian literature on RPL in general (Wilson and Lilly, 1996; Smith and Keating, 1997; Pithers, 1999; Bateman and Knight, 2002; Doddrell, 2002; Brophy, 2004). There has also been an array of case study research with notable recent contributions focused on the aged care sector (Booth and Roy, 2004), private registered training providers (Smith, 2004) and enterprise-based RTOs (Blom, et al, 2004). During the initial stages of the introduction of RPL in Australia many Australian researchers focused upon the proposed benefits RPL would bring. It has now been just over ten years since RPL's introduction and research is now more focused on whether these benefits have come to fruition (Mattner, 1997; Pithers, 1999; Smith, 1999; Bowman, et al, 2003; Wheelahan, et al, 2003). The

general consensus 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.

The AQFAB and ANTA commissioned reports mentioned earlier both provide empirical evidence to support this. Both reports concluded that the uptake of RPL was relatively low. The ANTA report found that the major determinant of RPL was AQF level and the second major determinant was age. The national aggregate figure for the uptake of RPL was 4% for 2001 with equity groups having relatively lower rates of RPL uptake. Table 1 below details the key findings from this report.

Table 1: RPL activity in the VET sector, 2001

AQF level	Rate of RPL
Diploma Higher	10%
Cert I & II	2%
Non award	< 1%

Age range	Rate of RPL
Up to 19 yrs	2.1%
20-24 yrs	4.6%
25-39 yrs	5.0%
40-64 yrs	4.3%
Other	1.4%
All ages	4.0%

Equity groups	Rate of RPL
ATSI	2.1%
Reported disability	3.1%
NESB	3.9%

Within the VET sector	RPL activity
TAFE	4.7%
Private providers	3.0%
Community based providers	0.6%

Source: Bowman, et al, (2003)

The AQFAB report reached similar findings with some statistics needing clarification due to complexities involved in data sets and sectors. 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 (and was sourced from the ABS SETIT survey). In terms of equity groups students with a disability who received RPL was 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. Data was not available for students from low socio-economic backgrounds (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)

The AQFAB report concludes that RPL in Australia and overseas has not been successful in achieving its goal as a mechanism for social inclusion. Those who benefit most from RPL are those who have experience and success in post-compulsory education and training (Wheelahan, et al, 2003,p.27). It is those existing students with significant accumulated educational capital who are familiar with formal learning systems and the associated discourse who are more likely to utilise the RPL process.

Barriers to RPL-Reasons for its failure to act as a mechanism of social inclusion

Why has RPL failed to act as a mechanism for social change?

The barriers to RPL uptake and reasons for its failure to act as a mechanism for social inclusion are many and varied. This paper will look first at the barriers identified in the research and will then discuss the limitations imposed on approaches to RPL if it is viewed exclusively as a form of assessment before exploring what has been termed the paradox of RPL.

Identified barriers – equity considerations

The ANTA commissioned report 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 course / training. 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 report recommends:

- greater collaboration between assessors, the community & staff responsible for equity support.
- the use of group processes- 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 AQFAB commissioned report identified six major problem / issue areas which impeded the implementation of RPL across all sectors. The report's response to these problem areas encompassed a set of principles and possible strategies and have recently been endorsed by AQFAB as a set of National Principles and Operational Guidelines for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). The principles particularly relevant to equity considerations are listed below.

'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)

The Queensland DET report compiled a set of strategic responses. Those most relevant to this discussion can be summarised as:

- Client-friendly, less paper-based processes. Alternatives to portfolios which take a more holistic approach to assessment.
- Using more observation, general questioning & third parties for verification
- RPL upfront & actively encouraged part of integrated planning & progression for students
- Shift from student-driven to teacher-driven models

(Qld DET, 2003, p. 2)

Limitations of RPL as a form of assessment

All three of the reports have made recommendations to address the identified barriers to the engagement of equity groups with RPL processes. These recommendations and strategic responses 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. It is argued that this creates a *narrowness* around the possibilities of RPL approaches and confines RPL practice as a result. We need to broaden our vision of recognition possibilities to encompass a developmental, 'not for credit' model of recognition. 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 of RPL framed by the wider objectives of lifelong learning (Cameron, 2004).

