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Recognition of prior learning: policy and practice in Australia

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Recognition of Prior Learning: Policy and Practice in Australia

This research report has been prepared by a consortium led by Southern Cross University, which has been commissioned by the Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board to:

- research RPL policy and practice in Australia; and,
- develop National RPL Principles and Operational Guidelines common to all sectors of post-compulsory education and training.

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"It seems to be a matter of researching the applicable jargon and using bucketloads of it!"

Response by a student to our question on the website questionnaire, which asked what they would differently if they were to apply for RPL again.

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Table of contents

List of tables

List of case-studies

Acronyms

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ABSCQ	Australian Bureau of Statistics Classification of Qualifications
ACACA	Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Certification Authorities
ACCI	Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry
ACE	Adult and Community Education
ACFE	Adult Community Further Education Division Victoria
ACPET	Australian Council for Private Education and Training
ACTU	Australian Council of Trade Unions
AEU	Australian Education Union
ALA	Adult Learning Association
ANTA	Australian National Training Authority
APEL	Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning
APL	Accreditation of Prior Learning
AQF	Australian Qualifications Framework
AQTF	Australian Quality Training Framework
ASCED	Australian Standard Classification of Education
ATSIC	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission.
ASEM	Asia-Europe Meeting
Austudy	Strictly means-tested income support or living allowance.
AVCC	Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee
CAPA	Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations
CAPLA	Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment
CBT	Competency based training
CAE	Centre for Adult Education
CFMEU	Construction, Forestry, Mining, Energy Union
DETYA	Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs
DEST	Department of Education, Science and Technology.
DfEE	Department of Education and Employment, England
DIMIA	Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs
EFTSU	Equivalent full time student unit
ETQAs	Education and Training Quality Assurance bodies in South Africa
FE	Further Education
HECS	Higher Education Contribution Scheme
MDP	Management Development Program, Queensland Police Service
MCEETYA	Ministerial Council for Employment Education Training and Youth Affairs
NCVER	National Centre for Vocational Education Research
NTEU	National Tertiary Education Union
OPCET	Office of Post-Compulsory Education and Training in Tasmania

OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PLA	Prior Learning Assessment
PLAR	Prior Learning and Assessment Recognition
QETO	Quality Endorsed Training Organisation
QUT	Queensland University of Technology
RCC	Recognition of Current Competency
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
RTO	Registered Training Organisation
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
SCOTVEC	Scottish Vocational Education Council
SETIT	Survey of Education Training and Information Technology
SOS	Student Outcomes Survey
SQA	Scottish Qualifications Authority
SSABSA	Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia
SR	Skills Recognition
SRA	Skills Recognition Assessment
TAFE	Technical and Further Education.
TDA	TAFE Directors Australia
VCAA	Victoria Curriculum Assessment Authority
VET	Vocational education and training.

Report summary and recommendations

One of the key objectives of the Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board is to facilitate pathways to formal qualifications that are based on, or include, prior learning that has occurred outside formal education and training. Learning occurs in many contexts that include work, involvement in social, community or sporting activities, or learning through life experience generally. Much of this informal or non-formal learning is relevant to the learning or competency outcomes of formal qualifications within the Australian Qualifications Framework. Recognition of prior learning is a process designed to assess (or credential) that learning so that it can be counted towards achievement of a qualification.

The AQF Advisory Board commissioned this project to identify obstacles to the implementation of RPL, and to identify mechanisms that facilitate increased use of RPL. In preparing the project brief, the AQF Advisory Board aimed to, through the project:

- facilitate and increase the use of RPL as a pathway towards the partial or complete achievement of a qualification;
- improve access to learning pathways, particularly for students from social backgrounds that are under-represented in post-compulsory education and training;
- promote lifelong learning; and,
- increase the consistency in the way in which RPL is applied in each of the four sectors of post-compulsory education and training.

Consequently, the AQF Advisory Board commissioned:

- research on RPL policy and practice in Australia in each of the four sectors of post-compulsory education and training; and,
- the development of a set of national common principles and operational guidelines for Recognition of Prior Learning for the four sectors of post-compulsory education and training in Australia. These sectors are:
  - ➢ senior secondary school;
  - ➢ adult and community education (ACE);
  - ➢ vocational education and training (VET); and,
  - ➢ higher education.

We have developed a discussion paper with the draft national common RPL principles and operational guidelines, and this is available from the website developed for this project. Public comment on the draft principles and guidelines is sought, and comments must be received by Monday, 25 November, 2002. [1]

For the purposes of this project, we have defined RPL as follows:

> RPL assesses the *individual's* non-formal and informal learning to determine the extent to which that individual has achieved the required learning outcomes, competency outcomes, or standards for entry to, and/or partial or total completion of, a qualification;

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[1] The discussion paper with the draft national common RPL principles and operational guidelines is available at the RPL website established for this project: http://www.scu.edu.au/research/rpl/index.html

RPL is distinguished from credit transfer in the following way:

> Credit transfer assesses *the initial course or subject* that the individual is using to claim access to, or the award of credit in, the destination course to determine the extent to which it is equivalent to the required learning outcomes, competency outcomes, or standards in a qualification. This may include credit transfer based on formal learning that is outside the AQF structure.

The key distinguishing characteristic is that it is the *student* who is assessed in the case of RPL, and the *course* or *subject* in the case of credit transfer. That is, in credit transfer the judgement is about the learning program, outcomes and assessment in the initial course or subject. Many students will use both RPL and credit transfer simultaneously, as the learning pathways students use, combined with their life and work experience are becoming increasingly complex.

Sectoral definitions of RPL are diverse, and they have not converged in recent years. The definitions and approaches to RPL reflect the diverse sectoral missions, funding and accreditation arrangements and their historical development. However, while there are differences between the sectors over the extent to which RPL can be implemented, and the processes for doing so, there was remarkable consistency in both the obstacles that were identified, and the enabling mechanisms that would lead to its greater implementation. This is the basis for common RPL principles and operational guidelines that each sector could use to guide policy development. This would help to promote greater understanding of RPL among stakeholders, particularly students, and greater understanding by one sector of the processes used in another sector. This is important in helping one sector to have confidence in the RPL decisions made by another. The common national RPL principles and operational guidelines are flexible, and still provide each sector with the scope needed to implement RPL in a way that is consistent with the sectoral missions. They have been developed following extensive consultation with stakeholders in all sectors.

RPL is important in qualifications frameworks in Australia and overseas, and is a key component in reforms to these frameworks that aim to increase access to, and participation in, post-compulsory education and training pathways. One of the key drivers for RPL was its perceived capacity to act as a mechanism for social inclusion for those who have not had the opportunity to participate in, or who have had negative experiences of, post-compulsory education and training, but who nonetheless have much learning that is relevant to qualification outcomes. However, despite the prominence given to RPL in policy frameworks, we found that the take-up of RPL is relatively low, and that it has not acted as a mechanism for social inclusion to education and training pathways for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.[2] Those who have benefited most are those with the most experience in post-compulsory education and training, and who do not come from socially disadvantaged groups. Approximately 5% of those enrolled in higher education qualifications reported that they received RPL, while almost 8% of those in enrolled VET qualifications reported that they receive RPL. Data are not available for the school sector, and we think that very few school students receive RPL, reflecting the early stage of development of RPL policies and processes in this sector. Much of the data for the ACE sector is included in reporting for the VET sector.

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[2] There are some exceptions to this, and this is discussed in chapter 4: Who receives RPL

Four key findings shaped our report, recommendations, and the draft national RPL principles and operational guidelines. The first is that there are at least two models of RPL in Australia, and the proponents of these models are engaged in debate as to which model should prevail. The existence of the two models is expressed in the skirmishing in Australia over whether there is a difference between RPL on the one hand and Recognition of Current Competency (RCC) on the other. Some people say there is no difference, and others insist there is: RPL is about certifying *learning*, some say, whereas RCC is about certifying *competence* in a workplace. Others say that in so far as competence involves learning, any distinction is meaningless. We think that the way through these issues is to acknowledge frankly that there are different philosophical approaches, which give rise to different models of RPL, and that both are valid and have a role to play. These different models are reflected in the two key 'discourses' that are used to talk about RPL:

- the first focuses on RPL as a *learning process* in its own right. The focus here is to use RPL for self-improvement, personal development, and self-actualisation. This is the humanist language of 'learner-centredness'. The main focus is not certification. We can describe this as the developmental model of RPL; and,
- the second focuses on RPL as a mechanism of credentialling. This is part of the discourse of "efficiency, accreditation, competence, access, transparency, equality of opportunity and mobility" (Harris, 1997: 9). This is from the language of 'human capital theory,' in which individuals make decisions about their own 'investment' in their education, related to the likely returns they will receive. This may be described as the credentialling model of RPL.

Both these models are valid, and one is not better than the other, as they are designed to meet different needs. Moreover, while both models will be implemented in all sectors, it may be that one sector emphasises one to a greater extent than others. This is also reflected in the extent to which RPL can be used to achieve a qualification. The higher education and school sectors generally do not provide for a whole qualification to be awarded on the basis of RPL, whereas this pathway is possible in the VET and ACE sectors.

Some courses focus more on self-development, and the development of reflective practitioners, while others are more concerned with the development of specific skills. Some courses do both. We do not expect courses and qualifications within and between the sectors to have the same goals or outcomes. We should not expect RPL to have one goal or outcome. To do so is to privilege RPL as something distinct from the course or qualification within which it is embedded.

Student support and RPL assessment methods need to be aligned to the course and qualification outcomes. Conceiving of RPL in this way allows for greater diversity in the way RPL is understood and implemented. It becomes clear that there is no *one* approach towards RPL, or *one* point in a student's learning career where RPL should be implemented

The second key finding is that the approach to RPL in Australia has been to focus on the *outcome* (the actual assessment and the outcome of assessment) and less on the *process* of RPL. In doing so, we have not adequately considered the support students need to effectively participate in, and use RPL. Our existing approach to RPL assumes that there is a relatively straightforward process of 'translation' between the student's prior learning and the learning outcomes or competency standards against which they are being assessed. However, personal

learning is not neatly packaged for comparison with academic or course requirements. The assessment process often assumes it is, or can be made to be without difficulty. 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. Students need support in acquiring the skills they need to participate in RPL, in the same way they need support to learn to undertake other forms of assessment, for example, how to write essays or sit exams.

There may benefits from harnessing the development of skills to learn to use RPL (both the developmental and credentialling models), and processes which help students learn the skills they need to become lifelong learners. To use RPL effectively, students need to develop the skills of self-evaluation and self assessment, career planning, 'learning to learn' and 'learning to be assessed'. These skills are also intrinsic to lifelong learning. We cite examples in the report from England and Australia where subjects or modules have been developed that students enrol in to prepare their RPL application. This has the advantage of allowing students to use their current learning in their course to reflect on their past experience, to learn the discourse of the institution and the area in which they are studying, and most importantly, to be provided with (funded) support from teaching staff in this process. Of course, not all students need to undertake such a subject or module, and some only need do it once, but there are many students who need this level of support, and existing frameworks do not make it possible for them to receive it

The third key finding is that funding disincentives constitute a major impediment to the more widespread implementation of RPL in all sectors. Higher education receives no funding for RPL, either from student fees or from government. The funding arrangements for the VET sector differ between the States and Territories. Some states fund RPL module enrolments at the same level as taught module enrolments. Other states fund RPL module enrolments at a lower level. The funding arrangements in the ACE sector are more opaque. Where ACE delivers VET funded programs, they are funded in the same way as VET providers are for those programs. Funding arrangements in the school sector are even more difficult to disentangle because of the differences between states and territories in the ways schools are funded in general, and how VET in schools is funded in particular. States differ in the extent to which VET in schools is funded within total school education appropriations. How RPL is funded against other aspects of the curriculum (in those areas in which it is permitted) is even more difficult to establish, but is likely to be required to be absorbed into individual schools' operating budgets. We propose the following measures to begin to address the funding issues:

- funding bodies in each sector should review their arrangements to remove funding disincentives. The Commonwealth should revisit the current prohibition for universities to charge fees for RPL for HECS funded students, while States and Territories should consider funding models that reflect the true cost of delivering RPL;
- all sectors should consider developing, accrediting and funding RPL subjects, modules or units that support learners in acquiring the skills they need to prepare RPL applications; and,
- sectors should consider developing RPL strategies that are premised on supporting enterprises or industries to use RPL, as this enables large-scale approaches with built-in economies of scale.

The fourth key finding is that the main anxiety about RPL is to do with ensuring the quality and rigour of RPL outcomes. This is expressed in the following question: "are assessment outcomes equal to outcomes achieved by students who have completed the formal course and assessment, and how do you know?" This problem was broken down and examined through exploring the following issues:

- the problem of defining 'graduateness';
- competencies or learning outcomes that are inappropriate or inadequate;
- hostility to RPL by teaching staff and/or institutions;
- different expectations arising from different cultures of enterprises and education and training institutions;
- variable and subjective RPL assessments;
- one sector not knowing what the other is doing or how they do it;
- inappropriate or inadequate or 'dodgy' practices; and,
- existing sectoral quality assurance frameworks and how they may be improved.

There is no simple answer to the problem of quality. It requires a suite of strategies and approaches, and clear identification of what the problems may be. Often the problem is not RPL as such, it is:

- the appropriateness or otherwise of RPL for particular areas;
- the extent to which learning or competency outcomes reflect the 'hidden curriculum' embedded in qualifications;
- hostility to change and unwillingness to consider new approaches to teaching and learning;
- the different outcomes sought by diverse groups of stakeholders in education and training;
- assessment practices in general;
- sectoral relations; or,
- difficulties in complying with onerous requirements.

Each of these require a different response, but taken together will do much to improve the confidence in RPL outcomes. However, it is clear that quality assurance processes surrounding RPL need to be made more explicit. This does not mean that they have to be distinguished from other quality assurance frameworks, only explicitly included among them, particularly those relating to assessment. It is important that the quality assurance mechanisms and assessment processes relating to RPL are not *more* rigorous than other mechanisms and processes, but they do need to be explicit and transparent, and decisions need to be accountable.

In addition to the issues discussed above, the report identifies obstacles associated with implementing RPL, in particular the overly bureaucratic processes that are often involved, and the lack of awareness by students and stakeholders as to what RPL is and how they can use it. It also identifies mechanisms (in addition to those discussed above) that can facilitate the implementation of RPL, in particular through incorporating RPL principles into flexible and student-centred approaches to learning, providing staff with time to support students in preparing RPL applications and to assess RPL applications, publicising RPL in accessible language (particularly on the web), and including RPL assessment processes as part of institutional negotiations about credit transfer and articulation within sectors and between sectors.

Recommendations

While the national common RPL principles and guidelines will be an important component of strategies to increase the extent to which RPL is implemented, there are still systemic, sectoral and institutional issues that require attention. These recommendations augment the draft RPL principles and operational guidelines. This section outlines recommendations based on the discussion and findings in the report.

These recommendations are the considered views of the project consultants, resulting from the extensive research into and consideration of the issues. The recommendations have not been endorsed by the AQF Advisory Board or its RPL Steering Committee.

Recommendation 1: support for learners

That institutions, sectors and jurisdictions develop a suite of strategies to support learners to understand and effectively use RPL. This may include the development of formal subjects, units, modules or competencies in which students can enrol to:
- determine if RPL is an appropriate strategy in their circumstances;
- determine which subjects, units, modules or competencies in which to seek RPL in their circumstances;
- prepare their RPL applications;
- receive advice and support from teaching staff as to the sorts of experiences and learning that will be considered, and how to produce evidence that is valid, authentic, and sufficient; and,
- where appropriate and aligned to the course or qualification outcomes, develop the skills of self-assessment, self-evaluation and career planning.

Such subjects, units, modules or competencies may or may not be credit bearing in their own right. However, they may be most effective if harnessed to strategies to help learners acquire the skills they need to become lifelong learners, and if this is the model chosen, the award of credit in its own right for such a subject is a legitimate outcome.

Recommendation 2: information for learners

That institutions, relevant sectoral bodies, and jurisdictions develop information about RPL that is easily accessible and simple. It is recommended that information include the following components:

- information on the web about RPL that includes advice as what it is, how to use it, the type of learning and experiences that will be considered, what sort of evidence is required, who to contact for more information, where to go for support in preparing the application, expected timelines, and appeals processes;
- information in handbooks, and course, subject, module, unit and competency guides along the same lines;
- a clear statement of learning or competency outcomes that will be used to assess RPL applications;

- simple, introductory leaflets and other advertising to let students know about RPL and where to go to get more information;
- exemplars of effective RPL applications;
- case-studies, to provide examples of the sort of experiences and learning that can be used in RPL processes; and,
- active promotion of RPL among existing and potential students.

Recommendation 3: international RPL policy development

That the AQF Advisory Board give consideration to how Australia can participate in, contribute to, and learn from, international RPL projects, and countries that are developing national RPL policy frameworks and implementation projects.

Recommendation 4: funding

That the jurisdictions give consideration to funding models that act as an incentive to implement RPL. RPL needs to be fully funded if it is to be implemented. Such funding models may focus on ways in which economies of scale can be achieved, through identifying groups or industries where RPL may contribute to addressing particular needs. Review of existing funding frameworks are necessary, particularly in higher education where universities are not funded to, nor allowed to charge students fees to, implement RPL. In the VET sector, consideration is needed to achieve consistency in the funding models used for RPL across all jurisdictions.

Recommendation 5: quality assurance

It is recommended to all sectors, jurisdictions and institutions, that:

- RPL be explicitly included in institutional negotiations and agreements regarding credit transfer and articulation;
- RPL processes and assessments be explicitly included in institutional quality assurance processes, particularly those to do with assessment, to assure all stakeholders of the standing and integrity of RPL outcomes;
- audits of institutional quality assurance processes and procedures include examination of the quality assurance arrangements used to underpin RPL policies and processes.

Recommendation 6: RPL as flexible learning

That institutions and jurisdictions encourage teaching practices and approaches to assessment that incorporate RPL as a component of flexible, student-centred learning, and that staff development be made available to assist teaching staff in developing these practices and approaches.

Recommendation 7: staff development

That institutions provide support for teaching and administrative staff to develop the knowledge and skills needed to effectively implement RPL, and to incorporate RPL into the mainstream of the life of the institution.

Recommendation 8: partnerships with Indigenous communities

That jurisdictions and peak bodies give consideration to funding and developing a research partnership with Indigenous communities to develop approaches to RPL that are:

- culturally appropriate;
- explore culturally inclusive approaches to providing evidence that learners have met the required learning or competency outcomes; and,
- explore approaches that draw on existing Community structures and roles for evidence that participants have met the learning or competency outcomes.

Such research partnerships need to build on the joint ANTA/ ATSIC project on developing appropriate and effective RPL models for use by and in remote Indigenous communities for VET qualifications. The findings of this report and project need to be used as a basis for the higher education, school and ACE sectors in developing appropriate models.

Recommendation 9: partnerships with industry

That jurisdictions and peak bodies give consideration to funding and developing a research partnership with industry, peak bodies, employer bodies and unions to develop industry-wide RPL projects, particularly in areas where there are low levels of educational attainment.

Recommendation 10: supporting the development of RPL in schools

It is recommended that jurisdictions, ANTA, and DEST give consideration to funding a research project that seeks to understand how principles such as RPL and RCC can be effectively incorporated in the senior school certificates, while maintaining the integrity and standards of these certificates. The implementation of RPL in the senior secondary school system is in the very early stages. Research is required to develop effective approaches for including learning that occurs outside school as part of the learning that occurs within schools, particularly in the senior school certificates. The ANTA *Due Credit* Report (Australian National Training Authority, 2001) is timely, and the focus in that report is congruent with objectives that seek to increase the extent to which RPL is used in the secondary school system.

Recommendation 11: supporting the implementation of RPL in the ACE sector

That MCEETYA fund pilot projects that aim to:

- develop RPL modules or subjects that provide learners with support in understanding RPL and how to use it. Funding provision of this sort in the ACE sector may help learners access VET and higher education, as ACE is often used by people as a stepping stone to the other sectors, and recognising and enriching this role currently played by ACE will help to further this process;
- assist ACE in developing systems and processes that allow it to meet the AQTF audit requirements relating to RPL. Providers in the ACE sector do not have access to the same resources as do larger institutions in the other sectors, and providing this level of support will help to embed RPL as part of mainstream provision in ACE;
- develop, trial and evaluate a model which allows ACE providers to share access to trained RPL assessors to work with providers, particularly providers that are not Registered Training Organisations. This would ensure that students and clients in all ACE providers have access to RPL, even if their provider is not an RTO. This should include developing a network of trained assessors who can support each other, disseminate good practice, and ensure geographic coverage.

Government policy is increasingly focussing on the ACE sector as a key avenue for supporting people to become involved in learning, particularly those who have not had the opportunity to do so, and those whose experiences in other sectors have resulted in feelings of marginalisation and alienation from formal education and training. The MCEETYA Ministerial Declaration on ACE (Ministerial Council for Employment Education Training and Youth Affairs, 2002) lists the use of RPL as a key enabling strategy for involving people in learning. The above recommendations are suggested as a means of operationalising the MCEETYA Ministerial Declaration on ACE as it relates to RPL.

Recommendation 12: developing an Australian RPL network of practitioners and researchers

That DEST consider funding and supporting the development of an Australian RPL researchers and practitioners network to undertake RPL research, and disseminate good practice models. Such a network would also help contribute to the development of more consistent policies and practices across the sectors. This project has identified RPL researchers and practitioners all over Australia in all sectors and this provides the basis for such an approach. Moreover, a cross-sectoral RPL network can build upon the existing RPL assessor networks in the VET sector in some States and Territories.

Recommendation 13: reporting

That consideration be given by the Federal, State and Territory governments to developing consistent reporting for RPL across sectors to allow for the development of nationally comparable data that provides accurate information about RPL, the extent to which it is being implemented, where it is being implemented, who benefits most, and where emerging needs are being identified.

1   Introduction

The Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board has initiated a project to develop national recognition of prior learning (RPL) principles and operational guidelines for post-compulsory education and training in Australia, which includes the senior secondary school, adult and community education, vocational education and training and higher education sectors. This chapter outlines the aims, objectives and background to the project, the way in which the project has defined recognition of prior learning and distinguished it from credit transfer, examples of both, and finally, the way in which each sector defines RPL.

In May 2002, the Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board commissioned a project to:

- research existing policies and practices relating to Recognition of Prior Learning in the senior secondary school, adult and community education, vocational education and training, and higher education sectors in Australia; and,
- develop cross-sectoral, national RPL principles and operational guidelines

The AQF is committed to supporting the development of a range of pathways within and between sectors, including pathways based partly or wholly on recognition of prior learning. One of the key objectives of the AQF is to:

"help with developing flexible pathways which assist people to move more easily between education and training sectors and between those sectors and the labour market by providing the basis for recognition of prior learning, including credit transfer and work and life experience."[3]

The aim of the project was to make it easier for Australians to embark on a learning pathway leading to a qualification, and to have their informal and non-formal learning counted as part of that pathway. This requires greater consistency between sectors in the way informal and non-formal prior learning is assessed and counted towards a qualification, or for entry into a qualification.

Vision for RPL

Learning occurs in many contexts that include work, involvement in social, community or sporting activities, or learning through life experience generally. Much of this informal or non-formal learning is relevant to the learning or competency outcomes of formal qualifications within the AQF. Recognition of prior learning is a process designed to assess (or credential) that learning so that it can be counted towards achievement of a qualification.

The reasons why recognising prior informal and non-formal learning is an important objective of the AQF Advisory Board are because:

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[3] See http://www.aqf.edu.au/aboutaqf.htm#key

- people should not be required to repeat, and pay for, learning they have already achieved, if it does not add value to the course or qualification they are undertaking;
- governments and taxpayers should not have to pay for learning to be repeated, when it has already been achieved;
- many individuals have not had the opportunity either to participate in formal post-compulsory education and training, particularly people from disadvantaged groups or communities, or when they have participated, they may have had negative experiences of these learning environments. This effectively precludes them from having their learning recognised and valued by society, and from achieving qualifications that give them choices about work and their lives more broadly. While people from disadvantaged communities have not been part of education and training to the same extent as other groups in society, they have still been learning all through their lives, and much of this learning is relevant to, and should be counted towards, a qualification.
- RPL opens possibilities for people, by helping them to embark on pathways that include informal and non-formal learning, and formal learning.
- workers and enterprises benefit through including RPL as a key strategy for increasing overall skill levels in enterprises, tailoring training appropriately, and as a mechanism for staff selection and recruitment.
- society and technology is changing so rapidly, that new knowledge and skills are constantly being created, often outside formal research centres such as those in universities. It takes time for the knowledge and skills generated in these ways to be included in formal education and training qualifications and courses, because it takes time for courses to be developed to meet new needs. RPL is one way of contributing to the renewal of qualifications and curriculum, by recognising knowledge and skills that have emerged in the workplace and in society, and not inside formal institutional contexts.

The AQF Advisory Board commissioned this project to identify obstacles to the implementation of RPL, and to identify mechanisms that facilitate increased use of RPL. In preparing the project brief, the AQF Advisory Board aimed to, through the project:

- facilitate and increase the use of RPL as a pathway towards the partial or complete achievement of a qualification;
- improve access to learning pathways, particularly for students from social backgrounds that are under-represented in post-compulsory education and training;
- promote lifelong learning; and,
- increase the consistency in the way in which RPL is applied in each of the four sectors of post-compulsory education and training.

The RPL pathway to a qualification is fundamental to developing a post-compulsory education and training system that has multiple pathways to qualifications. RPL pathways can contribute to a system that is accessible, transparent and equitable. It is premised on a philosophy that values and recognises the learning of all Australians, and stakes a claim for the legitimacy of that learning within formal education and training. An open system that is able to embrace learning from diverse sources is more dynamic, more capable of creating new knowledge, and in involving people in extending and applying that knowledge. RPL is one strategy that can contribute to the transformation of institutional practices, courses and curriculum to ensure the outcomes meet the needs of all stakeholders. It cannot do this on its

own, but this process of transformation will be much more hesitant, slower and less complete without the inclusion of RPL.

Components of the project

There are two components to this project. The first is this research report, which maps policy and practice in each of the sectors of post-compulsory education and training. It includes an analysis of the literature on RPL in Australia and overseas, an examination of how RPL is implemented internationally, case-studies from each sector, and the results of interviews with 150 teachers and academics, students, researchers, administrators and stakeholders. It also includes the results of questionnaires that were available from the website established for the project[4]. Approximately 620 people responded to the questionnaires. We have analysed available data showing who receives RPL in each of the sectors and the extent to which it takes place. The report concludes with a discussion of the implications for the development of RPL in Australia and recommendations for future policy development and research.

This research has significantly informed the second component of the project, a discussion paper which includes draft common national RPL principles and operational guidelines. This discussion paper has been released for public comment, which will close in early November 2002.[5] The final common national RPL principles and operational guidelines will be developed in light of responses to the discussion paper, and will be submitted to the AQF Advisory Board for consideration.

Background to the project

This is the second project concerning RPL that the AQF Advisory Board has initiated. The first was in 1996, and it examined RPL processes in the senior secondary school, VET and higher education sectors, by commissioning reports in each. The three reports were used to develop a composite picture of RPL policy, processes and practice in Australia (AQF Advisory Board, 1997). In presenting the composite report to the Ministerial Council for Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) the AQF Advisory Board advised the Ministers of the need to monitor RPL policies and practice "to gauge progress with particular reference to the following objectives:

- readily available, transparent and consistent RPL policy and procedures within and across all sectors;
- RPL funding arrangements in all sectors which enable maximum cost savings for the taxpayer;
- parity of esteem for qualifications gained through (or partly through) RPL assessment; and
- 'best practice' RPL assessment models to be accessible within and across sectors."

(AQFAB, 2002: 5)

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[4] The web address for the RPL site is: http://www.scu.edu.au/research/rpl/index.html
[5] The discussion paper is available from our RPL site at the address in footnote 1.

In preparing the brief for this project, the AQF Advisory Board commissioned a scoping project on RPL in Australia, which reviewed recent literature and outlined the direction for future research (Ryan and Watson, 2001).

This project builds on the 1997 report, and on the scoping report. It uses the 1997 report as a baseline, and analyses changes that have occurred since then. As recommended by the scoping report, it includes the adult and community education sector in recognition of its importance as part of post-compulsory education and training in Australia, not only in the delivery of credentialed education and training, but as a key mechanism used by increasing numbers of adults seeking re-entry to education, and by young people who need alternatives to school-based education.

Definitions

Australian and international literature on RPL always contends with the vexed question of definition, and we are no exception. We first define what we mean by RPL and distinguish it from credit transfer. The way in which each sector defines RPL is then outlined and a number of examples that illustrate the differences between RPL and credit transfer is provided. We acknowledge that the distinctions we make may be controversial, but have tried to outline why we think these distinctions are important in the next chapter. We thought it necessary to focus in this chapter on clearly defining the concepts that we used for the project, so the framework of the rest of the report can be clearly understood. The next chapter discusses different concepts of RPL and whether RPL and credit transfer *should* be distinguished from each other, and from other forms of assessment.

We distinguish RPL from credit transfer as follows:

- RPL assesses the *individual's* learning to determine the extent to which that individual has achieved the required learning outcomes, competency outcomes, or standards for entry to, and/or partial or total completion of, a qualification.
- credit transfer assesses *the initial course or subject* that the individual is using to claim access to, or the award of credit in, the destination course to determine the extent to which it is equivalent to the required learning outcomes, competency outcomes, or standards in a qualification. This need not confine credit transfer to credentialed courses within the AQF framework. The key distinguishing characteristic is that it is the *course* or *subject* that is assessed for equivalence, not the student.

This is similar to the definition used in the 1997 RPL report of the AQF Advisory Board:

> "RPL assessment, however, may be distinguished from 'credit transfer', each being a distinctive *process* for gaining credit. Credit transfer is a process based on formal credit arrangements or protocols negotiated by institutions on the basis of articulated course content and independent of the individual applicant. By contrast, the RPL process involves a case-by-case assessment of the individual's knowledge and skills, which may be derived from a whole range of learning experiences, including workplace learning and general life experience, to determine how much credit can be given towards the requirements of the desired qualification. Some of this learning may be formal, as in a short course but, unless a formal credit arrangement has been

made, or protocols in place to negotiate credit, the only way to establish credit for this learning is through RPL assessment" (AQF Advisory Board, 1997: 1).

RPL and credit transfer can both be used in one of two ways; for admission to a course or qualification, or for the award of credit in a course or qualification. RPL is used as an access mechanism when the normal education or qualification prerequisites are not present. It can also be used for the award of credit for partial or full completion of a course or qualification. Credit transfer is used as an access mechanism to determine the equivalence of prior studies compared to the normal prerequisites for entry (for example, an overseas senior school certificate instead of a senior school certificate from an Australian State or Territory as an entry mechanism to higher education). It can be used also for the award of credit for full or partial completion of a qualification.

There is ambiguity in the literature as to whether RPL is or should be confined to the attainment of credit in courses or qualifications, or whether its application is broader in scope. Kenyon, Saunders and Gibb (1996: 2) explain that: "Many people and organisations think RPL is a term which only applies to processes used by training providers, or with accredited institutional training." They explain that RPL can be used for other reasons, including the determination of competence in the workplace, independently of the award of a qualification. It is possible that RPL is used more for these purposes than it is used by individuals seeking access to, or credit in, a qualification. However, our focus in this project is on the use of RPL in qualifications.

Individuals may seek RPL for the following reasons:

- to gain entry to a course or qualification
- to seek credit within a course
- to seek recognition for their overseas qualifications, when these are not able to be certified as equivalent by NOOSR or other statutory authorities, or when the overseas qualification must be augmented by evidence of further learning or competency to be deemed equivalent to the relevant Australian qualification

(Kenyon *et al.*, 1996; Keating, Kelly and Smith, 1998; DETYA, 2001; Bateman and Knight, 2002)

Several scenarios follow, each of which illustrates an example of RPL or credit transfer, and an explanation as to why it is classified as one and not the other.

Example 1:

Scenario: A student commencing a Bachelor of Arts at a university in Melbourne seeks credit on the basis of a Diploma of Community Services (Community Development) at a TAFE institute in Perth. The university does not have an articulation or credit transfer agreement with the TAFE institute. The student is asked to collect information about the competency standards, delivery plan and assessment for that course before a decision can be made about whether or not he will be granted the advanced standing.

Outcome: This is an example of *credit transfer.*

Reason: The competency standards, delivery plan and assessment for that course are being assessed to determine equivalency to subjects in the Bachelor of Arts. The student is not being assessed to determine the extent to which he can demonstrate whether or not he has met the required learning outcomes.

Example 2:

Scenario: A student in the Diploma of Arts (Professional Writing and Editing) at a TAFE institute seeks advanced standing on the basis of her professional experience. The student is asked to collect evidence that she has met the competency standards. She prepares an annotated *resume*, and a portfolio that includes examples of short stories and newspaper articles she has written, examples of desk-top publishing she has produced, and testimonials from supervisors about her responsibilities and tasks.

Outcome: This is an example of *RPL*

Reason: The *student* is being assessed to determine the extent to which she has demonstrated that she has met the required competency standards

Example 3:

Scenario: A student is undertaking the Certificate 4 in Further Education at the local neighbourhood house. The student studied political science at a tertiary level in her own country, but that was some time ago, and she is participating in the Cert 4 to reintroduce herself to tertiary study, which she wants to do, particularly as English is her second language. Nonetheless, she believes she can demonstrate competency for several of the standards, and wishes to pursue her application for credit. She prepares a portfolio of evidence, which includes a reflective component relating her life experience, particularly her experience of migration to Australia, to demonstrate her learning in areas of cross-cultural communication, problem-solving, team work, and knowledge of the Australian political framework.

Outcome: This is an example of *RPL*

Reason: The *student* is being assessed to determine whether she has demonstrated she has met the required standards.

Example 4:

Scenario: A student is undertaking the Certificate 2 in Retail Operations as part of his senior school certificate and is seeking advanced standing for the competencies "interact with customers", "work effectively in a retail environment" and "apply point of sale handling procedures". He has worked in the local supermarket since he was 15 in a variety of roles, including at the checkout, stacking shelves and receiving goods from the central warehouse. He has attended several inhouse short training sessions over the last three years. In applying for RPL, the student attaches certificates of participation as evidence of his involvement in the inhouse training. The assessor takes these into account in determining the student's claim, but does not rely on them solely in deciding whether or not to grant the RPL. The certificates testified only to participation and not achievement of standards or outcomes, and the outcomes of the sessions were not part of, or related to, endorsed standards or curriculum. The assessor interviews the student to discuss his experience further, and asks him to discuss what he learnt from participating in the inhouse training, and how this related to his capacity to do his job. The inhouse training proved to be very important to the student's skill acquisition, understanding and performance, and strongly contributes to his application.

Outcome: This is an example of *RPL*

Reason: The *student* is being assessed to determine the extent to which he has demonstrated that he has met the required competency standards. Some of the learning the student has undertaken has been formal, but it is still an RPL application because the inhouse training is not being assessed to determine equivalence, the student is being assessed. The sessions are not part of a credit transfer agreement. If the sessions were to be classed as credit transfer, then they would need to be assessed to determine equivalence.

Example 5:

Scenario: A student has been awarded a Diploma of Information Technology at a private Registered Training Organisation. The diploma was awarded on the basis of recognition of prior learning, as the student had worked for many years in the warehouse in a medium-sized company, and had taken on increasing responsibility for supporting the IT infrastructure of the company as the technology was progressively introduced. The company had paid for him to attend the occasional external training program, as the need and opportunity arose.

Outcome: This is an example of *RPL*.

Reason: The *student* is being assessed to determine the extent to which he has met the competency standards. The training he has undertaken is not being assessed to determine equivalence.

Example 6:

Scenario: The student in example 5 is now enrolled in a degree course in information technology, and is seeking the award of credit on the basis of the completed VET diploma – the diploma that was fully awarded on the basis of RPL. There is no articulation agreement between the private RTO and the university, but the degree course co-ordinator meets with the RTO, to discuss delivery plans and assessment approaches, standards and outcomes. The degree course co-ordinator knows the competencies, because they are part of the national training package, and are used in all IT courses in VET.

Outcome: This is an example of *credit transfer*.

Reason: The IT diploma and the RTO are being assessed to determine equivalency, *not* the student, regardless of the fact that the student was awarded the IT diploma on the basis of RPL. The university has to decide whether they have confidence in the assessment of the RTO. The request for the award of credit is based on the completed IT diploma, not the original RPL application

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Sectoral definitions

The sectors have defined RPL differently since it was established as one of 10 principles of the National Framework for the Recognition of Training (NFROT) in 1991, and as part of the charter establishing the AQF in 1995. These evolving definitions have not converged over recent years, and they arise from the historical development and application of RPL in each of the sectors. The 1997 AQF Advisory Board (1997: 3) composite report on RPL expressed the hope that the definitions used in the sectors would converge (and converge *within* sectors as well): "It is expected that, as the AQF moves towards full implementation by the year 2000, any local inconsistencies in definition will tend to disappear under pressure of the need for more effective national communication about RPL both with and between sectors." Unfortunately, definitions have not converged, while pressure for more effective communication about RPL has occurred. It was recognised, however, that the sectors may be using similar principles to guide their policy, despite different policy frameworks and terminology, and this project aimed to, in part, identify these common principles.

ANTA does not, in theory, distinguish between RPL and assessment in general. ANTA (2001) now defines RPL as:

> "…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.

In order to grant RPL, the assessor must be confident that the candidate is currently competent against the endorsed industry or enterprise competency standards or outcomes specified in the Australian Qualifications Framework accredited courses. The evidence may take a variety of forms and could include certification, references from past employers, testimonials from clients and work samples. The assessor must ensure that the evidence is authentic, valid, reliable, current and sufficient."

This definition differs to that in the higher education sector. The AVCC's new guidelines *defacto* define credit transfer and RPL in a similar way to our definition. In 1993 the AVCC adopted guidelines on credit transfer and recognition of prior learning which defined credit transfer as credit granted for *credentialed* learning at either higher education or *TAFE* (and not *all* VET providers). The 2001 guidelines extend the definition of credit transfer to include all *credentialed* learning in *VET* or higher education (AVCC, 2001). RPL is therefore residually defined, as credit falling outside the scope of credit transfer. The AVCC (2001) recognises that further work on developing RPL policy is required. Our definition is broader, as it can include formal programs of learning outside the AQF, as long as they are subject to institutional agreements and protocols granting graduates access to, or the award of credit in, the destination course upon successful partial or total completion of the initial course. As programs are developed that fall outside the AQF, particularly vendor certificates, all sectors will need to consider how to assess and credit learning in courses and programs such as these (Ryan and Watson, 2001). While recognition of these sorts of courses are currently excluded from the AVCC's definition, pressure will be exerted to consider how they fit, particularly as the influence of work-based and (to a lesser extent) work-integrated learning in higher education challenges notions of what a degree is. Work-based learning results in a negotiated curriculum between the student, employers and the university (Boud, 1998), where the learning outcomes are not fully elaborated and specified in advance. This opens up the way for much more widespread implementation of RPL in higher education, as the learning outcomes are more tailored to the individual.

Definitions of RPL are undergoing renewal in the school sector, as the senior secondary school curriculum is reshaped to cater for a wider range of learning outcomes and pathways to post-school education. The 1997 AQF report (1997) stated that the schools sector generally distinguished RPL from credit transfer. The introduction of VET in schools based on endorsed training packages brings with it the requirement that schools comply with VET definitions of RPL, and Australian Quality Training Framework RPL implementation standards. However, the Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia is proposing to introduce a specific RPL policy as one of five policy instruments establishing the recognition policy framework in that state, which will have application across *all* areas of the senior school curriculum, and not just those areas related to VET (Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia, 2001). The introduction of the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning may have implications on RPL definitions and policy in that state.

While the ACE sector cannot be said to have a nationally agreed definition of RPL given vastly different arrangements that exist between the states and territories, the sector itself is premised on adult education principles and recognising and valuing the full range of learning that adults engage in, regardless of context. The problem for the ACE sector is the lack of nationally coherent arrangements. In NSW and Victoria ACE is regarded as a *sector* in its own right, and the sector offers many forms of provision, or learning opportunities, some of which includes VET, while in other areas provision is related to the senior school curriculum, further education, adult and basic education, life skills, pre-employment preparation, and

recreational and personal enrichment. Where the ACE sector offers credentialed VET programs, it must comply with AQTF requirements regarding RPL. In other states ACE is regarded principally as a form of *provision*, focussed on adult and basic education, and further education, and is offered in a number of institutional frameworks, including TAFE. This project may help to articulate a sector-wide definition and approach to RPL, to assist the sector the brokering of further education and training arrangements for those engaged in community-based learning, and to provide opportunities for credentialed outcomes leading to qualifications.

Conclusion

This chapter has signalled the importance of RPL as a key strategy in facilitating access to education and training, and the achievement of nationally recognised qualifications for Australians. This is the reason why RPL is the one of the key objectives of the AQF. RPL refers to the assessment of an individual's learning which can be used to gain access to a course or qualification, and/or partial or total completion of a qualification. RPL is distinguished from credit transfer, as the latter assesses the previous formal study the student has undertaken for access into a course, or for the award of credit within a course or qualification. This is not limited to courses and qualifications within the AQF. Many students will use both RPL and credit transfer simultaneously, as the learning pathways students use, combined with their life and work experience are becoming increasingly complex. Examples were provided that illustrated the differences between the way in which RPL and credit transfer can be understood. The way in which the sectors define RPL was explored, and it was noted that the sectoral definitions are quite different and have not converged in recent years. This project aims to identify principles that the sector share, despite the differing terminology and policy frameworks. It is imperative that if all learning is to be valued that there be greater consistency in the way that RPL is implemented. This will increase opportunities for students to access education and training pathways, and to have their prior learning counted towards a qualification.

2 What is RPL and why isn't there more of it?

This chapter considers why RPL is a key component of qualifications frameworks and post-compulsory education and training policy, and the key drivers for RPL policy. The relationship between outcomes-based education and RPL is examined. The chapter argues that there is a wide gap between policy and practice, and that RPL has not yet achieved its intended policy goals, particularly those relating to the capacity of RPL to act as a mechanism for social inclusion for learners traditionally excluded from post-compulsory education and training. It examines the benefits of RPL and discusses whether too much is being asked of RPL. Different concepts of RPL are examined, and the implications these may have for the way in which RPL is implemented. Examples of different models of RPL are provided. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the way in which RPL is related to the skills to engage in lifelong learning.

Recognition of prior learning is almost universally regarded as a fundamental pillar of lifelong learning systems, but the take-up of RPL seems to be very low, despite the importance given to it in policy. The fact that it is invested with great importance is evidenced by its inclusion as a key principle in qualifications frameworks, in reform processes to qualifications frameworks (as discussed later in this chapter), and by the number and range of national and international projects devoted to it. Business and union leaders interviewed for this project impressed upon us the importance of RPL, as it was seen to be a key pillar underpinning a competitive and skilled workforce, as well as underpinning lifelong learning and education and training systems. One union leader said that unions regarded RPL as one of their most important priorities in terms of improving current arrangements for workers. Almost all of those who were interviewed stated unequivocally that RPL was very important for post-compulsory education and training. It is true that in these interviews we could have expected a positive response to RPL, given that we deliberately sought out those who we thought would have something to say about it, but we did not expect such a *strong* positive response. We thought there would be more critics of the *idea* of RPL (as opposed to how it is implemented – we found many critics here). We were astonished by the broader response to our project, in particular to the RPL website which has several questionnaires that people were invited to complete. Approximately 620 people completed the questionnaires, and project team members were overwhelmed with individual emails and phone calls from people who were interested in the project and who wanted to be part of it. Students contacted us asking how they could access RPL, and we were asked to demystify RPL arrangements, and to explain tricky problems they had encountered.

However, despite this overwhelming level of interest and its clear priority policy, the gap between policy and implementation is very wide. In most areas there is a gap between policy and practice, but it is hard to find an area in post-compulsory education and training policy where the gap is as wide as is the case with RPL policy and practice. We must account for this.

Where RPL is located within qualifications frameworks and processes of reform

The expansion of post-compulsory education and training and the development of lifelong learning policy frameworks are driven by the development of the knowledge economy and society, the rapid pace of technological change, and globalisation. New policy contexts emphasise knowledge, skills and the flexibility of individuals to increase economic performance, overcome unemployment and increase social inclusion (OECD, 1998; OECD, 2001). Mass participation in post-compulsory education is the reality in many OECD countries, with several, such as Australia, close to near-universal levels of participation (Aungles, Karmel and Wu, 2000). High levels of labour mobility, technological change and new and emerging markets place pressure on individuals to participate in post-compulsory education and training. These factors also place pressure on governments to facilitate this access, to ensure individuals acquire the skills and attributes deemed necessary to ensure their 'employability' (Mounier, 2001). The introduction of competency-based training in VET systems in many OECD countries reflects this objective, as do more recent debates surrounding the employability of higher education graduates, and the attributes associated with 'graduateness' (DEST 2002).

The transformation of post-compulsory education and training from elite to mass systems means that the range of learners is more diverse, as are their levels of preparation for study, personal goals and aspirations, levels of family responsibility, and other factors affecting the way they participate in education and training. People in OECD countries can now expect to participate in formal, nonformal, and informal learning for the rest of their lives, particularly their working lives. Given this imperative, government policy in reforming qualifications frameworks has focussed on developing pathways between and within sectors, particularly to and from general to vocational education and training, and on providing frameworks that can credential learning where-ever and whenever it has occurred (Raffe, 1998).

Education systems now are a network of pathways, and government policy aims to influence the way in which individual decisions are made, to align them with national economic imperatives (Raffe, 1998). Qualifications and qualification frameworks are used by governments to promote lifelong learning, and encourage specific education and training goals, with the aim of improving links between learning and employment, in particular the hope that:

> "qualifications reforms will improve the capacity of qualifications to signal the knowledge, skills and competencies of job applicants, thus reducing the costs of recruitment for employers and more generally enhancing people's employability" (Young, 2001: 5)

The main goals of reforms to qualifications arrangements include:

- "To encourage people to see qualifying as a process that starts in initial education and training and continues throughout their adult lives;
- To improve opportunities for mobility and progression between different types of qualifications (especially general and vocational) and between qualifications for different occupational sectors; and

- To encourage formal learning, to promote links between it and informal learning and to improve opportunities for people to use their informal learning to gain recognised qualifications" (Young, 2001: 4)

Articulation, credit transfer, and recognition of prior learning are intrinsic features of qualifications frameworks that aim to provide access, create opportunities and recognise learning. These features do not revolve around achieving efficiency and effectiveness, important as these are:

> "Articulation is not a mechanical matter of formal recognition of qualifications, or of prior learning experience, necessary as these may be. It is also a learning concept, implying complementarity, continuous enhancement or development of competences, achievement and progression along a pathway that is personally meaningful and has a social recognition and status" (OECD, 1998).

The OECD (1998) says that there are too many historically derived restrictions in member countries on credit transfer, and recognition of other modes of learning, including RPL and work experience. This AQF Advisory Board project represents an explicit policy intention to increase the extent to which RPL is available and implemented, so as to create learning opportunities for as many people as possible. The policy goal is to develop learning pathways that are accessible to everyone in the community. If they are to be effective, these pathways must include RPL. This is why RPL is fundamental to qualifications frameworks.

Outcomes based education and RPL

Reforms to link post-compulsory education and training systems to the needs of the economy have been driven further in vocational education and training than in higher education in Australia and internationally, but higher education has not been immune from this process. Universities proclaim the skills and attributes of their graduates, and courses aim to produce employable graduates.

Part of the reform process has included a focus on outcomes-based education, where the learning outcomes or competencies are clearly specified in advance, and assessed using criterion-based assessment methods. Outcomes-based education is regarded as a much more tangible way of creating links between education and training and the needs of enterprises and industry. As with many other countries, Australia has adopted competency based training frameworks in vocational education and training.

Many areas in higher education use competency approaches in some parts of courses (for example, in the health and engineering fields of study), and increasingly the focus in higher education is for clear specification of learning outcomes, although not necessarily competency based. The notion that the academy does not need to specify what graduates should be broadly expected to accomplish is no longer tenable. Changes in universities towards outcomes based education have been uneven, but this is the direction in which higher education is heading. There are several drivers for this process including government policy, demands by employers, and student demand for courses leading to enhanced employment prospects (DEST, 2002; Nelson, 2002).

Reforms to schools curricula have also focussed on the clear specification of learning outcomes and standards of expected performance. This movement has pervaded all of school education from primary school to the senior school certificates. While senior school certificate graduates are still ranked using a norm-referenced approach for purposes of entry to higher education, reforms are attempting to create other pathways for the majority of secondary students who do not directly proceed to university, and for whom a tertiary entrance rank may be less important. The Department of Education, Science and Training has funded major national projects that seek to develop alternatives to the tertiary entrance rank, and has funded two conferences to report on these projects, and disseminate the results.

The broad acceptance of outcomes-based education (in all the different forms that this can take) is a precondition for the implementation of RPL, because students must be able to match their own learning to, and provide evidence for, the way in which they have met the stipulated learning outcomes, competencies or standards. Another precondition is the acceptance that learning can take place in many contexts, including contexts outside formal education and training. This notion is generally enshrined in qualifications frameworks. RPL represents an opportunity for many people, including those who have not had the opportunity to participate in formal education and training, to demonstrate how they have met the learning outcomes of different qualifications, and to gain entrance to, and achieve partial or total credit towards, the award of a qualification.

Benefits of RPL

RPL is deemed to have benefits for individuals, education and training institutions, enterprises, unions, and government – benefits which are regarded by many as self-evident and obvious (Harris, 1997). Many Australian researchers make the point that the Australian literature focuses on the *potential* benefits of RPL, rather than the *actual* benefits, but that there has been relatively little research on the extent to which the claims match the outcomes. Instead, the Australian literature focuses on policy frameworks and implementation (Wilson and Lilly, 1996; Smith, 1997; Pithers, 1999; Bateman and Knight, 2002).

Potential benefits to individuals include:

- alternative access to credentialled learning, when the 'normal' prerequisites used for entry have not been achieved;
- being able to have their prior learning counted towards a qualification, regardless of how or where the learning occurred;
- reduced time and cost in undertaking a qualification;
- recognition of their skills and abilities as certified in a qualification, which allows employers to make judgements about the knowledge, skills and competences associated with a particular qualification. This is particularly important in times of high labour mobility, and in part replaces previous methods individuals used to testify to their knowledge and experience (for example, personal references, although these are still important). Having 'a ticket' is particularly important in allowing individuals to find and move jobs (Kenyon, Saunders and Gibb, 1996);
- progress in a qualification that has a social use, value, and standing;
- increases in self-confidence and motivation;

- the development of lifelong learning skills, particularly the skills of self-evaluation, self-assessment and career planning; and,
- access to pathways in lifelong learning.

Potential benefits to enterprises include:

- encouragement for the development of a culture underpinned by training and lifelong learning, and the reduction of costs, less duplication of education and training and less time spent in training (Barker, 2001);
- encouragement for individuals to invest in their own training;
- more effective and targeted planning of training and upskilling of the workforce; and,
- more effective recruitment in times of high labour mobility.

Potential benefits to unions include:

- the development of career paths for workers;
- access to qualifications and qualifications pathways in which the prior learning and experience of individuals is properly recognised and validated;
- improved wages associated with recognised higher skill levels; and,
- increased access to training for workers.

Potential benefits to education and training institutions include:

- the efficient and effective deployment of teaching resources, by not teaching people what they already know;
- the development of new markets by engaging individuals who may not otherwise consider undertaking study towards a qualification;
- improvement in retention and success rates by increasing student motivation;
- the exposure of institutions, teachers and academics to new and emerging knowledge and technology as it is developed in areas of the economy and society, which can help in the development of new courses and programs. Further, RPL can be regarded as "the other side of curriculum development because it allows for, indeed demands, a broader and better informed consensus about what socially useful knowledge means" (Michelson, cited in Buckler, 2000). and,
- the development of approaches that are student-centred.

Potential benefits to government include:

- efficient and effective deployment of resources;
- encouragement of individuals to invest in their own education and training;
- encouragement of enterprises to invest in credentialling their work force, and in training;
- increased access to education and training pathways;
- increased economic competitiveness resulting from more highly skilled work force; and,
- an increase in general levels of education and training in the community, leading to increased levels of social capital, and social inclusion

(Kenyon *et al.*, 1996; Wilson and Lilly, 1996; AQF Advisory Board, 1997; Harris, 1997; Mattner, 1997; Smith and Keating, 1997; Raffe, 1998; Smith, Brennan and Oczkowski, 1998; Pithers, 1999; Learning From Experience Trust, 2000; Romaniuk and Snart, 2000; Barker, 2001; Cretchley and Castle, 2001; DETYA, 2001; Ryan and Watson, 2001; Young, 2001; Bateman and Knight, 2002; Cleary, Whittacker, Gallacher, Merrill, Jokinen and Carette, 2002; Whittacker, Cleary and Gallacher, 2002)

RPL was seen to play a key role in social inclusion strategies in post-compulsory education and training (Learning From Experience Trust, 2000; Cleary, Whittacker, Gallacher, Merrill, Jokinen and Carette, 2002). One of the drivers for the introduction of RPL, and its inclusion as a key objective of the Australian Qualifications Framework, was its perceived capacity to act as a mechanism for social inclusion (Kenyon *et al.*, 1996; Wilson and Lilly, 1996; Pithers, 1999; Bateman and Knight, 2002). This is brought into sharp relief in South Africa, where RPL is seen as a key building block in developing a post-apartheid, post-compulsory education system that is able to redress the exclusionary practices of the previous apartheid system, create opportunities for people to participate in lifelong education and training, and increase the skill level and economic competitiveness of the South African labour force (Harris, 1997; Cretchley and Castle, 2001).

However, while RPL appears to have been successful as a mechanism for social inclusion for individuals from regional Australia and for those with a disability[6], it has not been successful as a mechanism of social inclusion for Indigenous Australians, for people from a non-English speaking background, those with low levels of education, those in 'unskilled' jobs, and the unemployed. This experience is replicated overseas. The main beneficiaries have been those from socio-economic backgrounds who have experience in, and success in, post-compulsory education and training (Buchler and Ralphs, 2000; Learning From Experience Trust, 2000; Ryan and Watson, 2001; Bateman and Knight, 2002; Cleary *et al.,* 2002).

It is also clear that RPL has not *yet* delivered the potential benefits on the scale originally envisaged and hoped for in policy documents and reforms to qualifications frameworks. Much of what is discussed concerning the potential of RPL is clearly aspirational. If the benefits are so good and pervasive and so obvious, why isn't there more of it? The answer to this question may be addressed on three levels:

- consideration of the extent to which the claims associated with RPL are realistic;
- consideration of what people *mean* when they talk about RPL; and,
- consideration of the way in which RPL is operationalised in each of the sectors, and the factors that inhibit or promote its implementation. This last issue is the subject of subsequent chapters.

Are we asking too much of RPL?

When all the claims about the potential benefits of RPL are collected in the one place, and the extent of these claims examined, it is clear that too much hope is invested in RPL. Its transformatory potential is stretched beyond what can reasonably be invested in the concept. This is quite aside from the issue of whether it can be operationalised on the scale desired by policy objectives and other stakeholders. RPL champions may be risking the entire enterprise

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[6] See Chapter 4: Who receives RPL

and the undoubted benefits that RPL can bring to students and other stakeholders by investing too much in it as a single mechanism or lever.

Rather than regarding RPL as the lever which can itself transform post-compulsory education and training, create new relationships between enterprises and education and training, result in reduced costs, increase social inclusion, and transform curriculum, it may be more realistic to consider RPL as *one* strategy among several. Moreover, the implementation of RPL cannot be considered independently of other strategies that are seeking reform along these lines.

RPL may be best considered as part of a suite of strategies that aim to increase the breadth and scope of pathways between different sectors, levels, disciplines and occupations. The notion of *pathways* is crucial to transforming post-compulsory education and training, and RPL is one possible pathway among many. Raffe (1998) argues that education systems can be conceived as networks of pathways, which can be characterised in terms of individual programs (or courses), individual pathways (linked and sequenced courses) and systems of pathways (where pathways are linked or converge, length etc). He argues that "policy makers can influence the attractiveness of educational programmes, and consequently the level and pattern of participation in them, by changing the structure of the pathways which connect them" (Raffe, 1998: 377).

Strategies are needed to increase the attractiveness of participating in pathways, particularly in a lifelong learning context, and RPL is one key strategy. Such strategies rely on the development of policy frameworks, but also on the development of *relationships* between stakeholders in industry, and in and between the different sectors of education and training (Sommerlad, Duke and McDonald, 1998; Carnegie, 2000; Schoemaker, Allison, Gum, Harmoni, Lindfield, Nolan and Stedman, 2000; Wheelahan, 2000). In a context where pathways are many, student-centred, and flexible, and where students move between sectors and draw from each what they need, RPL will increasingly come into its own.

Increased use of RPL is particularly associated with flexible learning environments, where the mode in which students study is flexible, and where the curriculum is also flexible. Learning and studying is then seen as a process of knowledge creation in its own right, one that requires as a consequence negotiation about learning outcomes between institutions and students (Boud, 1998; Learning From Experience Trust, 2000).

This does not detract from the importance of identifying and implementing strategies which increase the take-up of RPL, as this will contribute to, and be given further impetus by, strategies that aim to make education and training more student-centred and flexible. Strategies to increase the take-up of RPL are essential in increasing opportunities for people to access and participate in post-compulsory education and training, and in making systems more responsive to the needs of individuals, enterprises, the community and government. However, these outcomes cannot be achieved *solely* through RPL.