The paradox of RPL

Fraser (1995) first referred to accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) as a having a fundamental paradox and a double-edged sword in her analysis of the experience of conducting Making Your Experience Count (MEC) programmes. These programmes were conducted through a workers education association (WEA) centre for a variety of purposes in Kent, Britain. She perceived that the fundamental paradox of APEL derived from the fact that on one hand we encourage students to engage in self reflection / a journey of self discovery however when we open that private sphere up to approval of an external reader or assessor we are opening the students private world to public adjudication.

APEL ‘...operates at the margins between our private and our public selves because it intervenes at the sites of self-disclosure, selection, relevance and control. In begging the question ‘count towards what’ it can either ‘cut the ties that bind’ or sever our connection to perhaps the most creative parts of our selves because they are not ‘relevant’”
(Fraser, 1995, p. xiv)

Trowler (1996) refers to the problem of translation in the developmental approach to APEL. He draws attention to the different effects the reflective process can have for different learners. For some it leads to increased self-confidence and learning. However, for others it can mean a distancing from the learner and his/her learning to the point that the learner loses personal control. (1996, p 24). Trowler also points to the fact that students require the possession of cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) to successfully apply for APEL. He addresses the unexamined question concerning the resources needed by candidates of APEL. These resources he has grouped under aspects of the concept of cultural capital, which are important for educational success. Students are required to have confidence, knowledge of the academic conventions of written expression, facility in language use and conceptual thought. Trowler critiques the developmental model of APEL as requiring exactly the sort of qualities, which have ensured underrepresented groups remained underrepresented in higher education in the past (1996, p 28).

A comparative research project on APEL and social inclusion from the learners’ perspective conducted through the European Commission: Socrates-Grundtvig Project also refers to the double-edged phenomena of APEL.

‘...experiential learning – as a type of informal learning – has value in its own right and its value should not be judged simply in association with processes of formal accreditation. Processes of accreditation – and processes of APEL in particular – may in fact act as a barrier to social inclusion. In this respect, APEL is a double-edged phenomena – in one sense it serves to give recognition to informal types of learning (personal experiential learning) and in other respects, because of its formality it can act as a deterrent to processes of social inclusion’
(Cleary, et al, 2002, p 18)

Wheelahan, et al, also refer to the paradox of RPL, which assumes the process of translation is relatively straightforward.

‘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)

Conclusion

The initial promise of RPL to act as a mechanism of social change and inclusion has failed. Those who have benefited most from RPL provision cannot be considered disadvantaged in terms of access and participation in post-compulsory education and training. RPL has failed due to a range of reasons stemming not only from the barriers identified in the research but also from the limitations imposed upon its practice if it is perceived as a form of assessment only. The credentialing model of RPL is the model most commonly practiced in Australia and contains within it assumptions about RPL applicants. These assumptions centre around the *levels* of literacy of RPL applicants, the applicant's *ability* to translate experienced into codified knowledge and the applicants *familiarity* and knowledge of systems of formal learning. The paradox of RPL is that it assumes all applicants will have what Trowler (1996) refers to as the necessary cultural capital to successfully apply.

The fact that the groups of people RPL was designed to assist the most (those groups with little formal post compulsory education and training and underrepresented in formal learning) are required and expected to have certain resources (accumulated levels and combinations of cultural capital) which the lack there of, contributes greatly to the very conditions upon which they are under represented in formal education in the first place.

'...RPL practices are capable of multiple significations and that those concerned with the design and implementation of RPL could benefit from being aware of the various ways of seeing the practice and could combine this with a critical reading of the discourses of societal, institutional and curricular contexts in order to reveal possibilities for inclusive approaches.' (Harris, 1999, p 124)

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