Different conceptions of RPL

In this section and the remaining sections, we argue that it is necessary to distinguish between:
- RPL as a *process* and RPL as an *outcome*; and,
- RPL as *tool* that universities use to assess students, and RPL as a *skill* that students need to learn in order to be assessed.

A key problem in implementing RPL is that there is no consensus over how to define it, and once having defined it, what content to invest in that definition. On the face of it, RPL is a simple concept, as one teacher argued in their response to our website questionnaire:

> "RPL is a very straight forward concept, not rocket science. Too many vested interests guarding the gates are making it into rocket science, therefore less accessible to applicants and assessors. *The evidence is there or it isn't there – very simple!!*"

This exemplifies the argument that Harris (1997: 3) develops to explain why RPL appears to be so unproblematic:

> "The RPL concept is…relatively unproblematically underpinned by (1) a belief that adults are by definition predisposed to learning and of necessity experienced learners and (2) that irrespective of its non-formal, informal, formal, deliberate or incidental nature, subject to some form of scrutiny, non-accredited learning is deemed to have the potential to be 'recognised' and accorded value in relation to formal qualifications and structures."

This belief is a powerful driver for RPL, but it is not enough to build consensus around the concept. This is because RPL is the subject of competing educational and social discourses, and it cannot unproblematically be regarded merely as "processes of recognition and/or assessment" (Harris, 1997: 3). Following Harris, we argue that there is more than one model of RPL.

The existence of different models of RPL is expressed in the skirmishing in Australia over whether there is a difference between RPL on the one hand and Recognition of Current Competency (RCC) on the other. Some people say there is no difference, and others insist there is. RPL is about learning, the contestant's say, whereas RCC is about certifying competence in a workplace (Smith and Keating, 1997). Others say that the focus on learning or competency *outcomes* renders any distinctions meaningless as learning takes place in a variety of contexts, including at work (Gibson, 1997; Bateman and Knight, 2002).

Any distinctions that did exist between RPL and RCC were said to become less meaningful with the system-wide introduction of competency based training in the VET sector, as all assessment must now be directly against industry-derived competencies in nationally endorsed training packages, with assessment taking place in the workplace or in a simulated work environment (Kenyon *et al.*, 1996; Wilson and Lilly, 1996; Keating, Kelly and Smith, 1998; DETYA, 2001; Bateman and Knight, 2002). However, this does not solve the problem for the other sectors, and may not completely solve the problem for the VET sector.

This is because we think that behind this debate there are deeper philosophical issues. To some extent these debates are characterised as a debate between sectors concerning the

primary orientation of that sector: is it to be driven by industry needs, or does the sector have a wider social role? This is often expressed in the statement that VET serves the needs of industry and is oriented to skills formation, whereas higher education serves a broader social role, with the main focus on knowledge creation. But it is simplistic to characterise this debate as only one concerning the relative mission of each sector. The above statement is a caricature of the role of each sector, as both have roles that are far more complex and multi-layered, while the emphasis in each may be different.

The debates over the relative emphasis of the needs of industry versus pedagogical imperatives are occurring *within* sectors, *all* the sectors. A key area where this is occurring is in the debates over 'graduateness'. By 'graduateness' we mean the attributes that graduates need to find and participate in work, participate in lifelong learning, and to contribute to their communities and society. We came up against this issue time and time again in our consultations. Too much RPL, it was argued, may result in graduates not having the 'something extra' that comes from participating in formal education and training programs leading to qualifications. We heard this from teaching practitioners in *all* sectors.[7] The debate over graduateness is indicative of the broader debates concerning the relative emphasis to be given to industry-derived competencies or outcomes and pedagogy.

This is giving rise to competing definitions, cultures and philosophical approaches, and these debates are reflected, perhaps most strongly, in debates concerning RPL. This is because of the perceived emphasis in RPL on workplace skills (although RPL is far broader than this), with subsequent debates over the extent to which these should be credentialled and assessed as part of qualifications, and the process needed to do so.

An example of the different cultures that arise is of the difference between the culture of education and training providers in the VET sector, and that of the workplace. This often leads to one not understanding the other, and moreover, valuing different things. For example, workplaces may value specific skills acquisition in particular areas, whereas education and training providers or teachers may be more focussed on the learning the student is experiencing. If education and training providers assess things that employers or colleagues in the workplace do not value highly, then the whole RPL assessment process may be seen to be suspect.

We think that the way through these issues is to frankly acknowledge that there are different philosophical approaches, which give rise to two different models of RPL, and that both are valid and have a role to play, because they are designed to meet different needs. The broader contexts for the debates concerning RPL that Harris identifies revolve around self-oriented and developmental discourses on the one hand, and outcomes-oriented discourses on the other. RPL has been championed by experiential learning theorists from humanist traditions, and from proponents of the 'technological' tradition where "value is accorded to experience to the extent that it matches skills and knowledge which have been prescribed according to national economic needs" (Harris, 1997:6). This tradition springs from human capital theory, where "rational" individuals make decisions about their own "investment" in their education, related to the likely returns they will receive. RPL, in this tradition, is part of a discourse of "efficiency, accreditation, competence, access, transparency, equality of opportunity and mobility" (Harris, 1997: 9). This is in contrast to the first tradition which views RPL *primarily* as a learning and developmental process in its own right, designed to promote

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[7] See Chapter 7: Quality Assurance

"self-improvement, learner-centredness, personal development and self-actualisation" (Harris, 1997"), and not mainly as a process of certification.

Harris argues that both traditions become conflated because both centre around the individual and result in an individualising discourse, which in both cases proclaim student centredness as the key objective. She says that:

> "This is the mix which allows practices such as RPL to retain their capacity to appeal relatively unproblematically, to a wide range of stakeholders in the education, training and employment world, largely because of the conflated resonances that are possible."
>
> (Harris, 1997: 9)

While both models will be implemented in all sectors, it may be that one sector emphasises one to a greater extent than others. This is also reflected in the extent to which RPL can be used to achieve a qualification. The higher education and school sectors generally do not provide for a whole qualification to be awarded on the basis of RPL, whereas this pathway is possible in the VET and ACE sectors.

An example of the different approaches in each of the sectors is that we found interviewees in the schools sector to be more comfortable with developmental models of RPL, rather than credentialling approaches, as the developmental model reflects the outcomes of the senior school certificates to a greater extent. This was largely the case in the ACE sector as well.

Views varied in the VET and higher education sectors. This is because within each sector some disciplines or industry areas may emphasise one model more than the other. Some courses focus more on self-development, and the development of reflective practitioners, while others are more concerned with the development of specific skills. Some courses do both (see the case study below). We do not expect courses and qualifications within and between the sectors to have the same goals or outcomes. We should not expect RPL to have one goal or outcome. To do so is to privilege RPL as something distinct from the course or qualification within which it is embedded.

This is one reason why it is essential to distinguish between RPL as a *process* and RPL as an *outcome.* In the end, RPL is about assessment. But different things are being assessed in the 'learning development' model and the 'credentialling' model. Both are valid. Depending on the model in place, students will need different forms of support and preparation to achieve the RPL outcomes. Often the process of applying for RPL evolves, and the student becomes clearer about how it works and what its potential benefit is for them. Conceiving of RPL in this way allows for greater diversity in the way RPL is understood and implemented. It becomes clear that there is no *one* approach towards RPL, or *one* point in a student's learning career where RPL should be implemented.

Another distinction that should be made is between RPL as a tool and RPL as a skill. Institutions use RPL as a tool to assess or recognise prior learning. Students need skills to use RPL effectively. *How* students acquire these skills is discussed later in this chapter.

Case Study 1: BHP and the University of Newcastle

When BHP announced its decision to wind back its operations at its steel-mill in Newcastle several years ago, The University of Newcastle, BHP and the NSW Department of Education and Training joined together to provide opportunities for workers to acquire new skills to find employment as school teachers. Most of the workers at the steel-mill had been there for many years, and for some, it was their only job as the BHP plant dominated employment in Newcastle. Many of these workers had formal trade qualifications, while others had many years of learning and had acquired a range of skills, particularly in areas to do with new technology: Most had both. This partnership won a National Teaching Award, and a Business Higher Education Round Table award. The model that was developed by The University of Newcastle has since become the basis of the model adopted by the New South Wales Department of Education for developing other 'accelerated' teacher education programs.

The program was funded by BHP and BHP provided workers with text-books. The trade qualifications or uncredentialled skills that the BHP workers had acquired was given full recognition towards the teaching qualification. This program ran for two years part-time and one-year full time. A mixed model was used with students receiving instruction in multiple locations, with workers spending much of their time in schools. Many classes run by The University of Newcastle were run in the schools – workers from BHP were sitting in classrooms that were next to other classrooms where school students were studying. Teaching at other times was conducted by The University of Newcastle at BHP in lunch times as well as at the main University campus.

Retention rates were much higher for this program than for most other university programs. Of the approximately 60 who commenced, 54 have so far completed. Their results were also quite high, as many put a lot of time and effort into their studies.

In making assessments for Recognised Prior Learning (RPL) The University of Newcastle did not sit down and undertake a straight 'matching exercise' – this subject for that trade qualification or this subject for that set of assessed skills. Students were assessed holistically and this included their formal qualifications but, also their knowledge**,** technology skills, interpersonal skills, and their learning to learn skills. Many were completely self-taught in technology. The University was not looking for a one-to-one mapping to subjects, rather they were looking at the total picture of skills and knowledge acquired and demonstrated life-long learning.

This program required a high level of pastoral care, and also support for students to learn the skills traditionally associated with degree level studies, particularly formal academic writing. The University of Newcastle explicitly put in place processes to help students learn the culture of participating in formal academic programs, the hidden curriculum associated with being a student, and the culture of their intended workplace – schools. In addition to this, the University helped students/workers to make the process of translation between their own experiences as workers at BHP and learning outcomes in the teaching qualification. BHP worker/students were simultaneously studying and working over three completely different cultural contexts: at the steel-works, in the university and in schools. Each environment had stakeholders with different expectations and cultures. The academic staff leading the program had to broker relations between all three.

This included brokering cultural change processes inside the University. It required new ways of thinking about teaching and learning, and assessing learning. The staff also had to demonstrate that students had met the academic standards expected of graduates from that course. It also required new ways of thinking about how to support students from this background to acquire the skills they need. The school integration-learning model of teaching school teachers is still a radical concept in many areas (not necessarily at this university), as it is in other areas of professional education (as expressed, for example, in debates about nursing education). The academic staff also had to broker negotiations with schools. This process was not hard, because these BHP workers were in high demand by schools – their skills in working with kids was valued and sought after.

This program was extended by The University of Newcastle to BHP in Wollongong with some studies being undertaken at The University of Wollongong, and in the same integrated way in schools in the district. It also involves a partnership with local schools: the universities use school staff to help in teaching and use of school resources. The program at Wollongong is still continuing, with similar programs now operating in two locations in Sydney. It is no longer employer sponsored: students either pay fees or are in HECS funded places.

The University has extended its involvement in these programs with the NSW Department of Education. In all, approximately 280 students are now going through a similar program. Many of these students have come to the program directly, and not *via* an employer or other mediating process.

Do we need to distinguish between RPL and assessment and credit transfer?

We have argued that RPL is fundamentally about assessment, and that the process of assessment needs to be aligned to the course or qualification outcomes. We now argue that, paradoxically, RPL should not be subsumed under assessment in general, or 'recognition' in general. This is because while the *outcome* may (or should be) the same, particularly to ensure parity of esteem for those who have gained their qualification partially or completely through an RPL assessment, that the *process* leading to the assessment needs to be distinguished from the *outcome*. We first consider the arguments for including all forms of assessment and credit under the broad umbrella of recognition, and then suggest reasons why we may need to make these distinctions.

ANTA policy subsumes *all* forms of credit – that is, RPL, RCC and credit transfer, under the one heading of 'recognition'. The issue is not when or how someone became competent, it is: are they competent now? All processes are, in some way or other, a process of assessment. Collapsing the various distinctions under the one heading was seen to have the following advantages:

- it enables RPL processes to be incorporated into current learning programs, and incorporated into learning and assessment more holistically;
- by removing the distinction, it enables parity of esteem between qualifications derived from RPL or from undertaking training courses, or some combination of these.

(Kenyon *et al.*, 1996; Wilson and Lilly, 1996; Keating *et al.*, 1998; DETYA, 2001; Bateman and Knight, 2002)

Bateman and Knight (2002) summarise the arguments for not differentiating between RPL and other forms of assessment processes. They do suggest that distinctions be made, but between assessment on the one hand (including RPL) and credit transfer on the other. This is because credit transfer "is essentially an administrative process" (Bateman and Knight, 2002: 6), a consequence of the 'mutual recognition' arrangements in VET, whereby one Registered Training Organisation (RTO) is required to recognise and provide full credit for assessments conducted by another RTO.

We would suggest that while credit transfer may be an administrative process *within* sectors, particularly the VET sector, it still involves an educational and assessment judgement. In VET the educational judgement is enshrined in policy frameworks which impute equivalence for the same competency outcomes or qualifications, regardless of the context in which the assessment occurred. The nature of educational judgement becomes clearer when considering credit transfer decisions *across* sectors. Explicit decisions about equivalence need to be made, and these are reflected in institutional credit transfer arrangements and partnerships. This will remain the case unless Australia develops a credit accumulation model with agreed values for units of credit between and within sectors. Credit transfer is *operationalised* as an administrative process, with students required only to produce evidence of prior credentialed learning, but the decision is an *educational* one, where equivalence of outcomes is assessed.

Different educational judgements are being made in the case of RPL and credit transfer. In the former, the assessment is whether the *student* has demonstrated learning that is equivalent to the outcomes required; in the latter, it is the *course, subject, unit or competency* which is

assessed for equivalence. Or to put this another way, the accreditation judgement being made is about the learning program and its outcomes, not about the student.

We argue that there are several reasons why distinctions should remain between:
- RPL and credit transfer
- RPL and other processes of assessment

The first, and most prosaic, is so we can know what is happening, and encourage the widespread take-up of RPL. The evidence is clear that the take-up of RPL is low (Ryan and Watson, 2001; Bateman and Knight, 2002). If we are required to report, count, are funded, and held accountable for something, it starts to matter a lot. It encourages institutions to put in place mechanisms that are accessible, for champions to raise the issue and push for further development within institutions, and for students to push for its greater implementation.

This leads to the second reason why it is important to maintain the distinction between RPL and credit transfer. As discussed earlier, the Australian and international literature shows that the take-up of RPL has been relatively low, and that it has *not* acted as a mechanism of social inclusion for disadvantaged groups in tertiary education, despite the principles of access and equity which underpin RPL in the Australian policy contexts.[8] Yet this is clearly an issue for non-traditional groups, as was made clear by the submission to the Nelson enquiry into higher education by the Australian Indigenous Training Council which argued that RPL and credit transfer were two key issues for Indigenous education (Andersen, 2002).

The third reason why it is important to maintain distinctions, is so that discussion can occur as to the appropriate models that need to be put in place to increase the extent to which RPL is implemented.

Distinguishing between RPL as a *process* and RPL as an *outcome*

The *intention* of incorporating RPL as part of a broader assessment process was to incorporate it holistically into learning and assessment, but paradoxically, the *result* has been insufficient attention paid to the process of *how* prior learning can be included. All best practice models of RPL point to the importance of support and advice being available to candidates. This is clearly identified as one of the stages in the RPL process. Recognition is made of the importance of ensuring that students from disadvantaged groups are not further disadvantaged by the use of assessment instruments that rely heavily on documents and high levels of literacy, when these are not intrinsic to the learning or competency outcomes. Much literature focuses on ensuring the assessment is valid and reliable, to ensure, for example, that students are not being assessed on their capacity to read and understand the RPL literature (Kenyon *et al.*, 1996; Wilson and Lilly, 1996; DETYA, 2001; Thomson, Saunders and Foyster, 2001; Bateman and Knight, 2002).

However, the literature mainly focuses on supporting students through the *assessment* process. This presumes a relatively straightforward process of 'translation' between the student's prior learning, and the learning outcomes or competency standards against which

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[8] The five principles that underpinned the introduction of RPL at the national level were: competence, commitment, access, fairness and support. Kenyon, *et al.*, (1996). Wilson, and Lilly (1996), DETYA (2001), Bateman and Knight (2001).

they are being assessed. However, personal learning is not neatly packaged and subject to comparison to academic or course requirements (Davison, 1996). The assessment process often assumes it is, or can be made to be without difficulty.

Relatively little attention has been paid to this process of translation, and we are suggesting that it is necessary to distinguish between RPL as a *process* and RPL as an *outcome*.

Eraut (2000: 12) distinguishes between three forms of non-formal learning:[9] *implicit learning*, in which "there is no intention to learn and no awareness of learning at the time it takes place…."; *reactive learning,* which " is used to describe situations where the learning is explicit but takes place almost spontaneously in response to recent, current or imminent situations without any time being specifically set aside for it"; and, *deliberative learning*, in which the learner puts aside time specifically for that purpose. The degree to which individuals are aware of their own implicit learning varies, and "factors affecting the capability to tell were linked to people's prior experiences of talking about what they knew" (Eraut, 2000: 17). Articulating reactive learning "in explicit form could also be difficult without setting aside time for more reflection and thus becoming deliberative" (Eraut, 2000: 12). He questions the role of the researcher (or assessor) in assessing what students can do and know. To what extent is the role of the *researcher* (or assessor) to articulate what students can do or know, and what is assessed? Is it what the researcher or assessor infers the students do or know (particularly underpinning knowledge in assessing competencies)? Eraut (2000: 17) says: "Can a skilful researcher [or assessor] communicate what their respondents cannot and does that suggest that the researcher is a good novelist, a potential poet or an expert in knowledge elicitation?" Assessing tacit knowledge is particularly difficult, requiring interrogation and interpretation to ensure the *full* extent of the knowledge is recognised.

So, focussing only on the assessment may well limit the extent of RPL which can rightfully be claimed, because people may be unaware of what they know and the extent to which they know. They may also not have the language to describe what they know, particularly if they have not had much experience in the telling. The capacity to do this is often associated with past involvement in education and training. These factors are more likely to disadvantage students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

An addition problem is that individuals may find it difficult to move from the discourse of their everyday practice to the discourse required to substantiate their claims. Northedge, (2001: 308) argues that 'knowledge' is not a static, timeless 'thing', but is constituted by 'flows of meaning' within discourse communities, and is "produced between knowledgeable people when they communicate with each other." He describes three 'discursive worlds' – the everyday, of professional or vocational practice, and academic (or other education or training) discourse, each of which works in different ways, particularly in regard to what is taken for granted, and what is subject to debate. The process of RPL requires a translation of students' professional or vocational practice discourse into the academic (however we define that in each sector).

He describes an academic discipline as "an example of a discourse community of a particularly systematic and committed kind. It is a community which discourses primarily through writing" (Northedge, 2001: 308). "For students with little experience in academic

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[9] He rejects the term 'informal' learning because of its connotation in many contexts that have little to do with learning, and favours the term 'non-formal' learning as an alternative.

communities, the struggle to develop an effective voice through which to 'speak' the discourse, whether in writing, or in class, can be lengthy and difficult" (Northedge, 2001: 313). This may seem to apply only to higher education or more 'academic' kinds of learning in senior secondary school. However, this observation need not be limited to 'traditional academic' learning contexts like these. It is equally relevant to VET. The VET 'discourse community' speaks in terms of the concepts and theories that underpin learning, the policy frameworks established to operationalise the VET sector, and the specific language of competency based training. Students need to understand competency standards, elements of competency, performance criteria, evidence and range of variables. We have to, or should explain this, because students have to know how much evidence is enough, what sort of evidence they should present, over what time period and contexts, and so on. They often have to know about codes, and institutional processes. The extent to which they are not required to understand this, increases the responsibility of assessor in making the translation on behalf of student

The process of 'translation' from the non-formal and experiential to the formal and academic may be much more problematic than we have supposed, particularly for those unfamiliar with participating in formal education and training programs (Davison, 1996; Mattner, 1997; Cleary *et al.*, 2002; Whittacker, Cleary and Gallacher, 2002). It is not just about literacy and numeracy in English, it is about literacy in our discourse, and where necessary, we need to provide students with the opportunity to become literate in the discourse. Offering students RPL assessments at the point of entry may be a valid and effective means of implementing RPL for many students, and this still remains important as a key strategy. However, there may be many others, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, for whom this is too early, and they made need time to make sense of the education and training context they are now in.

Implications for practice

In considering *how* we support students to learn about and use RPL, it is worth while to consider how we support students in learning about other forms of assessment. If we think of RPL as a *process* we can see that we need to support students in the same way we support them to undergo other forms of assessment. For example, it is possible to have different forms of assessment assessing the same or similar outcomes – an exam (and there are many different kinds), an essay, a demonstration of the skill or competency, a compilation of a portfolio of evidence, a reflective journal, etc. We do not assume students can sit exams unless they learn exam technique, or that they can write essays without learning how to write essays. In an exam a student is examined on two levels – on the extent to which they know the content, and their skill in managing exams. Many schools spend a great deal of time preparing students for exams, particularly in the senior school certificates. Universities have, in recent years, incorporated basic study skills which include essay writing into the first year of degrees, because many students who now attend university come from backgrounds where they have not had the opportunity to learn these skills. The importance of helping students learn the 'hidden curriculum' is championed by student learning units and academic development units in universities and TAFE institutes throughout the country. While institutions may not explicitly have formal subjects on "learning to be assessed", attention is given to this in many ways, and sometimes it *is* part of formal subject or module learning outcomes. Perhaps this needs to be more widespread, as arguably "learning to be assessed" is a key part of "learning to learn" skills, which are fundamental to lifelong learning.

RPL often requires the skills of self-assessment, self-evaluation, and presenting oneself in format appropriate to the context. The context is often one that is right outside the student's or candidate's cultural frame of reference. If we then consider that the course or qualification outcomes and the purposes for which students may be pursuing RPL are diverse (developmental processes or processes of credentialling), this presupposes diverse methods in achieving RPL outcomes. Students need to learn these methods in the same way they need to learn how to write essays or sit exams, and they may need similar levels of support, depending on the course and the assessment processes that are to be used.

2.8.1 Credentialling processes

In many cases, the purpose of undertaking RPL is to achieve accreditation of skills in which a person is already competent, and has been so for years. Appropriate processes depend on whether the process is to be *student* or *candidate* driven, or *teacher, lecturer or assessor* driven, with the support of the institution.

If it is to be latter, it may not be so important to provide students with a framework to learn about RPL, learning outcomes or competencies, and the nature of evidence etc. However, this requires the assessor to undertake the mapping of a person's skills or knowledge to the learning outcomes/competencies in a qualification, and to tell the student exactly what sort of evidence and how much, they are required to produce. This sort of process is most easily conducted in the workplace, and where this is so, it is impossible to distinguish between RPL and work-based assessment.

Case Study 2: Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education

Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education in partnership with an Aboriginal community in the Top End, worked with a group of Community People to assess their skills in construction, as many had for years worked in construction using high order skills, and requiring knowledge of complex concepts. Initially many of the Community People could not see the point of participating in the process of acquiring a qualification, as they had not needed it on the Community to obtain work. However, after discussion with the Community Council, the men saw that there would be benefits in acquiring a qualification, because it would give them a credential that would allow them to get work in other parts of their communities. Batchelor Institute sent a lecturer to the Community to work, and he observed the men at work over a period of time, and was able to assess them in this way.

This process could be described either as work-based assessment or RPL, but its key feature is that students did not have to drive the process, and they did not have to develop the language of training packages, competency-based training, elements of competence, range of variables, performance criteria and so on. It is an example of good practice because:
- the assessor spent time in the community, and so was able to see participants working in a variety of contexts, using different skills, ensuring the evidence upon which he was basing his assessment was not only valid and reliable, it was also sufficient;
- it provided opportunities for a community who have not had much access to, or experience in, post-compulsory education to be recognised for the skills and knowledge that they had and had been using for years, and to have these skills appropriately recognised in a nationally recognised and portable qualification; and,
- it provides an *excellent* example of economies of scale, as spending considerable time in the workplace to assess one person is clearly not a viable option for Registered Training Organisations

It is more common that RPL processes are student driven, where the student is required to map their own knowledge and skills against competencies or learning outcomes, units or subjects in a qualification. Students need considerable support to undertake this process.

Case Study 3: Canberra Institute of Technology

Canberra Institute of Technology offers students the opportunity to enrol in an RPL competency module to provide them with extensive support in preparing their RPL application. Students learn skills of self-assessment and self-evaluation as well as the knowledge and skills they need to navigate in VET, particularly in terms of the qualification for which they are seeking partial or complete recognition. Students receive credit for the RPL module as well as whatever credit they receive for their RPL application. This is an example of good practice because:

- it recognises the learning that students need to engage in if they are to understand RPL and what they are required to do;
- it provides a structured learning environment with continuing support from teaching staff;
- it is funded, that is, teaching staff are allocated to 'teach' this unit or competency, and teachers are not required to undertake the task of supporting students to develop their RPL application over and above their normal workloads; and
- many teaching staff may not have the necessary skills to support students in preparing an RPL application.

2.8.2 'Developmental' RPL

As discussed earlier, RPL can be used as part of a *developmental* process, whereby the student engages in a process of self-actualisation, personal development and self-knowledge and an understanding of the world and their place in it. Many courses have these objectives as outcomes in their own right, for example, the Diploma of Liberal Arts in VET or many Bachelor of Arts degrees. It is also important in many occupations for practitioners to be reflective, to question their own practice, to have high levels of understanding about themselves and how they work in particular contexts, and to engage in continual processes of self-evaluation and self-appraisal in order to improve their practice. Teachers and social workers are two examples of occupations that value reflective practitioners, and there are many others. RPL offers students an opportunity to learn the skills of reflection and self-evaluation, and it is important that it do so, if the assessment outcomes are to be related to the course objectives. Assessment processes in the developmental model would include reflective essays, journals, or developmental and reflective portfolios. The skills of self-reflection are not always easy to learn, and students need considerable support to do so.

Case Study 4: United Kingdom examples

A study of UK higher education institutions (Learning From Experience Trust, 2000) found that a significant number offered students the opportunity to participate in a subject or module to prepare their RPL application. Of those who offered such a unit, two thirds gave students credit for participating in the subject or module *as well* as the credit they were claiming through the RPL process. This is because the process of reflection involved enabled students to use what they were learning now to reflect on their past experiences and to consider it in a broader context, thereby recognising and articulating what they had learnt from that experience and how and why it was relevant now. It also encouraged them to learn the skills of self-evaluation and self-assessment, and the skills of being a reflective practitioner. This is an example of good practice because:

- engaging in the RPL process is itself an important developmental and learning process, and this is recognised and given value because it counts towards the course outcome;
- students are given the opportunity to reflect on their past experience and articulate their tacit knowledge, something which can be more difficult for people not experienced in tertiary education, or from families without this experience;
- students have the support of teaching staff and their peers in engaging in this process; and,
- it is funded provision, ensuring that students receive the level of support they need, and staff are not required to provide it over and above normal load

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Skills for lifelong learning

RPL must reflect the diverse goals and outcomes associated with particular courses and qualifications. We have argued in the preceding section that RPL processes will be different depending on the nature of the course or qualification in which the student is seeking access or credit. It is important to be clear about the course or qualification goals, to ensure that the RPL processes are in alignment with them.

However, it is possible to envisage circumstances where similar processes may be used to help students learn what they need to do, in cases where students are seeking credentials, seeking to participate in developmental outcomes, or both (Learning From Experience Trust, 2000). This may be so when courses and qualifications share the common goal of equipping students with the skills they need to engage in lifelong learning. Arguably, these skills include self-evaluation, critical reflection, self-assessment, learning to be assessed, career planning and determining strategies to achieve personal goals and aspirations.

Including a credentialled component in courses and qualifications that focussed on these skills is one way of ensuring students learn the skills they need for lifelong learning, as part of the process of preparing their RPL applications. It also may help students to learn about the structures of education and training in Australia, structures many will be engaged with to a greater or lesser extent for the rest of their working lives. It may also be useful to students who are not seeking RPL, as many here would have less life and work experience than other colleagues, and for whom the development of these skills is just as important. Apart from anything else, it would have the advantage of being funded provision, and involving students with others in peer processes in considering these issues.

Conclusion

This chapter considered the importance of RPL in mass post-compulsory education and training systems and in qualifications frameworks. Globalisation, the development of the knowledge economy, the rapid pace of technological change, and high levels of labour mobility requires the implementation of lifelong learning policies, which in turn must feature RPL, to create access and opportunities for people. The level of implementation of RPL is very low, despite the importance given to it in policy, and the value placed on it by people we interviewed for this project. We considered why this was so, and found it was due to conceptual confusion about the purposes of RPL, and lack of focus on the way in which people are supported to learn the skills they need to engage in lifelong learning, particularly those who have had limited experience in post-compulsory education and training. Different models of RPL were offered, and the implications for practice were examined. Our key finding is that RPL must reflect the aims, objectives and goals of the course or qualification which the student or candidate is seeking access to, or credit in. This means that one single model of RPL will not be effective. We concluded by examining the skills required for lifelong learning, and suggested that RPL could be furthered if harnessed to provision that aimed to develop these skills.

3.   International RPL practice

This chapter considers international RPL practice. It identifies international RPL projects to demonstrate the value placed on RPL by international bodies. It then examines RPL practice in the United Kingdom, the province of British Columbia in Canada and South Africa, and draws parallels with Australian experience.

International projects

Several international projects are in place, most of which focus on qualifications frameworks and how they may be used in developing lifelong learning frameworks. While some of these projects are broader than RPL, they include an emphasis on RPL and the way in which learning is recognised in general. The international projects that we have identified include:

- an OECD thematic review on "The role of national qualifications systems in promoting lifelong learning". This includes a focus on how learning is recognised and credentialled, and the way in which formal, informal and non-formal learning contributes to qualifications systems. Australia is a participant in this project.
- a European Union funded project on the accreditation of prior learning as a mechanism for overcoming social exclusion. This two year project includes five countries and is cross-sectoral (Cleary *et al.*, 2002).[10]
- another European Union funded project co-ordinated by the European Universities Continuing Education Network on the development of European-wide credit transfer and credit accumulation systems with a focus on the transfer between formal, informal and non-formal education.[11]
- a project on lifelong learning conducted by the *Asia-Europe Meeting* (ASEM), which was established in 1996 and brings together 15 European Union member states and 10 Asian states. It is described as "an informal process of dialogue and co-operation" around "political, economic and cultural issues."[12] The ASEM has in place a lifelong learning initiative with three projects or areas, one of which is "Integrated Approaches to Lifelong Learning and recognition of skills and prior learning".[13]

These projects will enrich our understanding of RPL practice and policy, and will inform the way policy is developed in Australia. We need to ensure strategies are in place so that we can learn from these projects.

Britain

Recognition of prior learning in Britain is commonly referred to as the Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) or sometimes the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) to distinguish it from the recognition of previous certificated/accredited learning. On the face of it, APL/APEL seems to be more widespread in the higher education (HE) sector than in the

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[10] See http://hp1.gcal.ac.uk:7777/crll/index.html for more information. Site accessed on 14/8/2002
[11] See http://www.transfine.net/ for more information, site accessed 14/8/2002
[12] See http://www.uvm.dk/asem/aseminfo.shtml, accessed 14/8/2002
[13] See http://www.uvm.dk/asem/group2.shtml accessed 14/8/2002

further education (FE) sector, which is roughly the equivalent of our vocational education and training sector. As a consequence of contacting individuals in Scotland we were provided with information about APL projects conducted in the early 1990s (discussed later) and case studies on best practice in APL dated 2000 (SQA 2000). Beyond this, we could not identify *any* literature that discussed APEL in further education, with the exception of the European Union project report on APEL as a mechanism for social inclusion (Cleary, Whittacker *et al.* 2002). This report lamented the lack of APEL in the FE sector, and the authors said they had difficulty in identifying FE colleges that used APEL to an extent that allowed them to include a college in their case studies. Personal contacts confirmed that APEL was practised little in FE in Britain. The EU project national report on England stated that APEL was used in FE in England in the mid-90s for entry, accreditation and advanced standing, but is used less now, principally because of the costs involved (Merrill 2001). The authors of the EU national report on Scotland suggested that "it may be that the practice of APEL is operating at a very informal level and not being recorded in ways which make it easily identifiable" in FE (Cleary, Whittacker *et al.* 2001: 7). However, they said they had no evidence that this was the case.

We found this apparent lack of APEL in FE puzzling, given that the FE system is based on competency-based training as is the case in Australia, and in light of the prominence given to RPL in our system. CBT in theory should lend itself to RPL, as the focus is on the competency outcomes, and enabling people to be assessed on the basis of competence whenever and however it is acquired, and not time served in formal learning programs.

Major APL projects were conducted in Scotland in the late 1980s and early 1990s in the FE sector, and as a consequence the Scottish Vocational Education Council (SCOTVEC) included APL as an acceptable assessment approach that could be used in qualifications, and trained its verifiers and supplied guidance for assessors and internal verifiers in colleges as to how to handle APL evidence. APL centres were established with APL co-ordinators (SCOTVEC, 1992). However, even though a national framework was put in place, it does not seem to have been implemented by providers to any great extent, because of the cost of implementation. The Scottish projects conceived of APL as just one way of being assessed for a qualification, alongside many other processes of assessment. APL was different to other forms of assessment because it used information and testimony from a person's previous experience, instead of the 'normal' assessment activity. In other words, it was portfolio based, but was nonetheless fundamentally a process of assessment.

APL was found to be a reasonable assessment technique, but the problem lay in the *process*. Most APL candidates needed support in learning how to construct a portfolio, particularly those who had not been through the qualification system. Group processes were used to support candidates, but when it came down to matching individual learning and experience to individual qualifications and competencies, personal support was often required. The process was labour and resource intensive. Many found it easier to enrol students and assess them there and then (interview). There is also some anecdotal evidence that learners preferred a more traditional process, being focused as much on the learning, which often had a social aspect, as on the accreditation.

In some parts of the system it can be difficult to distinguish between work-based assessment and APL or APEL, the common factor being the absence of a structured or formal learning programme or context. If the assessment processes are aligned with the qualification outcomes the difference between RPL and work-based assessment in some instances may

only be one of reporting, and not of substance. The Scottish projects specifically distinguished between APL and assessment on demand. APL was portfolio based, whereas assessment on demand involved assessing students using the 'normal' assessment used to assess students for competence within courses. Both have in common the principle that students may not necessarily need to go through a learning program because they are competent; where they differ is in the assessment process. An email from one of the people involved in the Scottish projects explained that for those seeking accreditation of their occupational competence, APL was overtaken by the introduction of the Scottish Vocational Qualifications (the equivalent of Australian training packages), and that "When this competency based system was introduced, candidates could demonstrate their competence through workplace demonstrations" (Irving, 2002). This process is referred to as accelerated assessment. The cost of the process is also much lower. This does not resolve the problem for those who are not in work and hence do not have a work environment in which to demonstrate competence, nor does it solve the problem for those whose prior learning has been outside the workplace, and in broader community contexts. In these instances, students will need to use APEL.

Initially, when RPL was first implemented in Australia it focussed on the portfolio approach, but work in recent years has extended the concept to include *all* forms of assessment of prior learning, and not just portfolios. RPL refers to assessment processes used to assess an individual's prior learning – not just one form of assessment. If we use this understanding of RPL and apply it to FE in Britain, it appears that it may be more commonly used than is indicated in the literature.

Notwithstanding the above, it appears that APL/APEL is again becoming an issue for FE in Scotland, as one mechanism that can help to address future demographic and skills issues. The Scottish Case studies document five examples where APL was used by firms (all of which appeared to be enterprise based providers) as an integrated part of a training program leading to the award of qualifications. It has also been raised in relation to recognising the skills of asylum seekers and refugees (Hart, 2002).

APEL seems to be growing as a practice in the higher education sector (Learning From Experience Trust, 2000; Merrill, 2001; Cleary *et al.*, 2002). However, as with Australia, most discussion is on the potential benefits rather than actual benefits of APEL. Different models are used, reflecting different approaches and attitudes about assessment. These vary from:
- 'straight forward' processes of matching prior learning to specific and non-negotiable learning outcomes in specific modules or subjects (which seemed to be the most common approach);
- 'holistic' assessments that consider the individual's experience and learning and award credits on that basis, while not necessarily matching the credit to specific subjects; and,
- flexible models where the learning outcomes are themselves negotiable, and are constructed in partnership between the student and the University, and sometimes the student's workplace. This last model has most in common with Boud's views of work-based learning (Boud, 1998).

A major 'audit' of APEL in higher education institutions was conducted in 2000 by the Learning From Experience Trust, and was funded by the Department of Education and Employment (DfEE) for England. The take-up of APEL is still relatively low, and there are familiar problems with tracking and monitoring both the extent to which APEL is used and

its outcomes. It is developing fastest in professional areas in higher education, particularly at the post-graduate level, but has not been effective as a mechanism for social inclusion. It is most likely to occur in the 'new universities' (the old polytechnics), particularly those with large student populations, and a high percentage of mature aged and part-time students. It is most often granted at earlier stages in a degree, but some of the new universities permit it at later years as well. Most universities have restrictions on the extent it can be used, and the level of credit that can be granted (Learning From Experience Trust, 2000).

Most institutions distinguish between the different stages of APEL, particularly between the guidance and advice roles on the one hand, and the assessment role on the other. Much coursework assessment in the UK is assessed internally and moderated by the examining boards. This involves external moderation of all assessment, where an external verifier confirms the assessment judgements that have been made by the university, rather than actually assessing the candidate directly. The processes used to assess APEL reflect this broader culture (Learning From Experience Trust, 2000).

APEL is conducted on a one-by-one basis with individuals, but some institutions prefer to work with groups as this is more cost-effective. This approach has helped to open new markets, particularly in professional areas, and has also had the effect of opening higher education to processes of change in the knowledge and skill requirements in the labour market. This is particularly the case in newly emerging industries where the process of knowledge creation and technological innovation has not yet been reflected in the university (Learning From Experience Trust, 2000).

Some institutions provide a module or a subject that students can enrol in to prepare their APEL application, and of these, two thirds provide credit for completing the APEL subject as well as the APEL claim (should it be successful). This enables students to use their current learning to reflect on their past experiences, and to relate it to their current course. Another practice was to require students to prepare a proposal for their RPL, which must be agreed to by the institution, and which is subject to negotiation between the individual and the university. The outcome of this process results in agreements about the level and extent of credit to be awarded should the claim be successful. These two strategies are most common in institutions that have a commitment to flexible learning strategies, rather than requiring students to match their prior learning to pre-determined and fixed learning outcomes (Learning From Experience Trust, 2000).

Three models of charging students for RPL were identified: first, a cost-recovery schedule of fees; second, charging what the market will bear; and, third, a loss-leader model, which aims to use the APEL process to create new markets. Most universities have a mixture of devolved and centralised processes for managing APEL, with the new universities most likely to have a devolved framework that operates within the context of central guidelines. The authors of the APEL in higher education report favoured this model as one that enabled APEL to become embedded in the life of the institution. They regarded APEL as a subset of flexible learning, and that when this is in place APEL was more likely to occur, and lead to diverse outcomes (Learning From Experience Trust, 2000).

Canada: the province of British Columbia

It is useful to make comparisons between Canada and Australia. The countries have comparable sized populations (Canada has approximately 31 million people, and Australia approximately 19 million) which are located in the urban centres, with a vast and sparsely populated hinterland; both are federations with states or provinces; both are part of the Commonwealth; and they have similar systems of government (Albrecht, 2001). Both countries have had RPL policies in place since the late 1980s. In Canada, responsibilities for education and training are located mainly in the provinces, and these responsibilities are not shared between the provinces and the central government to the extent that they are shared between the states and the federal government in Australia. Despite this there are commonalities across the provinces, and in the area of RPL this expressed in the existence of the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) (Albrecht, 2001).

This report focuses on the province of British Columbia, which has invested much time and resources in developing RPL policies and an infrastructure to support its implementation. RPL is known in Canada as Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) or Prior Learning and Assessment Recognition (PLAR). British Columbia has 28 differentiated, publicly funded post-secondary institutions, which include:

- 'traditional research oriented universities' that grant degrees, and higher research degrees;
- specialised universities, which offer undergraduate and graduate credentials as well as certificates and diplomas in selected and applied fields
- a technical university, which offers technical bachelor degrees that combine practical skills and theoretical knowledge
- university colleges, provincial institutes and aboriginal institutes, which offer two year associate degrees that are a pathway to four year degrees in the universities, or an exit in their own right, and adult basic education; developmental education; apprenticeship training; career, technical, and vocational training
- the Open Learning Agency, which offers four year bachelor degrees and two year associate degrees in partnership with other agencies

PLA has been supported by the British Columbia provincial government since the late 1980s, and in 1993 a province wide standing committee was formed, reporting to the British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfer. Province-wide guidelines and standards were developed and training events held. The government provides implementation and enhancement grants to institutions, and 27 of the 28 post-secondary institutions were offering PLA by 2000. There is considerable diversity in the way PLA is implemented across institutions, as institutions developed their processes independently, although this is within the context of province-wide leadership. The provincial focus in 2001 has been on making PLA sustainable and efficient (Barker, 2001).

Institutions report to the provincial government on PLA outcomes, although there is some concern about the consistency in reporting (Barker, 2001). This does, however, allow some examination of outcomes. It is estimated that the number of students receiving PLA were 2824 in 2000/2001. The numbers of students receiving PLA were relatively constant from 1999/2000 to 2000/2001, but the effective full-time equivalent value of PLA assessment increased by 45% over that time. That is, approximately the same number of students were

receiving PLA, but they were being granted credit for a greater component of their course (Centre for Curriculum Transfer and Technology, 2001).

PLA students comprised almost 8% of students responding to the 2001 provincial student outcomes survey (1433 PLA students compared to 17,134 non-PLA students). PLA students outperformed other students by achieving higher course completion rates (86% cf 70%), although they were less likely to proceed to further studies (40% cf 48%). PLA students were more likely to report that they had completely met their main educational objectives (52% cf 47%), were completely satisfied with their educational studies (46% cf 42%), and approximately equal proportions of PLA and non-PLA students felt very well prepared for further educational studies. PLA students were also more likely to report that:

- the program or training was very useful in performing their current job (56% cf 42%);
- they were currently employed in a job related to their course or training (83% cf 65%);
- they found their course or training very useful in obtaining a job afterwards (67% cf 55%);
- their first job obtained after education was very related to the program that they had taken (46% cf 27%); and,
- they were currently employed (82% cf 76%).

(Centre for Curriculum Transfer and Technology, 2001)

Almost 39% of PLA students were studying at diploma level, approximately 46% were at certificate level or equivalent, and almost 11% were at bachelor degree level. Very few PLA students were university transfer students (2.7%) or were studying for an associate degree (1.8%). PLA students were spread across occupational groups, with the highest percentage concentrated in sales and service (25%), with business, finance and administration following at 22%. The next largest was health occupations (14%). Most PLA respondents (82%) were enrolled in courses that were career/occupational or vocational in nature, with 18% enrolled in academic courses. Much literature has focussed on the potential of RPL/APL in newly emerging industries, where there is a time lag between the emergence of the industry and courses to cater for that industry. Yet it was found in BC that:

> "Of all occupational program-based PLA students, 35% pursued studies in programs for which job growth rates were considered 'below average' 25% pursued studies in occupations with 'average' annual growth rates, while nearly 35% pursued studies in occupations with 'above average' growth."
>
> (Centre for Curriculum Transfer and Technology, 2001: 8)

British Columbia is creating a vision for PLA for the 21st century, which places PLA as a key strategy in achieving a learning province. They have "a strong cadre of able assessors, advisors and administrators committed to supporting the expansion and development of PLA and related services", resources, and guidelines "to support the articulation and transferability of credits earned through PLA" (Simosko, 2000: 4). Their challenges are to develop common understandings of PLA across institutions, embed PLA into mainstream institutional life, increase the take-up of PLA, publicise PLA and increase the extent to which PLA assessments are accepted in all post-secondary institutions (Barker, 2001).

They have undertaken research to identify the obstacles and facilitating mechanisms, and their experience accords with ours in Australia. These include the complexity and difficulty of PLA processes; the cost of implementing it, and the cost to the student; inadequate

resources; negative attitudes by students, teaching staff, and business; differential access because of variance in philosophy and practice in post-secondary institutions; and, 'shifting power' which refers to "systemic discrimination and balance of power" (Barker, 2001: 7). This refers to the 'cultural outsideness' experienced by First Nations students, and "visible minorities and other non-traditional students" (Barker, 2001: 7). PLA can act as a mechanism of exclusion when it legitimises "knowledge and skills that reassembles the academic norm and which extends the academy's traditional gate-keeping function of barring alternative cultures of knowledge and calibrates the legitimacy of students' knowledge according to sameness and correspondence" (Thomas cited in Barker, 2000: 7).

While BC has identified these issues as barriers to PLA, they arise as a consequence of *engagement* in the process of implementing PLA and creating an infrastructure able to sustain it. We can learn much from British Columbia.[14]

South Africa

There are two components to South Africa's strategy to implement RPL. The first is through the establishment of a national policy framework developed and implemented by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). The second is through the partnerships between institutions and stakeholders to develop and implement innovative practice, research how RPL may be implemented in the South African context, and contribute to strengthening RPL capacity throughout the country.

South Africa is about to embark on a national strategy to develop and embed RPL as a fundamental component of its National Qualification Framework. The South African Qualifications Authority has undertaken an extensive process of consultation in preparing a draft RPL policy. An RPL policy framework was adopted by the SAQA on 12 June 2002, and will now move to the implementation phase. The information we have used in this report is from the draft policy, as the final policy is not yet available.

RPL is a key strategy for post-compulsory education and training in South Africa, because:

> "The inclusion of the principle of RPL is fundamental to the development of a new education and training system in South Africa. The principle has its origins in a number of pre-democracy projects and policy-making forums initiated by the trade union movement and the ANC in the late 1980s."
> (SAQA, 2002)

While South Africa shares many issues in common with countries such as Australia, Britain and Canada, the scale of the problems that confront them are of a different order of magnitude. Cretchley and Castle (Cretchley and Castle, 2001: 488) explain that:

> In South Africa, RPL is bound up with moral and political imperatives to broaden participation in higher education by black South Africans. Thus, RPL is associated not only with issues of individual and social justice, but also with issues of redress."

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[14] British Columbia has many resources for practitioners. See the Centre for Curriculum, Transfer and Technology at http://www.c2t2.ca for more information

This understanding underpins the proposed South African RPL policy framework, which is cross-sectoral. The framework argues that a holistic approach is required, one which pays as much attention to the process supporting individuals to learn how to engage in RPL, as to the RPL assessment process itself. It is recognised that those who have not had experience of education, and those who have had negative experiences of education, may find the RPL process beyond their reach. Also emphasised is the role of RPL in recognising, validating and incorporating ways of knowing and cultural practices and understandings that empowered disadvantaged communities to create a new society. This, the paper argues, challenges curriculum and institutional practices that are drawn from, and reinforce discriminatory and exclusionary beliefs and practices. It is a powerful argument for democratising education and training, and for harnessing it to the social and economic needs of the people and the nation.

The paper cites the Australian experience as one that has not achieved the goals of access and positive outcomes for disadvantaged groups:

> "It is clear from both local and international experiences of RPL that the principles of equity, quality and redress, as stated in South Africa's new education and training policy and legislative framework, are objectives that need an explicit 'translation' into RPL practice if they are to be met. The Australian scenario, for example, demonstrates that a more equitable practice of RPL, and the hoped-for increasing access of Aboriginal people to mainstream education, has not taken place – old discriminations and exclusions continue to be practiced, both within institutions and workplaces with regard to education and training (Flowers and Hawke, 2000). A key challenge in South Africa will be to manage the diverse interests and expectations of the stakeholders who will participate in the field of RPL. This calls for a policy that provides direction and support for an evolving system of RPL that is able to go to scale in meeting the challenges of social, economic and human development while at the same time contributing to the overall development, quality and integrity of a National Qualifications Framework."
>
> (SAQA, 2002)

The features of the draft policy document include:

- creating appropriate institutional contexts and policies. This will require institutions to have policies based on key principles within the National Qualifications Framework, and institutions will be required to demonstrate how they are implementing RPL;
- services and support for learners need to be provided and need to take into account the social context of learners. Support services may include staff whose role is to be an 'evidence facilitator', and the provision of formal programs that support people in learning how to prepare the evidence they need for the RPL assessment. Services will also support students after the process, which includes the development of learning pathways;
- training and registration of key staff, including: "evidence facilitators, assessors, moderators, advisors and administrative personnel":
- methods and processes of assessment that are "systematic, flexible, collaborative and transparent" and involve "the learner and assessor within a specific context and site, such as the workplace or institution of education and training";
- RPL will "increasingly inform the development of new standards, qualifications, programmes and curriculum";

- quality management systems that are not RPL specific, but which are "properly integrated into credible quality management systems that prevail in the workplace and in the provider institutions"; and,
- fees and funding for RPL services should not exclude students. Fees should cost less than doing the course, and include flexible payment options

The SAQA's (2002) strategic plan for implementation includes:

- institutional self-audit procedures, benchmarking workshops and sharing good practice
- "The development of detailed plans to introduce, transform or strengthen quality assurance systems and procedures at all levels and locations in the system over the next five years….
- The development of dedicated capacity and personnel to drive the implementation of quality assurance systems and processes at all levels and locations in the system….
- The design and moderation of assessment instruments appropriate to RPL assessments against registered standards and qualifications….
- The installation of performance management systems and procedures against which all key personnel can be held accountable for the use of resources and the achievement of agreed targets in agreed timeframes….
- The provision by SAQA and the ETQAs [Education and Training Quality Assurance bodies] of opportunities (seminars, conferences and publications) at which all stakeholders, including candidate learners can profile their work, and contribute to the development of new knowledge in this field."

The strategies to implement the SAQA RPL policy framework have been preceded by national projects which aimed to support the development of RPL in South Africa. This included a major two year project which was a joint venture between the Human Sciences Research Council, the University of Cape Town, and Peninsula Technikon (Harris, 1997).

Another major two year project is underway, this time by the Joint Education Trust in South Africa on RPL, with the aim of informing "the further planning of quality RPL programmes in South Africa over the next decade."[15] The Joint Education Trust (2002) was established as a partnership between leading South African companies, who joined with "the leading political parties, labour unions, business and education organisations, recognising that although coming from different perspectives all these organisations shared a common goal: to improve the quality of education and to transform the existing system into one more equitable for all South Africa's citizens."

The South Africans are engaged in a process that will have many lessons for Australia, particularly relating to how to increase access to post-compulsory education and training using RPL as a strategy, and in contributing to the transformation of institutional practices, courses and curriculum to ensure the outcomes meet the needs of all stakeholders.

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[15] See http://www.jet.org.za/projects/default.asp?id=27, accessed 14/8/2002

Issues in common with Australia

There are many parallels between the British, Canadian and South African experiences of RPL and our experiences in Australia. Much of the research and policy frameworks focus on the potential benefits, rather than the actual benefits. The difficulties, barriers and problems resonate with our experience. Examples of good practice have been implemented and we can learn much from these, as researchers and practitioners in each of these countries have attempted to draw general lessons for how policy frameworks should be developed.

It is clear that RPL is set to become a major factor in the development of post-compulsory education and training systems around the world. This is further reinforced by the various international projects currently underway. Australia will need to develop strategies to ensure that we learn from overseas experiences, and that we are able to contribute our own findings and lessons on how RPL may be extended.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined international projects currently underway. While the focus of several of these is on qualifications frameworks and processes of recognising learning, this includes an emphasis on RPL as an intrinsic component of lifelong learning frameworks. The chapter also examined how RPL was implemented in Britain, in the province of British Columbia in Canada, and in South Africa. Many parallels between the experiences in these countries with Australia were noted, as was the need to develop strategies to ensure that we can learn from overseas experience, while contributing our own findings and lessons.

4.   Who receives RPL

This chapter examines the available data on who receives RPL based on the 2001 Australian Bureau of Statistics Survey of Education, Training and Information Technology and NCVER data. The former provides information based on student self-report across all sectors, while the latter provides information about VET provision drawn from the data collections and student self-report in each state and territory. The RPL outcomes for 2001 are compared to the outcomes of the 1997 ABS Survey of Education and Training. RPL outcomes are examined by sector, provider type, state and territory, qualification level, field of study, age, sex, equity group background, labour force status, and occupation.

Differences in data sources

There are two sources of data for this section: the first is based on several reports published by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research, which gives a picture of RPL outcomes for VET provision. The NCVER publishes statistics on participation in, and the outcomes of, publicly funded vocational education and training, based on data collections by each state and territory and surveys of TAFE graduates. We have used two types of NCVER data to analyse RPL in the VET sector. The first is data derived from institutional reports provided by states and territories to the NCVER. In theory, this data reports all formally recorded RPL in VET provision. The second source of NCVER data we have used is drawn from the Student Outcomes Survey (SOS). This is a survey of a sample of TAFE (and not all VET) graduates and TAFE module completers. While the other sectors publish similar data, RPL is not reported.

The second main source of data we have used in this chapter is based on the Australian Bureau of Statistics Survey of Education, Training and Information Technology (SETIT). The purpose of the survey is to present a national picture of educational attainment by Australians, and current participation in education and training, including informal education and training on the job. This is the fourth time this survey has been conducted, although in this one the focus was broadened to include use of information technology by individuals. It was previously undertaken in 1989, 1993 and 1997.[16] The information in the survey is based on interviews, and 24,400 people were interviewed between April and August 2001.

There are some differences between the NCVER and the SETIT data that we need to note. For example, if one were estimating the size of the VET sector, based on the SETIT data, the result would be approximately 1,017,000 students (ABS, 2002: 31, derived from Table 18), while the NCVER reports that 1.75 million students participated in VET in 2001 (NCVER, 2001). However, the NCVER data includes those enrolled in qualifications, as well as those enrolled in non-award courses, or those enrolled only in modules or subjects (and not in qualifications). Of all VET clients in 2001, some 1,227,700 were enrolled in an AQF qualification, with the remainder enrolled in other recognised courses, non-award courses, and in subjects or modules only (NCVER, 2001: Table 12). Other ABS data shows that the

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[16] Prior to 2001, the survey was known as the Survey of Education and Training (SET). As explained, the 2001 survey included use of information technology by individuals, and the name was expanded to the Survey of Education and Training and Information Technology (SET).

VET sector is substantially smaller than that in the SETIT or reported by the NCVER. This discrepancy between NCVER and ABS statistics has been known to exist for some time and it is beyond the scope of the current study to discuss it. We will however avoid mixing absolute numbers derived from the two sources and restrict ourselves to the comparison of ratios where relevant. These differences do make it difficult however, to construct an accurate picture of the sectors, their size, and outcomes.[17]

There are some major differences in outcomes depending on whether one is using the NCVER data based on institutional returns (VET statistics) or data based on surveys and interviews in the NCVER Student Outcomes Survey or the SETIT. These differences derive from the different bases for collecting the data. The SETIT and the NCVER Student Outcomes Survey are both based on student self-report (through interviews with respondents conducted by trained interviewers in the case of the former, and questionnaires in the case of the latter). The NCVER VET statistics concerning RPL are based on statistical collections in each state and territory, which are in turn based on institutional data returns.

Where the NCVER reports RPL outcomes based on student self-report as in the Student Outcomes Survey, the outcomes are more congruent with the SETIT outcomes. For example, we found from the SETIT data that 7.8% of students studying VET qualifications reported that they had been awarded RPL based on assessed skills and experience (see Table 7 below), while the Student Outcomes Survey reports that 10.4% of VET graduates (as opposed to all VET students) reported having received some RPL in their course (NCVER, 2001: 38).

However, when one looks at the VET statistics which report on RPL module results the results are much lower, because they are based on formal subject or module outcomes that have been awarded through RPL. For example, using VET statistics, the NCVER reports that 2.5% of all subject enrolment outcomes in the VET sector were based on RPL, while 3.8% were based on credit transfer (NCVER, 2001: Table 19). The different bases for collecting the data – institutional returns collected by states and territories in the case of the NCVER statistics, and student self report in the case of the SETIT and VET Student Outcomes Survey – renders the two types of data incommensurable, without further investigation.

We have used the SETIT for the substantial part of this chapter to discuss RPL, because this is the *only* way in which we can analyse *all* the sectors of post-compulsory education and training, and we must recognise the limitations that ensue from it being based on student self-report. However, the incommensurable nature of the different reporting regimes in each sector makes it impossible for the existing data in each sector to be used for comparison. It is hoped that a shared definition concerning RPL across sectors may lead to reporting that permits comparisons to be made.

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[17] The ABS Education and Work Australia (Cat no: 6227.0 May 2001) reports that of those in the VET sector, 536,700 were at (TAFE) and 231,800 were at other institutions. This includes those enrolled in the VET sector in qualifications and in non-recognised courses. If one were to add the number of students undertaking VET in schools to this number (approximately 130,000) this still only comes to approximately 899,000 students.

The VET sector

This section analyses RPL and credit transfer outcomes in the VET sector. The number of TAFE graduates who report that they received credit based on either (or both) RPL and credit transfer in their course has fluctuated from 1997 to 2001, and is now back to some 33%. The skills recognition, or RPL component based on assessed skills and experience in 2001 (for students who completed their course in 2000) was 10.4%, while it was 11.9% in 2000 (for 1999 graduates) (NCVER, 2001: 38). This has changed little from 1997, where some 10.3% of 1996 VET graduates reported they had received RPL (Ryan and Watson, 2001: 34). The overall figures for 2001 are similar to estimates for currently enrolled students (as opposed to graduates), based on the SETIT data (20% credit transfer and 7.8% RPL in the VET sector).

Table 1 shows that there is considerable variation by state in the extent to which TAFE 2001 graduates report that they received credit in the course they had just completed. South Australian graduates reported the highest overall levels of credit, with 24% of graduates reporting they received some credit in their course on the basis of assessed skills and experience, and altogether 36% reporting credit based on prior study in either TAFE, university, a private provider, an ACE provider, or for study elsewhere. TAFE graduates from the Northern Territory report high levels of RPL, but as the numbers involved are quite low, this should be viewed with some caution. TAFE graduates from Queensland reported the lowest levels of credit overall, with 73% reporting they received no credit in their course, and 8% reporting that they received credit for assessed skills and experience.

Table 1: Basis of credit in completed course for 2001 TAFE graduates

RPL towards training completed	NSW	Vic	QLD	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT
Study at a TAFE institution	24%	16%	12%	21%	18%	23%	23%	19%
Study at a Registered Private Provider or ACE Provider	2%	2%	2%	3%	1%	3%	*4%	3%
Study at university	3%	3%	2%	4%	2%	2%	8%	5%
Assessed skills and experience	**8%**	**12%**	**8%**	**24%**	**12%**	**16%**	**22%**	**20%**
Study elsewhere	4%	5%	4%	8%	6%	6%	6%	12%
No recognition	64%	67%	73%	51%	65%	58%	49%	56%
Not Stated (received credit, but reason for credit not stated)	1%	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	*2%	*1%

estimate has a relative standard error of between 25% and 50% and should be used with caution.
Source: unpublished NCVER Student Outcomes Survey data

Table 2 shows that there is considerable variation in the extent of credit awarded to TAFE graduates in their course. Graduates from higher level courses were more likely to receive credit from a variety of sources including study at a TAFE institution, at a university (particularly advanced diploma and diploma graduates), or on the basis of assessed skills and experience. Graduates with the high levels of credit based on assessed skills and experience are those who completed an advanced certificate (other) or associate diplomas, however, the numbers involved are relatively low. Graduates from diploma courses and certificate IV courses received credit for assessed skills and experience at almost 15% and almost 14% respectively. Nearly half of graduates from advanced diploma, diploma and associate diploma courses reporting receiving some credit in their course.

Table 2: Basis of credit in completed course for 2001 TAFE graduates by qualification

RPL towards training completed	Adv Dip	Dip	Ass Dip	Adv Cert Other	Cert - Trade	Cert IV	Cert III	Cert II	Cert I	Other Cert	Table Total
Study at a TAFE institution	25.9	25.7	27.5	29.8	19.6	22.8	19.6	13.6	13.3	16.9	19.1
Study at a Registered Private Provider or ACE Provider	*1.1	2.4	*1.0	**3.9	*0.6	2.3	1.8	1.6	1.0	*1.3	1.8
Study at university	8.4	5.5	*5.0	*7.4	*0.1	5.3	1.5	1.2	0.8	*1.5	2.7
Assessed skills and experience	**10.3**	**14.7**	**15.0**	**18.3**	**7.3**	**13.5**	**10.1**	**7.5**	**5.1**	**10.1**	**10.2**
Study elsewhere	6.8	7.7	8.9	*9.9	3.0	5.3	4.8	3.4	2.8	5.0	4.8
No recognition	54.6	54.7	50.9	40.6	70.8	60.2	65.5	74.1	76.2	69.5	65.9
Not Stated (received credit, but reason for credit not stated)	*0.4	0.9	*1.7	**1.4	*2.2	1.1	1.9	2.3	3.2	*1.2	1.8

Bachelor Degree and Advanced Certificate Post-Trade graduates have been excluded from this table, as the numbers were too low in both instances to yield reliable results.
** estimate has a relative standard error greater than 50% and is considered too unreliable for general use
* estimate has a relative standard error of between 25% and 50% and should be used with caution.
Source: unpublished NCVER Student Outcomes Survey data

The NCVER series *Australia Vocational Education and Training Statistics: In detail* reports that the outcomes for RPL and credit transfer at the module or subject level have remained relatively stable from 1997 to 2001 (from 2.3% and 3.3% in 1997 to 2.5% and 3.8% in 2001) (NCVER, 2001). However, there are such dramatic state differences in reported rates that a national trend should not be derived on the basis of the data available. The same series reports that the percentage of students who have successfully completed *all* their subject or module enrolments on the basis of both RPL and credit transfer is small, growing from 0.7% of all students in 1997 to 0.9% in 2001. The conclusion is that the underlying rates of RPL and Credit Transfer have only grown slightly, if at all, and the dominating factor is state level differences.

Using NCVER statistics, Bateman and Knight (2002) report that the incidence of RPL is greatest among older VET students, and highest in the 25-39 year age group, although the 20-24 and 40-64 year age groups are not far behind. Credit transfer is greatest in the 20-24 year age group. The incidence of both RPL and credit transfer increases with AQF level, and RPL is highest among diploma and above students (9.7%) and 6.5% having credit transfer results or outcomes.

Bateman and Knight explain that in 2000 RPL subject outcomes for reported publicly funded courses were more likely in TAFE compared to private providers (4.3% compared to 2.6%), however, this finding contradicts the SETIT data (see Table 6), where we found that 8.2% of students enrolled in 'other providers' (not TAFE or technical colleges, and not university or other higher education) reported receiving RPL, compared to 7.3% of TAFE students. However, the differences here are small. It may be that students in non-TAFE providers were slightly more likely to receive RPL, while the quantum of RPL they received was lower. This would require further research to determine if this were so.

Bateman and Knight report that in 1999 students with a disability were slightly less likely to receive RPL compared to students who did not have a disability. Student with a disability were equally as likely however, to receive credit transfer as were students without a

disability. They report that the outcome for students with a disability in 2000 was similar to that in 1999. The SETIT data shows that students with a disability were slightly more likely to receive RPL than were students without a disability, although the difference between the two groups was small (see Table 18). Bateman and Knight found that students from a non-English speaking background received RPL at approximately the same level as did students from an English-speaking background. The SETIT data paints a different picture however, and shows that students from a non-English speaking background were much less likely than English speaking background students to receive RPL (see Table 20). Indigenous students were much less likely to obtain either RPL or credit transfer than were non-indigenous students. Unpublished NCVER data shows that Indigenous students received 1.3% of RPL and 2% of credit transfer compared to 2.5% and 3.8% for students overall (source: Giles-Peters, 2002) We were unable to obtain a sample large enough from the SETIT for indigenous students to reliably report both RPL and credit transfer outcomes. This result might be wholly or partly explained by their concentration in lower AQF levels which get lower recognition.

In comparing the above outcomes two caveats must be kept in mind: first, the statistics reported from Bateman and Knight in the above paragraphs are based on subject or module outcomes as reported by the states and territories, while the SETIT data is based on student self-report; and, second, the Bateman and Knight information relates to the VET sector only, while the SETIT outcomes we have reported in the above paragraphs are for all sectors, and not just VET.

The ABS SETIT data

This section analyses RPL in all sectors of post-compulsory education and training using the ABS Survey of Education Training and Information Technology (SETIT). Our focus in this report is on those who are enrolled in a qualification, and whether they received RPL. We have excluded those who are enrolled in, or have participated in, non-formal and non-accredited training. The SETIT collected demographic information about a variety of attributes including:

- educational attainment;
- current participation in education and training, and the qualification level;
- the highest three qualifications the person has undertaken, and whether they completed that qualification, as well as the provider or institution type in which they were enrolled;
- the type of institution in which they are currently enrolled;
- the mode of study (full-time, part-time, external etc);
- field of study;
- labour force status and occupation; and,
- sex, age, equity group membership, and, state of residence.

The survey also asked respondents if they had received any recognition for prior learning in their current course or subject. They were asked to indicate yes they had, no they had not, or that outcome of their application was not known. If they had received recognition, they were asked if it was on the basis of:

- study at university;
- study at a TAFE or technical college;
- study elsewhere;
- assessed skills and experience, and
- other reasons.

(ABS, 2002: question 733 & 734)

The fourth option, *assessed skills and experience*, is closest to the concept of RPL as we have defined it in this report. As the question asks respondents if they had received recognition in their current course or subject, we interpret this as meaning the award of *credit*, rather than the use of RPL for *access* to a course or qualification. We have used the terms the ABS used to collect this data, that is we refer to credit transfer as RPL, but in each instance we have specified the source of the credit.

The ABS prepared a series of tables for us. The population was defined as *all* those enrolled in a *qualification,* however most of the data provided is relevant for those undertaking a *non-school qualification* and who are aged between 15 and 64 years of age.

The ABS reports that 20% of Australians aged between 15 – 64 years were enrolled in a course of study leading to a qualification, and of these, 72% enrolled in a non-school qualification, while 28% were studying at school level.[18] In terms of those studying for non-school qualifications, Table 3 shows the relative share studying each qualification, and the institution in which they are studying. The bottom row shows the distribution of current students across the various non-school qualifications. Almost 44% were studying at degree level or above. This is a change from the 1997 SET, where approximately 52% were studying at this level (Ryan and Watson, 2001: 37). It appears most of the fall is in those studying at degree level, (39% in 1997, compared to approximately 32% in 2001). The other rows show the distribution of students by qualification type or level within each institutional or provider type.

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[18] The ABS used the newly introduced Australian Standard Classification of Education (ASCED) to classify qualification levels Australian Bureau of Statistics (2002). Education and Training Experience, Catalogue Number 6278.0. Canberra: ABS..

Table 3: Level of Education of 2001 Non-School Study#

	Post-grad deg	Grad dip/ grad cert	Bach. degree	Adv dip/ dip	Cert III or IV	Cert I or II	Cert n.f.d	Level not determ ined	Total
TAFE or tech college	**0.11	*1.20	0.63	21.67	38.03	13.08	21.03	4.23	**100.00**
Uni or other HE	13.39	8.09	67.77	5.15	2.45	*0.67	1.43	*1.04	**100.00**
Secondary School	**0.00	**0.00	**0.00	**3.23	*9.32	56.27	*18.28	*12.54	**100.00**
Professional or industry assoc.	*2.64	17.62	15.31	14.76	19.82	*5.84	18.72	*5.29	**100.00**
Business college	**0.00	**0.00	**2.04	*24.49	*45.58	**8.84	*19.05	**0.00	**100.00**
Other private training org.	**0.26	**4.58	**0.95	24.05	26.73	12.11	25.17	*6.14	**100.00**
Other (c)	**1.35	**2.98	**1.25	*8.28	25.31	14.44	34.94	11.36	**100.00**
Qual share of those studying	**6.39**	**5.43**	**32.15**	**12.92**	**19.09**	**7.67**	**12.91**	**3.42**	**100.00**

** estimate has a relative standard error greater than 50% and is considered too unreliable for general use
* estimate has a relative standard error of between 25% and 50% and should be used with caution.
- nil or rounded to zero (including null cells)
(a) Includes persons who were studying towards a non-school qualification while attending school.
(b) For persons enrolled in more than one course of non-school study, details relate to the one they enrolled in most recently.
(c)Includes equipment/product manufacturer or supplier, Skillshare centre or other government training centre, Adult or community education centre, Industry skills centre, and 'other' organisations.
Derived from Table 18, (ABS, 2002: 31)

Table 4 shows that almost 46% of students were studying at a university or other higher education institution, while approximately 35% were studying at a TAFE institute or technical college, and almost 19% were studying in another institutional or provider type. In 1997 approximately 12% of students were studying in institutions other than TAFE or universities. It appears that the relative share of students studying at universities has declined from 53.2% in 1997 to 46% in 2001, while the number studying in other types of institutions or providers has increased by approximately the same amount.

Table 4: Institutional share of students in 1997 & 2001

Institution type	1997	2001
University or other HE institution	53.2%	46%
TAFE institute or technology college	34.5%	35%
Other institution or provider type	12%	19%
Total	**100%**	**100%**

(ABS, 2002: 31)
Source for 1997: Ryan and Watson, 2001: 37

RPL & credit transfer by state & institution type

Table 5 shows that the incidence of RPL and credit transfer in Tasmania, the Northern Territory, and the ACT are too unreliable to report, while the results for other states are (mostly) reliable. Of this latter group, NSW has the lowest incidence of RPL (assessed skills and experience), while it has relatively higher levels of RPL for study at TAFE or technical college. Another way to examine this data is to look at the percentages in each state who

received no credit of any kind from any source. Tasmania has the lowest percentage, with 69% receiving no credit of any kind, up to Victoria, with 80% of students receiving no credit. The fact that the total in each row exceeds 100% shows that students received more than one form of credit in their course.

Table 5: RPL & credit transfer by state (all persons)

	RPL - study at university	RPL - study at TAFE or tech college	RPL - study elsewhere	**RPL - assessed skills and experience**	RPL - other reasons	Did not receive RPL	Outcome of application not known
Persons							
NSW	7.22	9.30	3.74	**5.20**	*0.51	77.47	**0.26
Vic.	8.49	6.00	*1.72	**6.74**	*1.07	79.77	*0.51
Qld	11.12	7.56	4.98	**7.51**	**0.18	74.20	**0.33
SA	9.75	*6.45	*5.69	**7.49**	**--	75.62	**1.37
WA	8.98	7.77	*3.73	**6.95**	**0.20	77.55	**0.24
Tas.	*7.14	*11.73	**6.17	*10.94	**1.62	68.75	**3.59
NT(b)	**11.28	**3.97	**6.18	**12.00	**--	70.53	**0.00
ACT	*12.67	*6.95	**3.44	**3.82	**0.95	74.49	**1.98
Total	**8.79**	**7.71**	**3.68**	**6.52**	**0.54**	**77.02**	**0.52**

** estimate has a relative standard error greater than 50% and is considered too unreliable for general use
* estimate has a relative standard error of between 25% and 50% and should be used with caution.
- nil or rounded to zero (including null cells)
(a) Includes persons who were studying towards a non-school qualification while attending school.
(b) For persons enrolled in more than one course of non-school study, details relate to the one they enrolled in most recently.
(c)Includes equipment/product manufacturer or supplier, Skillshare centre or other government training centre, Adult or community education centre, Industry skills centre, and 'other' organisations.
Source: derived from table prepared by the ABS containing SETIT data

Table 6 shows that while the incidence of RPL has increased slightly in TAFE institutes, in other non-TAFE providers, and in universities, that overall the levels receiving no credit or RPL have increased over the same time, except for universities where it has remained relatively constant. This is concerning, as the only conclusion that can be drawn is that the level of credit transfer has declined in the VET sector.

Table 6: RPL by institution type

	Received RPL		Received No RPL or credit transfer	
	1997	**2001**	**1997**	**2001**
TAFE or technical college	6.8%	7.3%	73.3%	78.8%
University or other higher education	4.2%	5.2%	72.4%	73.0%
Other provider (non-TAFE)	7.5%	8.2%	79.2%	83.4%

Source: Giles-Peters, unpublished SETIT data

Table 7 outlines the incidence of credit transfer and RPL on the basis of higher education or VET qualifications. This differs from the above as Table 6 shows RPL by *institution* and not *qualification*. For Table 7, all qualifications from degree level above were classified as a higher education qualification, while all qualifications from advanced diploma and below were classified as VET qualifications. Advanced diplomas and diplomas are cross-sectoral qualifications in that they can be offered in either the higher education or VET sectors, but in practice, very few are offered in higher education. In 2000, only 1.3% of under-graduate students studying in higher education were studying at the diploma or advanced diploma level (NCVER, 2001). Table 7 shows that VET students were more likely to receive RPL than were higher education students, but that higher education students were more likely to

receive credit transfer, and were more likely to receive credit from any source compared to VET students (72% with no credit in higher education compared to 81% in VET).

Table 7 also shows that students studying for a higher education qualification were more likely to receive credit transfer for prior higher education study, while students studying for a VET qualification were more likely to receive credit transfer for a prior VET study. These results disguise the differences in credit transfer and RPL by qualification level in each sector however, and these are outlined in Table 8 below. The high level of credit transfer for students studying in higher education is partly explained by the fact that many students are transferring horizontally from one course to another. In 2000, 14.67% of commencing higher education students gained admission to their current course on the basis of incomplete higher education studies, while 8.93% gained admission on the basis of a completed higher education course (DETYA, 2001: derived from table 16, p. 39).

Table 7: 2001 – RPL & credit transfer by higher education or VET qualification

	Higher Education	**VET**
RPL - study at university	17.26	2.09
RPL - study at TAFE or technical college	7.09	8.42
RPL - study elsewhere	2.65	4.59
RPL - assessed skills and experience	**5.17**	**7.80**
RPL- other reasons	0.40	0.70
Did not receive recognition for prior learning	71.77	80.77

Source: derived from table prepared by the ABS containing SETIT data

RPL & credit transfer by qualification

This section outlines the incidence of RPL and credit transfer by qualification level. Table 8 outlines the incidence of RPL and credit transfer by qualification level for those who were studying in 2001. Almost 9% of students studying at post-graduate level (doctoral and masters level) received RPL. This has increased from 1997 where approximately 6% of students at this level received RPL. It is possible that these percentages reflect the development of course-work masters (with or without a minor thesis). These qualifications are oriented towards extending the capacities of people in middle to senior roles in the workplace, and this lends itself to the implementation of RPL in these qualifications, as many are grounded in the professional practice of students in their workplace. The qualification with the highest incidence of RPL is the graduate certificate level, however given that the relative standard error is between 25% to 50%, this result must be viewed with caution. Approximately 11% of those studying advanced diplomas or diplomas received RPL, while almost 13% of those studying at certificate IV level received RPL. Eight percent of students studying certificates III received RPL, while the numbers receiving RPL at certificates I and II are relatively unreliable, and the results must be viewed with caution. These percentages demonstrate that RPL is not confined to the VET sector, but is an important issue for higher education as well.

Table 8: RPL and credit transfer by qualification level

	Post-grad	Grad Dip	Grad Cert	Bach Degree	Adv Dip & Dip	Cert IV	Cert III	Cert I & II
RPL - study at university	27.64	19.46	**10.11	15.15	4.68	*2.67	*1.45	**0.22
RPL - study at TAFE or tech college	**1.23	*4.58	**6.23	8.62	11.09	*8.00	13.96	*4.84
RPL - study elsewhere	**1.52	*4.88	**--	2.66	7.65	*4.01	5.65	*2.50
RPL - assessed skills and experience	**8.59**	***7.56**	***16.68**	**3.77**	**10.77**	**12.72**	**8.00**	***6.55**
Did not receive RPL	67.95	68.72	71.53	72.94	72.31	77.48	75.52	85.85

** estimate has a relative standard error greater than 50% and is considered too unreliable for general use
* estimate has a relative standard error of between 25% and 50% and should be used with caution
- nil or rounded to zero (including null cells)
Source: derived from table prepared by the ABS containing SETIT data

Table 8 also shows RPL is less common than credit transfer in most qualifications. Credit transfer far exceeds RPL for all qualifications at the level of degree and above, with the exception of graduate certificates (however, given the small numbers involved, this must be viewed with caution). In the higher level VET qualifications the incidence of credit transfer is considerably greater than RPL, although the gap is not as wide as is the case with most higher education qualifications. The gap between credit transfer and RPL for students at Certificate IV level is minimal, however, this must be viewed with caution as the numbers receiving credit transfer were so low that they could not be reliably determined. Students at Certificate III level were more likely to receive credit transfer than RPL, while the numbers receiving any form of credit at Certificate I and II levels are too low to reliably determine a relationship.

Table 9 shows that there has been considerable progress since 1997 in the extent to which RPL occurs in all qualifications, with the exception of bachelor degrees and certificates I and II. The highest incidence of RPL occurs in advanced diplomas; however this result is subject to a high error rate. The incidence of RPL has increased substantially from Certificate III level to diploma, while the increase for advanced diplomas is more modest. However, in the case of advanced diplomas, the base figure for 1997 was higher than was the case for Certificate III to diploma levels. The incidence of RPL remained relatively stable for bachelor degree qualifications, while it increased for qualifications at a higher level.

Table 9: Proportion studying who received RPL by qualification in 1997 and in 2001#

	1997	2001
Post-graduate degree (higher degree)	5.5	8.59
Grad diploma / Grad certificate (post-graduate degree)	6.4	*9.4
Bach degree (bachelor degree)	3.9	3.77
Advanced diploma (under-graduate diploma)	9.9	*12.93
Diploma (associate diploma)	6.1	10.21
Certificate IV (associate diploma)	6.1	12.72
Certificate III (skilled vocational)	2.5	8.00
Certificate I/II (basic vocational)	7.5	*6.55

* estimate has a relative standard error of between 25% and 50% and should be used with caution
Source for 1997 figures: Ryan & Watson, 2001: 38
Source for 2001 figures: derived from table prepared by the ABS containing SETIT data
#In 1997 qualifications were classified according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics Classification of Qualifications (ABSCQ). In 2001, the ABS replaced the ABSCQ with the Australian Standard Classification of Education (ASCED). ASCED (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001: 204) contains equivalence tables mapping the way in which qualifications were classified pre and post ASCED. The qualification names in brackets represents classifications under the ABSCQ, and the names outside of the brackets are the ASCED classifications. Associate diplomas under the ABSCQ are not easily mapped to ASCED, as associate diplomas are listed as equivalent to both Certificate IVs and Diplomas.

We have presented the results for RPL and credit transfer for apprentices and trainees in Table 10, even though the incidence of RPL for assessed skills and experience is too

unreliable to draw any conclusions, as the standard error was between 25% - 50%. It appears, however, that 24% of apprentices and trainees received credit in their current course, which is similar to the level of credit other types of students receive, but the overall numbers are too small to support further analysis.

Table 10: 2001—RPL by apprenticeship and traineeship

	RPL - study at uni	RPL - study at TAFE or tech college	RPL - study elsewhere	RPL - assessed skills and experience	RPL - other reasons	Did not receive RPL
Persons						
Not applicable	8.26	6.66	3.20	**4.03**	**0.22	80.29
Is an apprentice	**1.85	17.10	*4.53	**4.85**	**0.00	75.47
Is a trainee	*5.51	*4.36	*7.63	**9.71**	**2.63	75.92
Is not an apprentice or trainee	9.89	7.68	3.69	**7.98**	*0.68	75.27
Total	**8.79**	**7.71**	3.68	**6.52**	**0.54**	**77.02**

*** estimate has a relative standard error greater than 50% and is considered too unreliable for general use*
** estimate has a relative standard error of between 25% and 50% and should be used with caution*
- nil or rounded to zero (including null cells)
Source: derived from table prepared by the ABS containing SETIT data

RPL & credit transfer by sex, study mode, age, & field of study

This section outlines the incidence of RPL by sex, study mode, age, qualification level, and field of study. Table 11 shows that the levels of credit transfer and RPL achieved by males and females is similar. It also shows that the source of credit transfer is similar, with very little variation between the sexes in the extent of credit transfer achieved on the basis of prior study at university or at TAFE or technical college.

Table 11: 2001 – RPL & credit transfer by sex

	Males	Females	Persons
RPL - study at university	9.03	8.58	8.79
RPL - study at TAFE or technical college	8.06	7.40	7.71
RPL - study elsewhere	3.22	4.09	3.68
RPL - assessed skills and experience	**6.52**	**6.51**	**6.52**
RPL - other reasons	*0.59	*0.50	0.54
Did not receive RPL	76.94	77.09	77.02

** estimate has a relative standard error of between 25% and 50% and should be used with caution*
Source: derived from table prepared by the ABS containing SETIT data

Table 12 outlines the incidence of RPL and credit transfer by sex, and by full-time or part-time study. It shows that part-time students have more than double the incidence of RPL compared to full-time students. This reflects no doubt, patterns of participation in the work force and the age of students, as older students/existing workers are more likely to be part-time, and to have extensive work experience which they can use as the basis of RPL applications. The incidence of RPL for males and females for both part-time and full-time students is similar.

Table 12: RPL by sex by full-time or part-time study

	Males			Females			Persons		
	Full-time	Part-time	Total	Full-time	Part-time	Total	Full-time	Part time	Total
RPL - study at university	11.15	7.64	9.03	10.35	7.20	8.58	10.71	7.42	8.79
RPL - study at TAFE or technical college	5.88	9.48	8.06	7.27	7.50	7.40	6.65	8.48	7.71
RPL - study elsewhere	*1.95	4.04	3.22	3.24	4.76	4.09	2.66	4.40	3.68
RPL - assessed skills and experience	**3.08**	**8.76**	**6.52**	**3.49**	**8.89**	**6.51**	**3.31**	**8.82**	**6.52**
Did not receive RPL	79.43	75.31	76.94	77.90	76.46	77.09	78.59	75.89	77.02

* estimate has a relative standard error of between 25% and 50% and should be used with caution
Source: derived from table prepared by the ABS containing SETIT data

Table 13 outlines the incidence of RPL and credit transfer by sex and by age group. Most RPL occurs in the age groups spanning 25 to 54, the time in which most people become established in the workforce and develop skills relevant to vocationally oriented courses and qualifications. The extent of credit transfer achieved by individuals in the age ranges from 20-54 is similar (22% to 25%).

Table 13: 2001 – RPL & credit transfer by age group

	15-19	20-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	Total
RPL - study at university	2.51	10.94	11.52	10.70	8.35	**3.73	**8.79**
RPL - study at TAFE or technical college	4.10	8.37	9.91	8.00	8.72	*4.97	**7.71**
RPL - study elsewhere	3.23	3.11	2.58	4.28	7.08	*7.04	**3.68**
RPL - assessed skills and experience	***2.00**	**2.44**	**9.96**	**11.30**	**10.62**	***9.56**	**6.52**
Did not receive RPL	88.83	76.67	71.48	70.60	74.19	83.51	**77.02**

** estimate has a relative standard error greater than 50% and is considered too unreliable for general use
* estimate has a relative standard error of between 25% and 50% and should be used with caution
- nil or rounded to zero (including null cells)
Source: derived from table prepared by the ABS containing SETIT data

Table 14 outlines RPL and credit transfer by qualification level and sex. It shows that the results are too unreliable to draw conclusions about the relative incidence of RPL achieved by males compared to females in post-graduate degrees (masters and doctorates), but it is clear that males receive considerably more credit from a range of sources, particularly credit transfer for prior university studies, than do females (31% for males compared to 24% for females). The disparity in the incidence of credit achieved by males compared to females for masters and doctorates needs some explanation. Approximately 53% of doctoral students are male, while approximately 50% of students undertaking masters by research and masters by coursework are male (DETYA, 2001: 46). A greater incidence of RPL for males compared to females may be a consequence of the occupational and labour force position of males relative to females, with the former more likely to be in employment that can be counted towards qualifications at that level. However, no such explanation is forthcoming for credit transfer based on prior studies, particularly in light of the fact that 56.5% of students studying at Bachelors level (including bachelors pass and bachelors honours degrees) are female, and 43.5% male, and these qualifications are normally a prerequisite for entry to masters and doctorates (DETYA, 2001: 46). Further research is needed to understand this disparity between credit achieved by males and females at this level of study. This would need to examine the incidence of credit transfer by field of study, by age, and by type of prior study which has been used to claim credit transfer.

Table 14 also shows that males are more likely to receive RPL at the bachelor degree level than females (4.73% cf. 2.99%), although in this instance the percentages are relatively low

in both cases compared to other qualifications. Women receive slightly more RPL than males at the advanced diploma/ diploma and certificate III and IV level. While there are some differences between the incidence of credit transfer based on prior study between males and females for VET level qualifications, these do not appear to be that large. The results are too unreliable to draw conclusions for the certificate I and II level.

Table 14: RPL & credit transfer by sex and qualification

	Males					
	Postgrad degree	Grad dip / Grad cert	Bach degree	Adv dip / Dip	Cert III/IV	Cert I/II
RPL - study at university	31.16	*18.68	15.20	*4.33	*1.58	**--
RPL - study at TAFE or technical college	**2.41	**3.95	9.66	*8.05	12.42	*6.87
RPL - study elsewhere	**1.67	**2.02	*3.05	*5.32	*4.50	**1.98
RPL - assessed skills and experience	***10.26**	***9.18**	**4.73**	**9.99**	**8.51**	****1.11**
Did not receive RPL	63.49	69.55	71.45	77.25	77.54	87.68
Females	Females					
RPL - study at university	23.94	*16.49	15.11	*4.97	*2.09	**0.49
RPL - study at TAFE or technical college	**--	*5.86	7.78	13.63	11.84	*3.59
RPL - study elsewhere	**1.37	*5.76	*2.35	9.60	5.92	*3.92
RPL - assessed skills and experience	***6.84**	***9.61**	**2.99**	**11.42**	**10.43**	***11.59**
Did not receive RPL	72.65	69.03	74.15	68.17	74.49	82.20
Persons	Persons					
RPL - study at university	27.64	17.58	15.15	4.68	*1.81	**0.27
RPL - study at TAFE or technical college	**1.23	*4.91	8.62	11.09	12.15	*5.04
RPL - study elsewhere	**1.52	*3.90	2.66	7.65	5.15	*3.06
RPL - assessed skills and experience	**8.59**	***9.40**	**3.77**	**10.77**	**9.39**	***6.97**
Did not receive RPL	67.95	69.29	72.94	72.31	76.15	84.62

** estimate has a relative standard error greater than 50% and is considered too unreliable for general use
* estimate has a relative standard error of between 25% and 50% and should be used with caution
- nil or rounded to zero (including null cells)
Source: derived from table prepared by the ABS containing SETIT data

Table 15 outlines the incidence of RPL and credit transfer by field of study. It is only possible to draw conclusions about the incidence of RPL for the larger fields of study (Engineering & Related Technology, Health, Management and Commerce, and Society and Culture). Another way to look at Table 15 is to examine the percentages that did not receive any form of credit (listed as 'Did not receive RPL') in each of the fields of study. Apart from Mixed Field Programs, the fields of study with the lowest incidence of credit from any source are Information Technology, Food Hospitality and Personal Services, Natural and Physical Sciences and Creative Arts. This is surprisingly low: three of these areas (Information Technology, Food Hospitality and Personal Services, and Creative Arts) are in industries with large numbers of uncredentialled workers, but they may not have necessarily required qualifications as a prerequisite for practice in the past. Perhaps this is changing, or alternatively, these areas may not formally credential on the basis of RPL, but may use work experience as an intrinsic part of learning strategies. This issue needs further research, particularly to determine the age distribution of those in each field of study. If these fields of study are disproportionately made up of young people seeking entry level qualifications for the workforce, then the relatively low levels of RPL can be understood. If, on the other hand, disproportionate numbers are in older age groups, then the low levels of RPL do not seem justified, on the face of it. This could not be discerned from the available data. One would also expect to see higher levels of credit transfer in both Information Technology and Food Hospitality and Personal Services, as courses in both areas at different qualification levels have been established for a number of years, which should result in articulation from one level to another, particularly from students moving from VET to higher education qualifications. This also need further investigation.

Table 15: RPL & credit transfer by field of study

	RPL - study at university	RPL - study at TAFE or tech college	RPL - study elsewhere	**RPL - assessed skills and experience**	Did not receive RPL
Natural & Physical Sciences	*12.64	*4.44	**--	**2.61	83.34
Information Technology	*4.42	*5.31	*2.84	*3.56	85.38
Engineering & related Technology	5.62	11.78	5.25	8.42	74.27
Architecture & Building	**2.40	14.23	**0.84	*4.87	79.48
Agriculture Environment & related studies	*4.84	*11.90	**1.26	*9.14	74.18
Health	12.79	6.05	*4.81	8.29	74.17
Education	14.53	*5.12	*2.53	*6.35	75.94
Management & Commerce	9.10	8.98	3.78	7.54	74.81
Society & Culture	12.30	5.93	4.98	7.08	73.22
Creative Arts	*7.61	*4.86	**1.76	*3.92	83.11
Food Hospitality & Personal Services	**0.85	*8.62	*4.65	*2.77	85.61
Mixed Field Programs	**2.64	**1.02	**2.64	**3.15	93.19
Inadequately described	*13.71	**7.73	**2.84	**7.22	75.71
Total	**8.79**	**7.71**	**3.68**	**6.52**	**77.02**

** estimate has a relative standard error greater than 50% and is considered too unreliable for general use
* estimate has a relative standard error of between 25% and 50% and should be used with caution
- nil or rounded to zero (including null cells)
Source: derived from table prepared by the ABS containing SETIT data

RPL & credit transfer by labour force status & occupation

This section outlines RPL and credit transfer by labour force status and occupation. Table 16 outlines the incidence of RPL and credit transfer by sex and labour force status. There is very little difference between males and females who work full-time for RPL and credit transfer, while there appears to be differences in the incidence of RPL among males and females employed part-time, although in the case of males, there is a high degree of potential error in this result. Those who are employed full-time are likely to be more established in the workforce, older, and studying part-time and hence more able to use RPL. Those not in the labour force appear to fare better in terms of credit transfer and RPL compared to those who are unemployed. The unemployed are least likely to receive credit from any source, with 88% not receiving any form of credit, compared to 80% for those in the labour force, 78% for part-time workers, and 73% for those employed full-time.

Table 16: RPL and credit transfer by sex and labour force status

	RPL - study at university	RPL - study at TAFE or technical college	RPL - study elsewhere	RPL - assessed skills and experience	Did not receive RPL
Males					
Employed full-time	8.35	10.99	3.85	**9.88**	73.21
Employed part-time	11.75	4.83	*3.43	***3.73**	78.51
Unemployed	**3.03	*5.66	**0.92	****--**	89.19
Not in the labour force	9.64	*4.96	*1.98	***3.25**	80.63
Total	**9.03**	**8.06**	**3.22**	**6.52**	**76.94**
Females					
Employed full-time	9.99	8.82	5.63	**9.98**	71.95
Employed part-time	8.10	6.43	3.28	**6.40**	78.15
Unemployed	*4.62	*7.42	*3.91	****3.00**	86.94
Not in the labour force	8.85	7.34	*3.63	***3.11**	78.96
Total	**8.58**	**7.40**	**4.09**	**6.51**	**77.09**
Persons					
Employed full-time	8.99	10.15	4.54	**9.92**	72.72
Employed part-time	9.38	5.87	3.33	**5.47**	78.28
Unemployed	*3.84	*6.55	*2.44	****1.52**	88.05
Not in the labour force	9.18	6.36	2.95	**3.17**	79.65
Total	**8.79**	**7.71**	**3.68**	**6.52**	**77.02**

** estimate has a relative standard error greater than 50% and is considered too unreliable for general use
* estimate has a relative standard error of between 25% and 50% and should be used with caution
- nil or rounded to zero (including null cells)
Source: derived from table prepared by the ABS containing SETIT data

Table 17 shows that only four occupational groups received sufficient RPL (or were large enough) for a reliable result to be achieved, and of these four, associate professionals achieved the highest incidence of RPL (14%). Professionals and associate professionals achieved similar levels of credit transfer (28% and 26% respectively), but from different sources, with the former more likely to receive credit transfer based on prior university studies, and the latter from prior TAFE studies. The occupational groups with the highest level of students who did not receive any credit from any source were Intermediate Production and Transport Workers, Elementary Clerical Sales and Service Workers and Labourers and Related Workers.

Table 17: RPL & credit transfer by occupation (all persons)

	RPL - study at university	RPL - study at TAFE or tech college	RPL - study elsewhere	RPL - assessed skills and experience	Did not receive RPL
Persons					
Managers and Administrators	*14.68	*6.59	*8.72	**14.25**	68.27
Professionals	16.75	6.39	4.74	**9.53**	69.69
Associate Professionals	8.30	13.54	*4.39	**14.24**	68.72
Tradespersons and Related Workers	*2.74	15.46	*4.01	**6.63**	74.72
Advanced Clerical and Service Workers	*7.53	*9.40	**--	***9.81**	76.15
Intermediate Clerical, Sales and Service Workers	8.55	8.67	5.02	**7.95**	73.22
Intermediate Production and Transport Workers	*6.78	**3.45	**1.72	***5.67**	83.42
Elementary Clerical, Sales and Service Workers	6.85	*3.77	*2.09	***1.67**	86.24
Labourers and Related Workers	*4.34	*3.29	**2.77	***5.22**	85.04
Total	**9.17**	**8.18**	**3.99**	**7.87**	**75.27**

*** estimate has a relative standard error greater than 50% and is considered too unreliable for general use*
** estimate has a relative standard error of between 25% and 50% and should be used with caution*
- nil or rounded to zero (including null cells)
Source: derived from table prepared by the ABS containing SETIT data

RPL & credit transfer by equity group characteristics

This section outlines RPL and credit transfer by equity group characteristics. This is key part of any analysis of RPL, as one of the key drivers for RPL was its perceived capacity to act as a mechanism for social inclusion for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Unfortunately, the data were not able to provide reliable information about the extent to which indigenous students received either credit transfer or RPL, a reflection of the low numbers accessing either type of credit. As stated earlier, unpublished NCVER data shows that Indigenous students received 1.3% of RPL and 2% of credit transfer compared to 2.5% and 3.8% for students overall (source: Giles-Peters, 2002) in terms of RPL subject outcomes (and not student self-report as is the case in SETIT).

Table 18 outlines the incidence of RPL by whether or not students had a disability. It shows that slightly more students with a disability reported receiving some form of RPL, while the percentages for those with and without a disability receiving credit transfer were similar.

Table 18: RPL & credit transfer by disability

	RPL - study at uni	RPL - study at TAFE or tech college	RPL - study elsewhere	RPL - assessed skills and experience	Did not receive RPL
Had a disability	8.42	7.50	4.90	**7.65**	76.18
Did not have a disability	8.88	7.77	3.38	**6.25**	77.22
Total	**8.79**	**7.71**	**3.68**	**6.52**	**77.02**

** estimate has a relative standard error of between 25% and 50% and should be used with caution*
Source: derived from table prepared by the ABS containing SETIT data

Table 19 outlines the incidence of credit transfer and RPL by location. It shows that students in the major cities are less likely to receive RPL compared to students from inner and outer regional Australia, with the results of remote Australia too unreliable to take into account. The participation rate for students from rural and isolated backgrounds in the VET sector is

comparable to the rest of the population, while these populations are under-represented in higher education. In 2001 approximately 30% of VET students were from a rural background, and 3.7% were from an isolated background (NCVER, 2001: Table 2, p.10), while in 2000, 17.6% of higher education students were from a rural background, and 1.8% were from an isolated background (DEST, 2001: columns 39 & 40, p. 47). The percentage of people from rural background in the Australian population as a whole is approximately 24%, and the percentage of people from an isolated background in the Australian population is 4.5% (DETYA, 1998: 12).

Table 19: RPL & credit transfer by regional location

	RPL - study at uni	RPL - study at TAFE or tech college	RPL - study elsewhere	**RPL - assessed skills and experience**	Did not receive RPL
Major cities of Aust	9.84	7.70	3.37	**5.22**	77.24
Inner regional Aust	6.52	8.44	3.87	**9.78**	75.82
Outer regional Aust	*5.61	6.47	*5.54	**9.88**	77.82
Remote Aust	**3.81	**6.56	**5.09	****9.95**	73.22
Total	**8.79**	**7.71**	**3.68**	**6.52**	**77.02**

** estimate has a relative standard error greater than 50% and is considered too unreliable for general use
* estimate has a relative standard error of between 25% and 50% and should be used with caution
- nil or rounded to zero (including null cells)
Source: derived from table prepared by the ABS containing SETIT data

Table 20 shows that students from a non-English speaking background were more likely to receive credit transfer, both from prior study at university and at TAFE, but were much less likely to receive RPL than were students from an English speaking background.

Table 20: RPL & credit transfer by language background

	RPL - study at uni	RPL - study at TAFE or tech college	RPL - study elsewhere	**RPL - assessed skills and experience**	Did not receive RPL
English speaking background	8.56	7.24	3.59	**7.07**	77.19
Non-English speaking background	12.62	11.98	2.74	**2.80**	73.25

Source: derived from table prepared by the ABS containing SETIT data

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the incidence of RPL and credit transfer for students enrolled in a non-school qualification. It shows that the incidence of RPL has risen for most qualification levels from 1997 to 2001, while the percentage receiving RPL has remained relatively stable for students studying at bachelor degree level. RPL was more common in post-graduate qualifications in the higher education sector, and more common in the higher VET level certificates and diplomas. 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, while the incidence of credit transfer they achieved was similar. Associate professionals received the highest incidence of RPL, followed by professionals. The quantum of credit (including RPL and credit transfer) received by managers was similar to professionals and associate professionals. Broadly speaking, those who are mid-career,

established in the workforce, older, work full-time, and in associate professional or professional or managerial occupations benefit most from RPL.

RPL outcomes achieved by students with a disability slightly exceeded those who did not have a disability, and students from regional areas were more likely to receive RPL than were students from major cities. This shows that RPL may have been successful in acting as a mechanism of social inclusion for these groups of students. The SETIT data do not permit examination of the outcomes achieved by indigenous students, however, VET indigenous students receive about half as much RPL or credit transfer as non-indigenous students according to NCVER statistics. Students who come from a non-English speaking background were far less likely to receive RPL than were students who come from an English speaking background, while they were more likely to receive credit transfer. The data did not provide information on the outcomes achieved by students from low socio-economic backgrounds. RPL seems to have been an effective mechanism for social inclusion for some groups of students, while still remaining elusive for most students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

5.   RPL policy frameworks and practice in the sectors

This chapter examines RPL policy frameworks and practice in each of the sectors, and the differences between states and territories. It considers RPL definitions in each sector, the extent to which RPL is centralised within the jurisdiction or devolved to institutions, and how it is implemented within institutions. The chapter uses the 1997 AQF Advisory Board report on RPL as a baseline, and considers changes that have occurred in that time.

The way in which RPL is implemented in each of the sectors reflects their missions, and respective accreditation, governance, policy and funding frameworks. Higher education is considered first, as the arrangements here are substantially different to the VET, ACE and schools sectors. The arrangements for VET, ACE and schools overlap, as VET provision is offered in the latter two sectors, and where this is so, the sectors are required to comply with the same requirements in relation to this provision as does the VET sector.

5.1   Higher education

Universities are self-accrediting bodies established by state and territory legislation, with the authority to develop, accredit, teach and confer higher education qualifications. They consequently have considerable autonomy in developing institutional policy, including that relating to RPL. Higher education providers that are not self-accrediting institutions must submit qualifications for accreditation to their respective state and territory higher education accrediting bodies. These bodies consider the academic quality, and the teaching, financial, infrastructure and resource capacity of the conferring institutions in deciding whether to accredit a qualification.

The main changes to RPL in higher education since the 1997 RPL report are that:
- the AVCC has changed its definition of credit transfer, to include all qualifications recognised under the AQF by *all* VET providers, and not just TAFE. This has implications for the way in which RPL is defined. This is outlined in more detail below.
- the 1997 report stated that only a third of respondents to the higher education survey thought existing funding arrangements were a problem (higher education is not allowed to charge HECS funded students fees for RPL), whereas most higher education respondents to our project thought this was a major obstacle.[19] This may reflect increased pressure on universities to undertake unfunded RPL assessments.
- the incidence of RPL has increased from 1997 to 2001 in post-graduate courses, but has remained relatively stable at bachelor degree level.[20]

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[19] See chapter 6: Fees and funding
[20] See chapter 4: Who receives RPL

5.1.1 The Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee policy framework

While there is considerable diversity between universities over the extent to which they offer RPL, the Australian Vice-Chancellor's Committee (AVCC) has in place RPL guidelines to assist universities in developing their own frameworks. In 1993 the AVCC adopted a policy covering credit transfer and RPL. The credit transfer policy has been updated, but the RPL policy has not. However, the AVCC recognises that further work on developing RPL policy is required (AVCC, 2001).

The 1993 AVCC credit transfer guidelines defined credit transfer as credentialed learning that occurred in universities or TAFE. The updated 2001 guidelines extend the definition of credit transfer to include all *credentialed* learning in *VET* (and not just TAFE) or higher education (AVCC, 2001). RPL is therefore residually defined, as credit falling outside the scope of credit transfer (Ryan and Watson, 2001).

If the above caveat is taken into account (the extension of credit transfer to include credentialled courses offered by non-TAFE VET providers), the 1993 AVCC RPL policy defines RPL as:

- non-credentialled learning "such as in a course offered by a professional body, enterprise, private educational institution, or any other provider recognised by a university.
- learning acquired in an 'uncredentialled' context, such as through work experience or through life experience."
  (AVCC, 1993: 3)

RPL is important because "[r]ecognition for credit of prior 'informal' learning (RPL) by some or all universities may improve access and equity for Australian students" (AVCC, 1993: 3). RPL can be used to gain access to a course where the student does not have the formal prerequisites for admission based on a completed qualification, or it can be used for the award of credit within a course. The AVCC guidelines indicate that universities should:

- publicise the availability of RPL;
- indicate the sort of experience the university will consider and the purpose for which it will be considered (access to, or credit in, a course);
- ensure that prior learning is assessed at a level comparable to the content and standard of the subject for which credit is claimed, but that it should not be greater than would otherwise be required if students were undertaking the subject;
- ensure staff assessing RPL applications have, in addition to their content knowledge, "personal expertise in or access to advice on RPL assessment methods"; and,
- ensure assessment processes are completed "before the beginning of the semester in which credit is sought."
  (AVCC, 1993: 4)

The AVCC established the Australian Credit Transfer Agency in March 1995, the role of which was to, in part, provide RPL assessments for individuals on a fee-for-service basis, as well as brokering credit transfer arrangements between the sectors. There was insufficient demand to continue the RPL service, because students were not guaranteed a place in a university on the basis of an RPL assessment conducted by ACTA, and nor were they

guaranteed credit. With no guarantees, students were understandably reluctant to pay for such a service. While ACTA did not continue, the work that it did in helping to broker arrangements between the higher education and VET sectors has continued.

It may be timely to investigate other approaches which have similar goals to ACTA. This need not focus on the actual delivery of RPL assessments, but on processes to promote RPL within the context of broader credit transfer agreements. It is difficult and expensive to broker such agreements, and it may be cost effective for universities to work together (either as a sector, or based on groupings within the sector) to develop arrangements with institutions in other sectors to maximise credit transfer and RPL. Arrangements developed in isolation from universities are not likely to be implemented, given their institutional autonomy and self-accrediting status, and it may be more fruitful to invest in voluntary and co-operative arrangements that actively engage universities in such processes.

Case Study 5: British regional credit accumulation and transfer consortia

Britain has in place regional credit accumulation and transfer consortia that work within their regions and with other consortia to develop consistent credit transfer arrangements and agreements aligned to the Higher Education Qualifications Framework. Membership includes universities and further education institutions with substantial HE provision. The consortia develop agreed values for credit which institutions are not required to implement, though most do. The consortia identify and promote good practices, engage in regional and national policy development, and conduct professional development to identify, promote and disseminate good practice.[21]

5.1.2   RPL policy and practice in higher education

Twenty-six out of thirty-eight universities have an RPL policy, although the language used varies. Of these twenty-six, two have RPL policies for post-graduate programs only. Many of the policies define RPL using the AVCC definition, and do not elaborate further. Students are generally referred to the appropriate faculty or school for further information and advice. Only four of the universities had detailed explanations about the process that the university uses in implementing RPL (other than that provided at the faculty/school level). Where a university does have an RPL policy, it is most likely that RPL can be used both to gain admission to a course where the formal prerequisites have not been met, and can be used to gain credit. While there may not be a policy at the university level, in many cases faculties and schools have an RPL policy. Faculty and school policies also, in many cases, elaborate upon the university-level policy.

Most universities refer to the AVCC's 1993 policy on credit transfer and RPL, and use it to guide the principles that underpin their policy. Most say credit transfer can be granted for credentialled learning taking place in a University or TAFE. However, others allow for credit transfer for credentialled learning that takes place in private providers. The terminology differs between universities: RPL is also known as 'proficiency credit', 'advanced standing' 'status', 'credit for prior learning', assessment of experiential learning, 'recognition of

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[21] Northern Universities Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer, Annual Newsletter, January 2002, http://www.nuccat.ac.uk/documents/NUCCAT%20Annual%20Newsletter%202002.doc, accessed 24 August, 2002.

informal learning', recognition of current competence', or 'recognition of prior work experience'.

The way in which universities have constructed their policy framework differs. Those who have adopted the AVCC approach have very similar frameworks, with some even quoting from the AVCC policy in lieu of elaborating their own in any detail. Other universities have an umbrella policy framework that incorporates recognition of prior learning and credit transfer and then defines each within that framework. For example, Northern Territory University has a 'skills recognition policy' which includes credit transfer and RPL; Deakin has an 'advanced standing' policy that does the same; and Murdoch University defines prior learning as that acquired in a credentialled context and non-credentialled context, including employer based programs or relevant work and/or life experience. Murdoch then explains that "*Recognition of Prior Learning* is the systematic assessment and recognition of Prior Learning by the awarding of credit" (Murdoch University).

At least two universities seem to have RPL policies only for post-graduate courses, and not for under-graduate courses, whereas for some it is difficult to discern what their policy is at all. Several universities informed us that the University did not have an RPL policy, while it may be that individual courses or that individual faculties or schools have a policy. For example, in one University handbook the only reference that is made in the admissions advice that can possibly be construed as relating to RPL is: "In some courses you may qualify for credit for experience relevant to a course." These were more likely to be the older universities, and where RPL was offered it was most likely to be for post-graduate courses.

One university explained that the:

> "University does not recognise RPL. The reason for this policy is that to assess RPL would be a time consuming, resource consuming activity. There would need to be a system which was fair and equitable and produced standardised outcomes. The outcomes would have to be timely i.e. prior to enrolment, this implies a 21 day turn around. At present we do not see this as a viable option" (email response to request for information on the university's policy framework).

Another university responded to our request for information by explaining that they had tried for some time to revise their RPL policy, but without success:

> "This has arisen largely as assessment of RPL can be extremely time consuming, and as universities are continually being asked to do 'more with less', rightly or wrongly, it has become another administrative burden, with no productive outcome for the university."

They explained that RPL was assessed on a case-by-case basis within the relevant faculty, usually in conjunction with assessment of prior credentialed learning. They would like to undertake a process that resulted in the development of a "better understanding of the academic bases of certain types of prior learning, or…. of the same type of prior learning" for the purposes of developing a responsive policy framework.

Several universities stated either in emails to us or on their websites that they were in the process of revising their RPL and credit transfer policies. The adoption by the AVCC of its revised credit transfer policy may be contributing to this process, but it is likely that there are

a range of factors driving re-evaluation of policy, including greater recognition of the value of life and work experience to higher education learning, and improved links between VET and higher education.

Others have elaborated extensive policy frameworks, which commence with the principles upon which the University has based its RPL policy.

Case Study 6: Murdoch University

Murdoch University's preamble to its policy on credit and exemptions says:

"Murdoch University recognises that learning may occur in a variety of ways, including formal study at universities and other accredited institutions and private providers, employer-based training and development and relevant experience gained within the workforce. It is committed to recognising previous studies and other relevant prior learning that contribute towards satisfying requirements for awards of the University. This is achieved by awarding credit. Credit leads to a reduction in the number of points required to complete a Murdoch award, facilitates the movement of students between institutions and between courses of various types and levels, and yet maintains academic standards."

Case Study 7: Northern Territory University

The Northern Territory University is a dual-sector university with a TAFE and higher education division and its skills recognition policy covers both sectors. The policy outlines the benefits of RPL both to applicants and the institution. The three outcomes applicants should expect are:
"i   prevent the frustration that comes from unnecessarily undertaking learning outcomes that have already been gained from another source.
ii   shorten the period between the commencement and the completion of an award
iii   encourage a sense of lifelong and continuous learning, whereby a student should be able to transfer the knowledge and skills gained in one context or environment into others throughout his or her life".

The three outcomes for NTU are:
"i   ensure the maximum use of resources by enabling those who no longer require those resources to be excused from their use
ii   increase the knowledge and performance of the University by exposing it to alternative ways of achieving specific learning outcomes
iii   enable the University to meet the needs of a wider range of 'non- traditional' students, and thereby maximise its mission towards the community it serves."

Several universities have augmented the principles in the AVCC policy by including as a principle that RPL should be on the basis of prior *learning* and not on the basis of prior *experience*. That is, students have to demonstrate the learning they have achieved, and credit is not awarded for having worked in a particular job, or for having been through a particular experience. The rationale behind this is that the university is not interested in the experience *per se*, but the learning that student has acquired, and the relevance of that learning to the qualification. Moreover, different students can go through similar experiences resulting in different learning outcomes.

Most universities have a very general and broad policy framework, and require faculties, schools and departments to provide information about:

- which courses will accept RPL as a basis of admission or for credit in a course;
- the sort of evidence the University will consider;
- the assessment process; and,
- the application process.

This gives faculties, departments and schools considerable room to move, and may result in varying levels of RPL within a single institution, depending on the policy of the academic organisational unit. Decisions concerning the amount and level of credit to be awarded through RPL are mostly devolved to course co-ordinators, heads of department or school, or in some instances, the dean or a committee established by the faculty board or dean. However, in most cases, faculties cannot award RPL (or credit transfer for that matter) in excess of a ceiling imposed by policy of the university academic board or senate. In most cases, students must undertake at least one third of the course at the university, and in some cases this ceiling is increased to one half, in the case of post-graduate courses. Most universities do not seem to distinguish between credit transfer and RPL for the amount of credit that can be awarded, however some do. For example, one university that only allows students to use RPL for access to or credit in post-graduate courses, allows RPL up to a maximum of 25% of a course, and requires students using RPL as the basis of admission to be admitted to the lowest sequence of a program (for example, graduate certificate to masters).

Given the numbers of students who receive RPL in higher education, it is unlikely that universities are required to deal with applications that request two thirds of a course based on RPL. The maxima are theoretical, rather than actual.

When RPL is awarded for credit, this may be in the form of:
- specified credit for subjects or units, based on a match between the individual's prior learning and the learning outcomes of the subject or unit;
- unspecified credit, for example, credit points or exemption from electives;
- block credit, for a part of a course, for example for one semester or the first year;
- advanced standing, defined as exempting students from having to do particular subjects, but still requiring them to undertake substitute subjects to meet the requirements of the qualification; and,
- exemptions, which can include exemption from attending lectures, tutorials, the requirement to undertake components of assessment, fieldwork placement etc. This is less common. Most of the policy frameworks that address the question of the sort of credit that can be granted state that credit is for the whole subject or unit.

Several universities seem to have concerns about 'double-dipping' because their policy frameworks state that the same RPL assessment cannot be used for both access *and* credit within the same course. In our interviews with higher education staff, several expressed concern about double-dipping. The basis of this concern is that students undertaking a course should be required to expend the same effort as other students. For example, a student is not (usually) able to submit the one essay for two different subjects.[22] Double-dipping is based on the same notion, but writ large. Most university policies are silent on this issue. RPL policies relating to double-dipping are most likely related to broader university policies on the question. An example is policy frameworks that either permit or deny senior secondary students the right to include their university 'enhancement' studies as part of their tertiary

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[22] Unless the essay has been designed holistically to meet the assessment requirements of more than one subject.

entrance rank, and to use the same studies for credit in the degree. We don't have a problem with double-dipping by and large, because the main focus in our view should be on the extent to which students have met the learning outcomes for a particular course, however, we can understand the concerns expressed about it.

In contrast to under-graduate courses, the RPL policies relating to post-graduate courses are more flexible and more information is provided to prospective students about what the university will consider for entry or the award of credit. This is consistent with more RPL being granted to students in graduate courses than in bachelor degree programs.[23] The University of Canberra is an exception to this, as it has provided information at the general university level (including under-graduate courses), and for individual courses and subjects.

Case Study 8: University of Canberra

The University of Canberra defines RPL as:

"Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) denotes the accreditation of learning gained outside the Australian Qualifications Framework (that is, those awards normally offered in universities and TAFE) and the systematic process used for granting that accreditation. RPL applies specifically to:

    (a)   learning gained from work experience;
    (b)   learning gained from non-credentialled courses;
    (c)   learning from life."

The University provides students with detailed information about:

- the administrative requirements for submitting RPL applications;
- how to submit an application;
- what sort of prior learning may be considered;
- the sort of evidence that may be used;
- what is meant by valid evidence from employers and others;
- how RPL applications are assessed and the range of assessment methods that may be used;
- maximum levels of credit ;
- how students are advised of the outcomes of RPL decisions; and,
- grading and transcripts.

In addition to this general advice, the University of Canberra provides specific advice for courses and subjects. Courses that permit RPL are listed, as are the specific subjects with provisions for RPL credit. This information is provided for bachelor degrees, honours degrees, graduate certificates, graduate diplomas, masters degrees by coursework and masters degrees by research.

Information is provided for each course and each subject with provisions for RPL credit including:
- whether credit awarded through RPL is for specified credit or unspecified credit
- the criteria against which applications will be assessed;
- examples of appropriate background;
- material (evidence) required in the applicant's portfolio; and,
- who to contact for further information, with both an academic and administrative contact listed.

In line with the AVCC policy, most University RPL policies state that RPL assessments should be conducted by an academic who, as well as having content knowledge, should also have experience and knowledge of RPL or access to someone with that expertise. The

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[23] See Chapter 4: Who receives RPL

authority to make RPL decisions are mostly devolved to the course or program co-ordinator, head of department or school. However, other examples of institutional policy on assessing RPL applications include:

- assessment of RPL applications by a discipline-oriented review panel which includes the head of school and at least one other academic;
- decisions by the faculty board concerning how much RPL is to be granted and the level at which it will be granted; and,
- RPL decisions made by the dean.

Analysis of policy frameworks suggest that the most common form of assessment is by portfolio, where students collect a range of supporting materials and evidence. Our interviews with higher education stakeholders confirmed that this is the most commonly used method. Respondents emphasised that portfolios allow students to present evidence that is authentic, sufficient, valid and reliable. Portfolio assessment does provide students with the opportunity to present rich and varied evidence that shows the depth and range of their learning and experience. However, the extent to which students can provide portfolios that fulfill these requirements is, arguably, reliant on the extent to which they understand what these assessment principles mean (authenticity, sufficiency, validity, and reliability).

Policy frameworks stipulate that a range of other assessment methods may be used including:
- interviews, including an interview by a panel of experts;
- challenge tests or exams;
- essays;
- oral format (presentation, debate, formal oral examination etc);
- demonstrations;
- work-based assessments; or,
- projects.

Several university policies indicated that students could seek advice from academic services or student services in preparing their RPL application, but most did not refer to support available to students. Several universities require students to submit their RPL application to an academic advisor who provides advice about the probability of its success. Our interviews with stakeholders indicated that there was no organised provision of advice and support to students, other than that published by the university, or provided directly in response to student requests. We came across no instance of the sort of provision discussed in chapter 3 (International RPL practice) provided by British universities. This consists of RPL subjects or modules which students enrol in to learn how to prepare their RPL application. Many of the British universities that offer the RPL subject also grant credit for the subject as well as for the RPL application.

5.1.3   Why RPL is more likely in post-graduate courses than under-graduate courses?

Analysis of university RPL policies shows that RPL is more likely to be offered in post-graduate courses than in undergraduate courses. In our interviews with higher education stakeholders we asked them why they thought this was so. Responses included the following:

- unlike the VET sector, higher education does not award qualifications based entirely on RPL applications. All universities have policies that stipulate that a component of the award must be studied within the university if the student is to receive an award of the university. However, universities recognise that many students have acquired knowledge, skills and experience that allows them to operate at a graduate level, and such students should not be required to go back complete an under-graduate degree. An AQF Advisory Board discussion paper explained the issue in this way:

  "…the sector as a whole understands the Graduate Certificate to accommodate non-graduate entry and that this qualification is available as an encouragement to non-graduates with extensive work experience to pursue further studies as part of the lifelong learning required in an advanced economy."
  (AQF Advisory Board, 2000: 20)

- graduate certificates have a more explicit vocational orientation than do many bachelor degrees;
- professional people may already have skills that allow them to understand what RPL is, and how to prepare an application;
- many course-work graduate programs *require* work experience as a condition of entry, and assessment is based in, and draws upon, the student's professional work practice. In this context, RPL is intrinsic to the curriculum, learning outcomes and assessment;
- graduate coursework programs have developed as tertiary education has expanded, and these courses acknowledge the reality that school-leaver entry to higher education is no longer the norm, whereas under-graduate courses are still founded on this assumption, even if a minority of university entrants are school-leavers;
- entry to bachelor degrees is through a competitive process, and students with credentialled prior learning are seen as more likely to succeed than are students with uncredentialled prior learning. Entry to graduate qualifications does not rely on competitive entry to the same extent as with under-graduate qualifications;
- prior credentialled qualifications lend themselves to ranking in competitive entry processes whereas RPL does not to the same extent;
- there are fewer graduate students than under-graduate making the process of RPL less time consuming and difficult; and,
- graduate coursework programs are more likely to be fee-paying, and RPL is used to establish markets in professional areas.

The extensive use of RPL in graduate programs shows that RPL is a higher education issue, just as much as it is an issue for the other sectors of post-compulsory education and training.

5.1.4 Summary of higher education policy

The nature and range of RPL policies reflects the diversity within the higher education sector. Newer universities which focus on mature-age students are more likely to have clearly identified RPL policies at the institutional level, than are the older universities that focus on school-leaver entrants. Attitudes to, and the possibilities for, RPL are also connected to the university's wider policy framework concerning articulation and credit transfer with TAFE in particular, and the VET sector more generally.

Where policies exist, most refer to the AVCC policy, indicating the importance of the peak body in leading the sector on these matters. The AVCC's revised credit transfer guidelines and acknowledgement of the need for further work to be undertaken in relation to RPL will increase the support given to RPL in the sector. Several universities have elaborated policies which use the AVCC framework as a basis, but include additional principles, and contextualise RPL and credit transfer into the mission and philosophy of the university.

Where policies exist, most provide an overall framework for RPL within the university, while devolving decisions about whether RPL will be offered in courses and subjects, and how it will be assessed, to faculties, schools and departments. Universities differ in the way the process is administered: some administer the process centrally, while others devolve the administration of the process as well.

While RPL is incorporated into the general quality assurance frameworks of universities this probably needs to be made more explicit, both to the increase confidence in using RPL and in ensuring that RPL decisions are transparent, accountable, and maintain the integrity of the qualification. However, RPL quality assurance and assessment processes should not be more rigorous than is the case for related processes that are designed to achieve the same or similar objectives.

RPL is more likely to be offered in post-graduate programs than under-graduate programs. RPL acts as an access mechanism to higher education at the graduate level for those who do not have under-graduate qualifications, but nonetheless have the skills, knowledge, and ability to study at that level. This is the way the higher education sector deals with recognising learning at this level. However, it is a recognition process, and not an accreditation process, unlike the processes in place in the VET sector, in which students are awarded the qualification based on a successful RPL assessment.

While RPL is more common at the post-graduate level, pressure will be exerted for it to be included in under-graduate courses to a greater extent, as higher education constructs policy frameworks that acknowledge the reality of its diverse student body, and the fact that the school-leaver entrant model no longer fits the needs of the majority of entrants. RPL is associated with flexible learning, work-based learning and with other student-centred approaches in higher education. This will also increase pressure on universities to accommodate RPL into the structure of the university.

5.2   Vocational Education and Training

The main changes to RPL in VET sector since the 1997 RPL report are that:

- the VET sector has changed its definition of RPL from that held at time of the 1997 AQF RPL report, to encompass all forms of assessment, including RPL, under a broad heading of 'recognition';
- qualifications are now based on training packages; and,
- the Australian Quality Training Framework has been introduced, and was implemented in July 2001. It consists of 12 standards that underpin the delivery of VET in Australia. All Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) must comply with

the AQTF as a condition of registration. The AQTF standards stipulate that students must be offered RPL at the point of enrolment.

Each of these points is elaborated below.

Unlike higher education, VET providers are not self-accrediting bodies. Credentialled training must be based upon nationally endorsed training packages which comprise industry-derived competencies, AQF qualifications, and assessment guidelines. States and territories can also permit RTOs to deliver other forms of credentialled training, but this must be based on courses accredited using the state or territory accreditation process. RPL assessments must be against the competencies contained in training packages.

ANTA's policy framework does not distinguish between RPL or other forms of assessment as all are part of a broader 'recognition' policy: ANTA now defines RPL as:

> "…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. In order to grant RPL, the assessor must be confident that the candidate is currently competent against the endorsed industry or enterprise competency standards or outcomes specified in the Australian Qualifications Framework accredited courses. The evidence may take a variety of forms and could include certification, references from past employers, testimonials from clients and work samples. The assessor must ensure that the evidence is authentic, valid, reliable, current and sufficient."
> (ANTA, 2001: 9)

However, ANTA distinguishes between RPL and other forms of assessment for the purposes of implementation. RTOs are required to provide access to RPL to all students upon enrolment (ANTA, 2001). Registered Training Organisations will be audited for compliance with this standard. The AQTF (2001: 18) states that:

"8.2   **a** The RTO must ensure that RPL is offered to all applicants on enrolment.
      b The RTO must have an RPL process that:
        i   is structured to minimise the time and cost to applicants; and
        ii provides adequate information and support to enable applicants to gather reliable evidence to support their claim for recognition of competencies currently held, regardless of how, when or where the learning occurred."

RPL is also known as Recognition of Current Competency (RCC), or sometimes Skills Recognition Assessment (SRA), or simply Skills Recognition (SR). This needs to be distinguished from "Mutual Recognition" and "Credit Transfer".

Mutual Recognition is a fundamental concept in the VET system. It requires all Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) to accept the assessment outcomes of other RTOs, and to provide full recognition for those outcomes. For example, if an individual moves from an RTO in one state, to an RTO in another state, and completes their course in the second RTO, they will be granted full recognition for the assessment outcomes they have already achieved, and will not have to repeat those units of competency. All RTOs are required to use national training packages with industry endorsed competencies and assessment guidelines. The

national policy framework has been designed to allow for diversity in developing learning processes to meet the needs of individuals and enterprises, while resulting in nationally consistent outcomes. This is because assessment must be undertaken using the assessment guidelines against the nationally endorsed competencies. So when mutual recognition is invoked it is for the same competencies, regardless of the provider or state in which it is delivered.

Credit transfer is slightly different. It refers to learning outcomes that are *similar* or *equivalent* but not necessarily identical. Credit transfer can be provided for similar or equivalent units of competency within VET, or for similar or equivalent learning outcomes achieved in other sectors of post-compulsory education and training. This can include credit transfer for learning that has occurred in an uncredentialled context, provided the RTO is satisfied with the standards and assessment used to assess the outcomes.

5.2.1 States and Territories

While all states and territories are part of the national VET system, they differ in their approach to providing a state-wide policy framework for the implementation of RPL in their jurisdiction. This reflects different state approaches to developing state-wide policy frameworks, and the degree of autonomy provided to VET providers with whom they have funding agreements.

In Victoria, RTOs (including TAFE institutes) have considerable institutional autonomy compared to many other states and territories. There is no state-wide policy covering RPL, as all RTOs must, as a condition of their registration, comply with the requirements of the AQTF. TAFE institutes and other VET providers are expected to develop their own policies and processes to give effect to the AQTF requirement. Consequently, providers in Victoria have developed institutional RPL frameworks that reflect their institutional circumstances and the communities they serve.

The situation in Queensland is similar. Providers are required to comply with AQTF standards and are audited against these standards. Queensland has, in addition, a "Recognition of Work or Training" framework that enables those working in the trades the opportunity to become credentialled. If an individual is over 21 and has six years working in a trade they can apply to be assessed through the Skills Recognition process for a relevant qualification.

The Northern Territory audits providers against the AQTF requirements, and registration and re-registration processes involve site visits by the Northern Territory Employment and Training Authority. The ACT audits RTOs for compliance with the AQTF standard. South Australia has published guidelines that provide advice for providers on RPL, including how to understand and interpret the AQTF requirement that providers offer all students RPL at the point of enrolment. However, "[u]nless directly specified in the AQTF standards, these guidelines are not prescriptive and RTOs may choose to adopt alternative arrangements that demonstrably meet the AQTF Standards for RTOs" (Accreditation Registration Council, 2002: 2).

Other states have in place RPL policies which guide the implementation of RPL in TAFE institutes, and to a greater or lesser degree, in private providers. This ensures consistency across the jurisdiction.

New South Wales has two policies: the first covers all students enrolled in the TAFE system and the second covers commercial recognition services. The latter refers to "recognition services of up to 100% of a TAFE NSW course or qualification as part of mainstream provision" and "a commercial service for enterprises and individuals who require a customised service." (TAFE NSW Recognition Policy & TAFE NSW Commercial Recognition Services Policy, 2001: 9) The NSW TAFE Recognition policy has four components:

- Pre-arranged RPL, which refers to credit transfer and articulation agreements made with other providers, particularly in the other sectors of post-compulsory education and training (schools, universities and ACE);
- RPL –which "is the acknowledgement of a person's current skills and knowledge acquired through previous education, training, work or life experience";
- TAFE NSW credit transfer, which is "specified learning previously completed in TAFE NSW, within a single Institute or across Institutes";
- Mutual recognition, as defined in the AQTF.

(TAFE NSW Recognition Policy, 2001: 4-5)

The NSW policy seems to distinguish between assessment and recognition, with assessment occurring only as part of delivery of NSW TAFE provision. "Delivery and assessment are the means by which TAFE NSW students achieve learning outcomes." Recognition, on the other hand, refers to recognising learning that has occurred outside NSW TAFE. This occurs in RPL by recognising an individual's learning outcomes however acquired, and, in the case of pre-arranged RPL and Mutual Recognition, assessments undertaken by other providers.

TAFE NSW credit transfer is only applicable for learning completed within TAFE NSW. In the case of TAFE NSW credit transfer, students are able to transfer the pass result or grade they received for their studies, whereas this is not the case with the other three processes of recognition.

The NSW policy framework outlines
- the principles of recognition, which are an elaboration of the AQTF standards;
- the different components of recognition (as discussed above);
- fees and charges;
- customer service and recognition; and,
- responsibilities for establishing and maintaining pre-arranged RPL.

NSW TAFE also administers trade tests on behalf on the New South Wales Vocational Training Tribunal, which "provide a means for people to re-enter their trade or profession. Although principally designed for people with overseas qualifications, those who have partially completed an Australian trade qualification also use them"

(TAFE NSW Recognition Policy, 2001: 7)

Western Australia has a *Skills Recognition Framework* that:

> "is the term used to describe a number of assessment processes resulting in the formal recognition of competencies that a person has acquired through formal or informal training, work experience and/or life experience."

The WA Skills Recognition framework encompasses:

- "Recognition of Prior Learning
- Recognition of Current Competencies
- Credit Transfer (may also be referred to as Advanced Standing or Exemption)
- RPL for Entry
- Overseas Equivalence"

(WA Department of Department of Training, 2002: 1)

The WA policy "also outlines the Principles of Skills Recognition by which all Registered Training Organisations must abide, and describes the roles, responsibilities and inter-relationships of stakeholders in the Skills Recognition process" (WA Department of Department of Training, 2002: 4). The framework is comprehensive: it provides operational advice to providers in implementing RPL, and pays considerable attention to the level of support that students should be provided with in accessing RPL. This includes participation in a portfolio development module or a RPL preparation module.

Case Study 9: Challenger Institute of TAFE

The Western Australian approach to promoting skills recognition shows how a state-wide framework can be used by institutions to develop and support institutional initiatives to drive RPL or skills recognition processes. In 2000, the Quality Assurance and Recognition Branch in the Western Australian Department of Training ran radio and TV advertisements promoting skills recognition. Individuals were referred to their local TAFE or VET provider if they wanted to pursue this.

Challenger Institute of TAFE had invested considerable institutional energy, time and resources in developing and implementing a skills recognition policy. Strategic funding was made available in 2000 to equip administrative and teaching staff to implement skills recognition processes. Institutional attention had been focussed on RPL or skills recognition since at least 1997. An institution-wide committee was established, and institutional champions for skills recognition were supported to gain the skills they needed. It was understood that it was not sufficient to proclaim policy; it also required an institutional infrastructure, accompanied by processes of cultural change.

The policy was again revised in 2001 to make it simpler and more student-centred. More strategic funding was provided. The impetus was the state-wide advertising campaign by the Department of Training. Challenger commissioned a communications expert to review their policies. Readability scales were used to assess information, and the existing information was found wanting.

Two key initiatives were introduced. First, the information was rewritten, with different levels of information available to support students from the initial enquiry stage, through to information about the process, and what students need to do. The second key initiative was to make the process institution driven, rather than student driven. After students fill in a form with their contact details, they are contacted by a member of teaching staff who supports and advises them through the whole process, from initial application through to the end of the assessment process, and provision of advice about their future learning pathways.

The delivery of VET in Tasmania is managed through TAFE Tasmania and the Office of Post-Compulsory Education and Training (OPCET), which is responsible for the purchase of training with RTOs other than TAFE Tasmania. Both TAFE Tasmania and OPCET report directly to the Minister through the Department of Education. TAFE Tasmania is the largest VET provider in Tasmania. TAFE Tasmania has a *Recognition Processes Business Rule* that outlines how recognition processes will be implemented. It does not distinguish between RPL and RCC, and is based on the AQTF definition of recognition. It stipulates that a variety of methods will be used to assess students, rather than focussing only on portfolio approaches, and states that teachers/assessors will mentor and advise students through the process (TAFE Tasmania Recognition Processes Business Rule, 2001).

5.2.2   Assessment only services

Most states have assessment only services in place, either through TAFE institutions or through centres established solely for that purpose. These services are able to assess students for a whole qualification or components of a qualification. They provide advice for students on how to prepare their application, and can advise students on 'gap training' and further pathways.

Case Study 10: Hunter Recognition Centre

The Hunter Recognition Centre was established by the Hunter Institute of TAFE in 1995 as an assessment only centre. Since the centre was established demand for its services have increased every year. In 2000, the Centre approved approximately 13,000 applications based on informal learning for approximately 4000 students. The centre advises students about the process and their application, handles all administrative and reporting requirements, and notifies students of the outcome. Specialist teaching staff are nominated by faculties to assess applications. The Hunter Institute of TAFE has 17 campuses, so this approach enables students to benefit from a 'one-stop shop', where they receive all the advice and support that they need, while the centre brokers all the arrangements behind the scenes (Albrecht, 2001).

Case Study 11 VETASSESS

VETASSESS is based in Melbourne and is an assessment only RTO that provides a national assessment service for individuals and organisations. VETASSESS is also the national assessing authority for the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA) General Skilled Migration program for a broad range of management, administrative, professional and associate professional occupations.

VETASSESS offers a service called the "Competency Skills Assessment Skills Passports." They explain that:

"The passport provides a permanent, readily accessible record of competencies achieved by individuals and confirmed through a formal assessment process.

"A major advantage of the Skills Passport is that it enables individuals to build qualifications over time. The Skills Passport will record all competencies acquired at different places and at different points in time. An individual may update their Skills Passport and have additional competencies recognised…."
http://www.vetassess.com.au/FrameSitemap.htm

5.2.3 Partnerships with industry

VET staff have developed partnerships in many areas that are based on:

- the understanding of VET staff of the industry, its direction, and stakeholders;
- the willingness of staff to be active in the industry, through industry supported research and development, being members of professional associations, and participating in industry conferences and similar activities
- the standing of VET staff in the industry, and the confidence of the industry in the assessment processes and standards

This requires an institutional framework that supports staff in establishing and sustaining relationships, and in engaging in new and emerging knowledge in the field. Staff in the field say they require a supportive head of department who has trust in them if this approach is to work.

Case Study 12: Challenger TAFE Horticulture

Several staff teaching in horticulture at Challenger TAFE work almost entirely in industry across several employers. They are not allocated classes internally, because they generate all their load through working with groups and individuals in the industry workplace. RPL is integrated with other flexible learning approaches, and at times it is difficult to distinguish between RPL and work-based learning or work-based assessment. Many of the people they are working with would otherwise never have considered seeking a qualification for either themselves or their staff, and the flexibility of combining RPL with short courses, on-the-job training and other learning activities gives them options they would not otherwise have had. TAFE staff spend a great deal of time with individuals *planning* their RPL applications, and integrating this with other training activities. Staff also participate in the industry associations and present papers to industry conferences, so they are not only helping to train the industry, but also to develop the industry in that state. This contact at all levels of the industry is the reason for continued growth in learning in horticulture programs in flexible delivery mode. The staff have been given the freedom they need to go out to the industry, and to develop appropriate programs to meet the needs of individuals and groups.

5.2.4 Enterprise providers

Enterprise providers are well placed to implement RPL into work practices as well as training. An enterprise provider is an organisation or enterprise that conducts its own training, and is registered to do so under the AQTF. Enterprises may choose to become RTOs to enable them to customise and conduct accredited training that supports their 'core business.' Examples of enterprise RTOs include McDonalds and Woolworths. Bateman and Knight (2002) explain that it is difficult to obtain accurate data about training in enterprises, as most of the evidence is limited to case studies. The literature suggests that many of the problems encountered by training providers in using RPL are not of the same scale as with enterprise providers, particularly if much training is on the job. While enterprise providers are required to report against assessment outcomes, qualifications and statements of attainment that they issue, not all their training is publicly funded, and so the same imperatives of class sizes and other economies of scale are not so immediate. There are funding incentives for enterprise providers to use RPL, as it involves less staff time spent in training, and less time off the job. Of 10 companies that responded to a survey on the implementation of RPL in the Victorian state training system, nine said the cost of RPL was outweighed by savings in training time,

with only one indicating the opposite (Gibson, 1997: 103). However, a focussed research project into the way in which enterprise RTOs use RPL is required to verify the anecdotal reports, and the small scale, case-study projects. It appears that the incidence of RPL in non-TAFE providers in the VET sector has increased from 1997 to 2001, and this group includes enterprise providers. However, it was not possible to disaggregate the data to reliably determine the incidence of RPL for enterprise providers as distinct from other private providers.[24]

Case Study 13: Victorian Country Fire Authority

The Victorian Country Fire Authority has 1000 staff and 65,000 volunteer fire-fighters. It is an enterprise RTO. The CFA is committed to training: training and development is co-ordinated centrally, and there are 10 full-time regional mangers each of whom supervises a further five instructors.

The CFA has grouped competencies drawn from four qualification levels ranging from Certificate II to Advanced Diploma, and in 2001 it introduced a skills recognition process for each level. It was recognised that of the 65,000 volunteer fire-fighters, many had relevant skills that were not recognised, and that it was a matter of training catching up with their skills. The aim of the CFA's training and skills recognition process was to recognise existing skills in a way that was meaningful to the CFA, compliant with national requirements, and most importantly, meaningful to the applicant.

In developing the skills recognition process the CFA moved away from the language of RPL or RCC, and developed a process that was simple, transparent, and easy to understand. A skills recognition template was developed that enabled candidates to self-assess before submitting their application. The nature of the evidence that candidates were expected to provide is clearly outlined, with the result that candidates don't have to second-guess the evidence needed to demonstrate that they have met the criteria. Accountabilities are clearly indicated, and supervisors take an active role in monitoring performance so that it can be included as part of the skills recognition process. Evidence is based on portfolios, and direct observation.

The skills recognition process has high visibility and transparency. It must also be rigorous. The occupational health and safety risks associated with volunteer fire fighting are very high. The outcome of the process is that the candidate's skills are recognised or the candidate returns to training, with advice and support about the training they need. Sometimes a combination of both may result.

The CFA is planning to introduce the skills recognition process to other operational skills and assessment programs. While it has not yet formally evaluated the results, anecdotal evidence suggests that candidates have found the process accessible, empowering and that it encourages them to proceed with further training.

5.2.5 Summary of VET policy

The AQTF provides the national policy framework for RPL in VET, and for VET provision in the school and ACE sectors. All Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) are required to offer RPL at enrolment, minimise cost to students, and provide students with advice and support. RTOs are audited for compliance with this and other standards in the AQTF. States and territories differ in the extent to which they provide RPL policy frameworks, in addition to that set out by the AQTF. Assessment only services exist in most states, either through TAFE institutes or as stand-alone assessment only RTOs. Partnerships with industry are essential in creating opportunities for people, and establishing relationships in the workplace is central to winning wider acceptance of RPL and in creating incentives to proceed with further education and training on the job and off the job. Enterprise RTOs are able to

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[24] See Chapter 4: Who receives RPL

integrate RPL into work processes, but more research is needed to fully understand how it is used.

5.3   Adult and Community Education

The ACE sector has always been important in providing new opportunities for people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds and socially marginalised groups. ACE is increasingly recognised in government policy for the important role that it plays in enriching the lives of participants and their communities. The inclusion of ACE in this project is evidence of the increased recognition of the role played by ACE. ACE was not included as part of the AQF 1997 RPL report and its inclusion in this project is one of the key developments to have occurred since 1997. It was understood that a national picture of RPL could not be attained without including the ACE sector, and that any national common principles and operational guidelines for RPL must include the ACE sector, if the policy outcomes sought for RPL are to be implemented.

The role of ACE in contributing to post-compulsory education and training has been reaffirmed by MCEETYA in its Ministerial Declaration on Adult and Community Education in July 2002 (MCEETYA, 2002). The statement posits a key role for ACE in contributing to the social and economic well-being of Australia through creating opportunities for young adults and people to participate in education and training. ACE provides a framework for young people who need options other than school, and for adults who have not had the opportunity to participate in education and training, or whose experiences were negative.

The Ministerial Statement has four key goals:

1. Expand and sustain innovative community-based learning models.
2. Raise awareness and understanding of the role and importance of adult community education.
3. Improve the quality of adult community education learning experiences and outcomes.
4. Extend participation in community-based learning

(MCEETYA, 2002)

RPL is listed as one of several key enabling strategies in the Ministerial Declaration, and it cites the need for the development of resources and strategies for RPL, which is defined as including informal learning. RPL is intrinsic to the development of learning pathways within ACE, and between ACE and other sectors, and must be developed if the vision in the Ministerial Declaration is to be realised.

Policy frameworks, funding and reporting for the ACE sector differs across the States and Territories. Golding *et al.* (2001) explain that the states differ in the extent to which the sectors are funded by government, and only Victoria and New South Wales have statutory boards to fund, represent and support community providers, and to oversee accreditation of further education courses and qualifications. In other states, governments fund ACE provision, and this takes place in a variety of contexts, including in TAFE providers, as well as in local neighbourhood settings. Another way of putting this is to say that ACE is constituted as a distinct *sector* in some states, particularly New South Wales and Victoria, while in others it is constituted as *provision* of adult and basic education, and further

education. These models overlap. Golding *et al.* (2001: 8) explain that, "[w]hile accepting that no precise definition of ACE applies across all States and Territories" the 1997 MCEETYA national policy on ACE:

> "proposed some defining features: that it is learner-centred, responsive to community needs, accessible and inclusive, diverse, varied and flexible."

The 2002 MCEETYA statement will help integrate ACE into the post-compulsory education and training sector, with a key role in contributing to lifelong learning, and the development of learning pathways. Among other programs, ACE offers:

- accredited VET programs;
- labour market programs;
- adult literacy programs;
- adult learning and basic education; and,
- adult migrant English programs.
                    (Watson, Wheelahan and Chapman, 2002)

While there are many neighbourhood houses and community centres that are registered training organisations (RTOs), not all neighbourhood houses and community centres have this status. Whether or not an ACE provider becomes an RTO depends on their mission and the role they serve in their local community. Not *all* ACE providers should become RTOs. To do so would distort their role, particularly the developmental role they play in helping to re-engage local people with their community and with education. Not all education can and should be credentialled: to insist that it should be so is to devalue all learning that occurs outside these contexts. Many people who venture to their local ACE provider are embarking on a life journey. Taking that first step can be a brave and courageous decision. This is because many of the participants in ACE are among the most disadvantaged in the community, with high learning needs and often negative experiences of formal education and training. If the focus of a centre is on credentialled provision rather than more informal and developmental provision and in community development processes, it would change the nature of the provider and would disenfranchise many who are not yet ready to participate in credentialled provision, and for whom gaining a qualification is not a priority or appropriate. Attending the local craft or sewing class can be the first step to participating in education or rejoining the work force. Workers in the ACE sector can tell many stories of how participants use activities such as these to re-engage with their community, learn a little about what is available, and develop confidence in themselves.

Consequently, formal RPL processes only apply to accredited VET and further education provision in ACE. However, RPL is relevant to all ACE providers, because even if they are not RTOs, they play a role in supporting participants to gain access to further education and training and to credentialled programs leading to qualifications, and in this process often act as advocates for participants in gaining access to RPL. The advocacy role was emphasised in our interviews with stakeholders from the ACE sector. This role is not only to validate and authenticate evidence that students use in their RPL applications, but also extends to explaining *how* an individual's learning is equivalent to learning or competency outcomes, and why it should be granted. ACE workers often act as advocates for students for RPL within ACE and in other sectors, but mainly TAFE.

Case Study 14: RPL advocates for students

Students preparing RPL in the ACE sector often require more support than students in other sectors, particularly if they have had no experience of post-compulsory education and training. This is because the *raison d'être* of the ACE sector is to provide opportunities for young people and adults from disadvantaged backgrounds to re-engage with learning. The ACE sector supports proportionally more students who have literacy, numeracy or general learning problems than do the other sectors. One ACE interviewee from a large provider told us that changes in funding structures have resulted in a decreased capacity for course co-ordinators or centre co-ordinators to play a role in promoting and implementing RPL and in supporting students through the RPL process. Most teachers in the ACE sector are sessional, and are not funded to, and do not have the time to, provide extensive support to students seeking RPL. Course co-ordinators are not funded to, and often do not have the extra time required to assist an individual going through the RPL process, but they have done it anyway. However, it is becoming increasingly difficult for them to do so. These difficulties can lead to delays for the student seeking RPL, and inhibit them from using the process again. Our interviewee told us that the role of a course or centre co-ordinator who acts as an RPL advocate for the student and a liaison person for both student and subject expert is undervalued by both institutions (for example, TAFE institutes or the ACE provider) and funding bodies.

While the level of RPL in the ACE sector has grown as the provision of accredited education and training courses and qualifications has grown, the level is still very low. However, much informal RPL occurs, particularly in assessing student learning needs at the point of entry and in teaching. For example, in the NSW and Victorian ACE sectors, every student enrolled in an accredited literacy program has a pre-course interview lasting an hour or longer which is used to assess a student's skills, and to ensure they are placed in a program commensurate with their level of academic preparedness (interview data).

The principles underpinning the ACE sector focus on validating the learning and diverse life experiences that individuals bring with them: consequently RPL operates informally at every level, particularly in teaching accredited programs. Classes are usually relatively small, and learning pathways highly individualised. Individuals are placed in programs when they need them, at the level they need, and move in and out of programs depending on their progress and other circumstances in their lives. This may result in fewer credentialled outcomes than would be the case if the emphasis were solely on accreditation and certification, but possibly more relevant learning. RPL, when so thoroughly integrated into the way a centre operates, is very difficult to count and monitor. The tension between demonstrable outcomes expressed in completed qualifications and competencies, *versus* the need for highly tailored and flexible programs has characterised the ACE sector and debates among ACE researchers for many years (Golding *et al.*, 2001).

Case Study 15: Centre for Adult Education, Melbourne

Donna White is an educator in the ACE sector with more than 20 years experience. She is currently teaching in the Centre for Adult Education (CAE) in Melbourne, the largest ACE provider in Australia. RPL is mainly used in the professional writing field and the Certificate IV in Administration and Management (ACE). Donna's experience has been that few eligible students use RPL even when encouraged, as they mostly want to be involved in the educational processes that are part of group learning. Many students also want to build their self confidence by using the learning process to re-confirm that they do have prior skills and knowledge. However, students often seek exemption from later units in courses and electives if their circumstances have changed significantly during a course, and after they have had the experience of group learning in initial course units/modules. This shows why it is important that the student's learning needs are evaluated holistically, and that RPL is offered and available throughout a student's enrolment.

Those ACE providers that are RTOs must comply with AQTF requirements for accredited VET programs and accredited further education programs (ACFE Division, 2002). In Victoria and New South Wales ACE providers must develop policies and procedures for actively offering RPL to students, but "as each centre is independently run the look and feel is up to them" (ACE sector interviewee).

The introduction of the AQTF may result in some ACE providers relinquishing their status as an RTO, because the effort required to meet the AQTF standards may distort the role the centre plays in the local community. A decision to relinquish RTO status may be as a consequence of a reaffirmation of the role and value of uncredentialled provision and the community development role of a provider in a community. Where this happens it is important that networks between ACE providers and providers of credentialled courses be established, maintained and supported, to ensure local community members have access to the full range of educational opportunities.

The standard and quality of provision of those providers who choose to maintain their RTO status will be ensured by their compliance with the AQTF. However, given the limited resources that most ACE providers have, it may help to increase the extent to which RPL is implemented if small providers are supported in developing RPL processes and procedures, and in implementing systems that meet audit requirements. The pressures that affect all sectors in developing and implementing RPL are exacerbated in the ACE sector by lower levels of funding, less infrastructure, smaller staffing levels, and clients with higher needs as many come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Provision in the ACE sector works on a different rhythm compared to other sectors, and the lead up to courses is usually much shorter, as advertising for courses is usually published immediately before term commences. This can make it difficult for small providers to offer RPL at the point of enrolment, as they are required to do by the AQTF.

If the MCEETYA ACE Declaration is to be realised, the ACE sector will need to be funded to ensure appropriate RPL infrastructure is in place. One way of dong this is to consider extending RPL assessor networks in the VET sector to the ACE sector. This may encourage the development of cross-sectoral communities of practitioners and may help all sectors to understand the constraints each operates under, and also provide staff with resources and support.

5.4   Secondary Schools

The most important change relating to RPL that has occurred in the school sector since the publication of the 1997 AQF Advisory Board report on RPL is the introduction of VET in schools. It is estimated that 37% of Year 11 and 12 students participated in VET in schools in 1999, while VET was offered by approximately 86% of schools in that year (Malley, Keating, Robinson and Hawke, 2001: 21). VET in schools is offered in different ways: either by the school directly, where the school is an RTO and is able to offer specific programs; or, by schools in partnership with other RTOs. All students participating in VET in schools have the opportunity to seek RPL. Accredited VET provision in schools must be compliant with the AQTF, and as such, schools that are also RTOs must make RPL available for accredited VET programs. There is however, little evidence that there have been many students seeking RPL. Given that VET in schools is still relatively recent, it may take some time for students to begin to use the RPL pathway for VET qualifications. It is not possible for students to gain

a senior school certificate based wholly on RPL in any of the states or territories, while it may be possible for students to use RPL for the VET component of the certificate. This reflects the aims of the senior school certificate, and this is explored in this section.

The development and accreditation of senior school certificates is a state and territory responsibility and each have their own policy frameworks to cover issues such as credit transfer and RPL. While this is so, all the State and Territory Accreditation Authorities co-operate through the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Certification Authorities (ACACA), while the Ministers of Education co-operate through MCEETYA in developing a coherent national senior secondary school system. ACACA is also represented on the AQF Advisory Board.

South Australia is the only state/territory to have developed a comprehensive RPL policy for the senior secondary certificate, beyond the requirement that RPL be incorporated within the VET component of senior secondary certificates, in compliance with the AQTF. Most of the states and territories have a *Recognition* policy which accommodates other *formal* (and usually credentialled) learning, and this can be used towards the senior school certificate. These are credit transfer arrangements of different types, although the terminology used varies between states and territories. They include recognition or credit transfer arrangements for students moving from one state to another, from one sector to another, from overseas, or for students transferring from the International Baccalaureate to the senior school certificate. Each jurisdiction sets its own parameters and limits on the operation of these procedures.

The range of studies within the senior school certificates has diversified in recent years, particularly through incorporating VET subjects into the senior school certificates, but also including VET subjects from qualifications that are outside the senior school certificates. For example, the Victoria Curriculum Assessment Authority (VCAA) has recently developed a considerably expanded approach to Block Credit which encompasses recognition within the VCE for VET qualifications at AQF level II and above, including equivalent qualifications in the VET sector. These changes have been implemented in an effort to increase school retention rates, and to make the senior years more relevant to those who are proceeding to work or further study in VET. Developments of this nature will inevitably begin to raise the issue of RPL in a much more direct way than has hitherto been the case.

There is currently scope for recognising prior learning in several ways. First, most states and territories allow adults returning to study to commence the senior school certificate in the final year, and not to undertake the preliminary year (most of the senior school certificates are studied over two years). This is sometimes referred to as 'status'; that is, the student is granted credit status or block credit towards the senior school certificate.

In New South Wales, students can be granted advanced standing if they can demonstrate to the school principal's satisfaction that they have achieved relevant outcomes. RPL applications in the Industry Curriculum Framework are assessed centrally. Students who are already in employment (that is, not under the auspices of the school) can apply for advanced standing for VET subjects, following assessment by a qualified assessor (NSW Board of Studies, 2001).

Case Study 16: Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia

The Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia currently has a 'Recognition' framework that has three components:

1. Special provisions in curriculum and assessment, which provides for the possibility for credit transfer for learning that is equivalent to the curriculum statement learning outcomes;
2. Status provisions for adults seeking re-entry. They are able to claim 12 unit blocks of credit, the equivalent of the first year of the certificate;
3. "Recognition of VET Outcomes Towards the SACE, which allows for up to eight SACE [South Australian Certificate of Education – the senior school certificate] units to be awarded for satisfactory completion of stand-alone VET units of competency."

The SSABSA has recently conducted a consultation about its proposal to add a further two components to the Recognition framework. They are:

4. Recognition of formal learning outside the AQF. This includes formal learning in courses that are not mapped to the AQF, and include programs like first aid, emergency services training, or vendor certificates; and,
5. Recognition of Non-formal Learning, which is RPL, in the way we have defined it in this report.

The SSABSA wishes to complete its Recognition Framework by including the last two components because:

"SSABSA's research and feedback from stakeholders have revealed that students lead very complex lives and the diversity of their experiences can provide opportunities for significant learning outside formal SACE studies." The principles upon which the SACE Recognition policy is based are designed to:

- "focus on the learning outcomes that are achieved through an experience, and not on the experience itself;
- recognise learning that is consistent with the goals and standards of the SACE;
- maintain the integrity and international standing of the SACE;
- ensure consistency of administration and reporting;
- be clear, fair, and equitable;
- value learning as a lifelong experience;
- be accessible to all students;
- support the transition needs of students by facilitating their progress along and between the multiple pathways of work, training, and/or education; and,
- contribute towards SACE completion."

The proposal suggests that students be able gain credit by any of the processes outlined above, for up to 12 units (out of 22 units) of the SACE. This will enable students to "customise more of their learning towards post-school options, while completing the SACE." Six units must be completed at stage 2, or the second year of the SACE. All applications will be assessed centrally by the SSABSA. The SSABSA will also "provide support to schools to facilitate the collection and verification of evidence. Information and advice will also be available on the SSABSA website." Students can use credit granted on the basis of formal learning outside the AQF, and credit for non-formal learning (RPL) towards the completion of the SACE, but it will not be graded, and consequently, will not contribute to a Tertiary Entrance Rank for the purposes of entering higher education.

(SSABSA, 2002)

Many of the jurisdictions indicated in their response to this project that the policy environment is conducive to considering how senior school curriculum and certificates can reflect the principles of lifelong learning and RPL in the senior school certificates. For example, the Western Australian senior school certificate is currently being reviewed, and:

> "Implicit in the new curriculum and assessment design that underpins future Curriculum Council courses of study is recognition of prior levels of achievement."
> (Western Australian Curriculum Council survey response)

The development of learning pathways for *all* young people is a key policy consideration, and the subject of a significant number of policy initiatives in states and territories, and at the Commonwealth level. This may play a role in contributing towards consideration of RPL within the school sector.

MCEETYA established "a short-term Ministerial Subcommittee on Young People's Transitions to develop practical options for strengthening transition pathways for young people who are disconnected or at risk of becoming disconnected" (MCEETYA, 2001). This initiative, entitled "Stepping Forward: What Works" was constructed to take an audit of, and create links between, programs in Australia designed to ensure all young people are engaged with learning pathways that reflect their individual aspirations, lead to either further education or work, and ensure young people are supported by, and are part of, their local communities.[25] An example of one program is the Youth Pathways Program which targets 15-19 year olds 'at risk'. In this program students are enrolled in accredited training (up to a maximum of 400 hours) and are provided with intensive individual support. The Youth Pathways Program encompasses schools, TAFE and the ACE sector, and young people aged 15-19 years are the target group.

ANTA released a report in April 2002 entitled *Due Credit: Examining the potential to recognise the skills achieved by young people participating in youth development programs* (ANTA, 2001) which proposes a framework for recording the achievement of skills, competencies and knowledge young people develop while participating in youth development programs. It proposes a framework for further consideration and includes eight elements:

- "the enhancement of the 'brand-name' awards provided by existing youth programs and organisations;
- the development of a 'community-based youth participation certificate';
- the development of a 'portfolio' which contains evidence of skills achieved across the schools, VET and youth sectors;
- the mapping of skills achieved in youth development programs against school curricula;
- further examining the potential for school exit certificates to include notation provisions which capture the skills achieved in youth development programs;
- the mapping of skills achieved in youth development programs against VET qualifications;
- further examining the potential to develop a VET qualification based on the generic skills included in existing VET qualifications;
- the identification of VET qualifications that recognise leadership skills."
  (ANTA, 2001: 8)

Initiatives such as *Due Credit* explicitly provides a framework for developing the capacity for senior secondary certification to include elements of "out of school" learning, either as part of the assessment of accredited courses/subjects, or in additional information provided to

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[25] The "Stepping Forward" initiative used key recommendations from the Commonwealth's 2001 Youth Pathways Action Plan, outlined in the report *Footprints to the Future.*

students as part of an overall reporting package. Many of the State and Territory and Commonwealth initiatives included in *Stepping Stones: What Works* implicitly do so as well. It may be that this is the way in which RPL is expressed in the senior secondary school sector. It is somewhat different to models of RPL in the other sectors, but the way in which RPL is implemented must reflect the mission of each sector. The RPL model used in schools has most in common with 'developmental' models of RPL, discussed in Chapter 2[26] and less emphasis on the credentialling purposes. It is an intrinsic part of curriculum, and RPL is used to extend students' learning across the range of curriculum areas.

5.5   Conclusion

This chapter has examined the policy framework for RPL in each sector. There are similarities between VET, ACE and schools insofar as all sectors include VET provision, and must therefore comply with the AQTF standards relating to RPL, but there are also differences in approach reflecting the diverse missions of each sector. The emphasis placed on RPL within individual universities tends to reflect the university's mission and orientation. Newer universities with higher numbers of mature-age students are more likely to have RPL policies than are the older universities that have large school-leaver intakes. The role of the AVCC in leading the sector and providing a policy framework is very important, as most universities that have an RPL policy have based it on the AVCC's policy.

Pressure will increase on all sectors to incorporate RPL in mainstream practices, as a consequence of lifelong learning policies. There are commonalities across the sectors as well as differences, as each sector must meet a variety of needs, all of which range from using RPL as a developmental learning process, to ensuring RPL helps students acquire the credentials and qualifications they need. However, there may be a different emphasis in each sector in the way RPL is implemented, while recognising considerable overlap.

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[26] See Chapter 2: What is RPL and why isn't there more of it

6. Fees and Funding

This chapter considers the fees students are required to pay for RPL, and how the sectors are funded to implement RPL. It considers the extent to which fees act as a disincentive for students in applying for RPL, and the impact of funding models on institutional promotion of RPL. Different approaches to funding models are discussed.

The funding arrangements in each sector differ, and consequently so do their impact on RPL fee and funding arrangements. Higher education does not charge students fees for RPL, nor is the sector funded to provide it. The other sectors have diverse funding arrangements reflecting their different State and Territory policy contexts. Higher education is considered first, followed by the other sectors. The chapter discusses issues raised by funding models, and considers the impact of these on the extent to which RPL is implemented. It also raises suggestions for alternative models for funding RPL.

Higher education

Universities are not permitted to charge HECS liable higher education students for RPL assessments, either for access to a course, or the award of credit in a course. The Commonwealth's *Advice to Higher Education Institutions on Fees for Ancillary or Additional Services* states that:

> "Institutions may charge for an assessment of prior learning only in circumstances in which a person has not applied for entry to the institution" (DEST 2002).

Students do not pay fees for access to higher education, except those fees paid to the state tertiary admissions centres which undertake selection on behalf of the universities. Students who are granted credit through RPL do not pay HECS for the subjects in which they are exempt. Higher Education institutions are prohibited from including credits awarded through RPL or credit transfer arrangements in student load (student load is the basis for funding), while they are still required to report these outcomes to government. This means they receive no funding for either RPL or credit transfer, no matter how much time is involved in these processes.[27]

Higher education is able to charge fees for RPL for fee-paying post-graduate courses, however, this does not seem to be common practice. Rather, universities have used RPL to position themselves in the market, and attract students who may not otherwise consider undertaking a post-graduate qualification. This is possible because of the small size of the post-graduate student population compared to the size of the under-graduate student population.

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[27] Once established, credit transfer takes very little time when it is the subject of institutional agreements. However, the work involved in developing credit transfer and articulation arrangements to begin with are very time consuming, and it takes considerable time to sustain and evaluate the arrangements. Much credit transfer however, is assessed on a case-by-case basis, and also can take a lot of time. Individual arrangements may lay the basis for future institutional credit transfer agreements, but it is likely that much work will continue to be on a case-by-case basis, considering the diverse range of institutions students attend before entering higher education. It is simply not worth the time and effort to develop institutional credit transfer agreements for every possible permutation, as they are expensive to establish and maintain.

Vocational education and training

Publicly funded VET students are mostly charged the normal course fees for RPL enrolments. This means that they may pay as much as, but usually not more than, what they would otherwise pay if they enrolled in the modules or course and participated in formal training. The states and territories also subsidise fees for students in receipt of designated welfare benefits. Private providers have discretion in the fees they charge students for courses and for RPL, as do TAFE institutes for fee-for-service programs.

Most states have assessment only centres where the fees charged are comparable to what a student would pay if they had undertaken the course. VETASSESS, an assessment only RTO, charges applicants $350 for a Certificate III, $575 for a Certificate IV assessment, $640 for a Diploma assessment, and $705 for an Advanced Diploma assessment. This is comparable to, or less than, fees charged to students undertaking courses leading to qualifications at this level in many states. VET providers and TAFE institutes in Australia are also free to enter into commercial arrangements with enterprises to conduct RPL assessments.

Funding arrangements vary between states. Only three states fund all programs across all providers the full amount for RPL. This includes private providers and TAFE institutions and is regardless of whether it is profile or recurrent funded programs, or funding for apprenticeship and traineeship programs (user-choice programs). That means providers are funded to the same level that they would be if they had delivered the training.

Other states fund at different levels and have varying arrangements. These include:
- distinguishing between providers, by funding TAFE and ACE providers the full amount for RPL, regardless of whether the program is recurrently funded or a user-choice program, and not funding private providers, or funding them at a reduced rate and only for the time taken to conduct the assessment in the case of user-choice programs;
- funding TAFE providers at a reduced rate for RPL assessments, to a maximum of 10 hours per module;
- not funding RPL at all for tendered Industry Training Programs that are outside both profile and user-choice programs or funding them at a reduced rate; and,
- funding TAFE providers the full amount for RPL for recurrently funded programs, but funding user-choice programs delivered by both TAFE and private providers at a reduced rate, ranging from 30% to 50%.

The Australian National Training Authority is conducting a research project on RPL in the VET sector at the same time as this project. The report from that project provides a more detailed overview of the funding arrangements for RPL in each of the States and Territories, including the extent to which TAFE and private providers are funded on the same basis, and the extent to which programs are funded on the same basis (recurrent, user-choice, or industry training programs).

Schools and ACE

Funding models in schools and ACE are determined by their respective state and territory governments, or other funding agencies.

The Commonwealth provides funds to co-ordinate VET in schools, but actual provision is funded by the states and territories, and these arrangements differ between the states and territories. Victoria funds schools on a per capita basis to deliver VET in schools in addition to the funding provided to schools for all other areas of the curriculum. New South Wales has an agreement between TAFE and schools which does not allow 'double-dipping' funding for the provision of VET in schools, and part of the funding the school is provided with must be used towards provision of VET if students are undertaking VET studies. In some cases in the states and territories, students may be charged fees to undertake VET studies. Schools can provide their own VET provision, provided they are an RTO, or they can purchase training from another RTO, and when they do, it is mainly through TAFE. TAFE providers say that when this occurs the full cost of delivery is rarely passed on to the school (Senate Employment Workplace Relations Small Business and Education Committee, 2000). The whole area of funding for VET in schools lacks national coherence; as a consequence the arrangements for funding RPL are almost impossible to discern, and the issue of RPL funding does not appear to have been considered. The funding arrangements for VET in schools are the subject of continuing debate (Malley *et al.*, 2001).

ACE funding for RPL enrolments mostly parallels VET sector funding models in the respective States and Territories. However, there are problems encountered by the ACE sector which make the existing funding arrangements more difficult. Not all provision is publicly funded, and in most states there is a large provider (for example, a Workers Education Association, or a College of Adult Education) and small providers that charge students fees on a full cost-recovery basis in some areas. These providers must make a decision as to whether they will charge students for RPL, and how much. The hope is, sometimes, that such students are full-time workers who can afford to pay full fees, and who can be charged full-fees. Students who qualify for concessions are charged reduced fees. In order to fulfil social commitments to provide access, the reality is that one area of provision will end up subsidising another area of provision, particularly in the case of RPL which is labour-intensive, and even where it is fully funded (as in some states in VET) the costs exceed the funding.

The ACE sector conducts much *pro bono* work prior to enrolling students, and this is, in effect, RPL. Students are often provided with extensive advice and individual interviews before enrolment, and are not charged fees until enrolment. The outcome of the advice and consultation period prior to enrolment may result in the student not enrolling at all, and embarking on an alternative course of action. While TAFE providers provide students enrolling in many adult and basic education courses with the same level of support, these students are not as large a proportion of the institution's total student cohort, as is the case in ACE.

Moreover, much of the provision that is funded in ACE is funded at a lower level, and/or is provision that has been put out to tender. It is often short-term provision, with no guarantees of continuing funding. This makes it difficult to establish the sort of infrastructure needed to resource and support activities like RPL. The dilemma for ACE is that the sector usually runs smaller classes both because they have fewer facilities and because the students often have high needs. However, they are still required to meet the same funding accountabilities as are TAFE providers.

The impact of funding models on RPL implementation

Almost everyone we interviewed, and many of those who responded to our website surveys, stated that funding was the major disincentive for students and institutions.[28] The people who we spoke to, and those who took the time to complete our survey, were mostly supporters of RPL, so the funding question was not a surrogate for general opposition to RPL. Stakeholders mostly thought RPL was essential to developing coherent lifelong learning policy frameworks and real and effective pathways, but they said that until the funding issues are resolved, it is difficult to see how RPL can be advanced.

Student fees

Many stakeholders thought that students found the existing fee levels to be a disincentive, particularly in the ACE sector. Others thought that as long as students did not have to pay more than what they would normally pay if they were to do the course then there was not a major problem for students; the problem was that the fees students paid did not cover the cost of implementation.

Albrecht (2001: 10) argues that it is essential to keep fees at a relatively low level to ensure access. She explains that attempts to implement full cost-recovery recognition services in the VET sector have not been successful:

> "There is some evidence that putting a price on Recognition reduces the uptake of Recognition services. In Australia, Sydney Institute of TAFE attempted to generate demand for a fee-paying recognition service from people who wanted to gain recognition for a full program of study. A commercial recognition service priced to ensure full cost recovery attracted almost no customers, and the structure set in place to support the process was later disbanded. A private company….created an Internet based application service for recognition in the Information Technology industry, with the intention of broadening the service to other industry areas. A return for investment has not yet been realised."

Similarly, the AVCC's efforts to provide a fully costed service for students seeking RPL for admission or for credit through the Australian Credit Transfer Agency also failed (see the previous chapter).

Funding models

It is clear that higher education receives no funding for RPL, either from student fees or from government. One stakeholder interviewed for this project said:

> "RPL operates on a *pro bono* basis in universities. This is okay if a small number of students ask for it. If a large number of students ask for RPL it will cost a lot of money, and will be too expensive. DEST needs to change this."

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[28] There were a few exceptions to this, but these were in the minority.

Arguably none of the various funding models in the VET sector fully funds the costs involved in RPL, even in those states that fully fund providers for RPL subject enrolments. VET is funded on the basis of student contact hours, that is, one hour of contact per student equals one student contact hour. These are called 'nominal hours' because competency based training is meant to focus on outcomes and not inputs. A student may require fewer or more hours to become competent in a given area. However, VET is funded on the basis of inputs. These are based on an estimate of the number of hours it would take an average student to learn to become competent in a particular competency or cluster of competencies, and for this reason, they are called nominal student contact hours.

However, what this fails to take into account in relation to RPL is *teaching hours*. It usually takes between 15 to 20 student contact hours to equal one teaching hour. The trades normally have a ratio of one teacher to 14 or 15 students, while in other areas the student/teacher ratio can be 1:20. If RPL subject enrolments are funded at 10% of nominal hours (as in some states), a teacher under such circumstances can only deal with a maximum of ten students, not the 15 or 20 that they need to, in order to meet load. This is based on the assumption (which is questionable) that an RPL subject enrolment only takes a maximum of 10% of nominal hours. If the support, mentoring, advice and preparation that students need is taken into account the actual hours may well be in excess of 10%.

Even the states that fully fund VET RPL subject enrolments fail to address the problems associated with economy of scale. Arguably, the fully funded models are similar to self-paced learning, which is also funded on the same basis as other forms of provision. There are some important differences, however. Self-paced learning is a form of flexible learning. However, while flexible learning models include self-paced learning, not all flexible learning is entirely self-paced. This allows for some economies of scale and collective and group processes. RPL mostly does not work like that. Usually RPL applications are handled on a one-by-one basis. As things stand, under current funding models RPL is not an effective use of a teacher's time.

Teaching staff in *all* sectors said they were not provided with sufficient time within their allocated work to conduct RPL. Some were not provided with *any* time, particularly in higher education. Many of the respondents to our project website and people we interviewed said they were asked to do RPL assessments over and above their normal load. This is not sustainable in the long run, and is not a basis for expanding RPL.

Further disincentives result: if too many people are granted RPL in a subject this could render the class sizes financially unviable, and they have to be offset with larger classes elsewhere, or run at a loss. There are also costs involved in managing RPL processes, procedures and assessments, and with associated record-keeping. Smith and Keating make the point that:

> "So while the VET system as a whole gains from RPL, individual providers may feel they have something to lose."
>
> (Smith and Keating, 1997: 173)

This point is equally valid for the other sectors. They continue though:

> "On the other hand, providers can find that enlightened RPL policies can increase student demand."
>
> (Smith and Keating, 1997: 173)

This certainly seems to be the case in higher education with post-graduate courses, but as was explained by several higher education stakeholders, the numbers involved in post-graduate courses are far fewer than those in under-graduate programs, and that is one of the key reasons why it is more manageable.

Alternative models of funding

Albrecht (2001) argues that many of the debates concerning funding RPL are dealing with false economies. She asks us to consider the costs involved in not recognising and using existing skill levels effectively. She says that:

> "The bureaucratic focus of education and training provider institutions on the perceived cost of community recognition services ignores the social and economic gains that can be derived if take-up of recognition services is maximised."
>
> (Albrecht, 2001: 3)

Albrecht (2001: 3) cites a large Canadian research report that:

> "shows that investment in the recognition of the skills and knowledge of immigrants and workplace-based learners can result in the achievement of billions of dollars of otherwise unrealised earnings."

She uses the same assumptions that the Canadian study uses to show that there are significant numbers of migrants and other Australian workers who are not able to have their skills recognised, and who are not therefore able to work at levels commensurate with their skills, and for appropriate wages. This results in individual losses, but also in broader economic losses to Australia as a whole.

Case Study 17: Building and Construction Workforce

The construction workforce has, compared to other industries, the highest percentage of workers whose highest qualification is a VET qualification. However, in 1996 some 42% of the industry was without a qualification, including 30% of workers operating as a tradesperson, and 72% of labourers. The qualification level of a further 6% in each case was not able to be determined, either because it was inadequately described, or was not stated (Construction Training Australia, 2001: 16).

Both employers and unions argue that there will be costs if the workforce is not qualified and skilled. These include:
- the costs of defects;
- losing the competition for job contracts as increasing numbers of tenders stipulate the requirement that staff be qualified; and,
- turnover of skilled staff in the industry, as those who are not credentialled may not return. This is a particular problem for industries such as the construction industry, which is cyclical in nature.

Understandably, unions and employers see RPL as crucial. In our interviews, union and business leaders stated that funding disincentives were a key obstacle. One interviewee said that from the union standpoint, RPL was one of the highest priorities of the union movement in considering how to improve current arrangements for workers. Another said that it was too difficult to get RTOs involved, because from the RTO perspective, the whole process was too labour intensive.

The fundamental problem with RPL funding models is that they are based on funding formulae used to cost *teaching* (except in higher education, where it is not funded at all). Teaching funding models are premised on economies of scale, and these don't exist to the same extent with RPL as it is currently implemented. It may be useful to consider developing a range of other funding models, one of which may be to try and build in economies of scale in using RPL. This requires the development of partnerships between potential students, government, providers and enterprises.

Case Study 18: Queensland Child Care Statewide Training Strategy

The Queensland Department of Families and the Department of Employment and Training have a partnership in place to train and credential the child care workforce in the state. The strategy is offered through TAFE Queensland and aims to:
- "improve the overall skill level of child care workers in Queensland
- provide child care workers with additional opportunities to gain qualifications
- assist child care services to meet their legislative obligations regarding qualified staff
- build on the existing training infrastructure in order to assess the sector in the long term"
(Queensland Government Department of Employment and Training and Department of Families Information Sheet 1)

The strategy operates from November 2001 until June 2004. The strategy focuses on the Certificate III and Diploma in Community Services (Children's Services), and is available to staff who are not qualified for the position they work in and who are employed full time, part time or on a casual basis in child care centres, kindergartens, school age care services, and family day care. The strategy also aims to increase the number of staff who hold the Certificate IV in Workplace Assessment and Training, as an investment in the long-term training infrastructure within the industry.

Fifteen regional co-ordinators have been employed throughout the state for the duration of the strategy. They visit sites and interview staff to determine what they need to do to be qualified. Students can enrol in the relevant child care course in one of 14 TAFE institutes. Flexible training plans are negotiated on a one-by-one basis through the Regional Co-ordinators. Together they explore the areas where the staff member is likely to be successful in applying for RPL or RCC, and develop a training plan to cover the remaining areas ('gap training').

Students are not charged for RPL or RCC assessments, and are subsidised for the remaining fees. Students are not charged for any training materials for competencies in their gap training.

This program has been very successful, but it has required the injection of serious money through the salaries of the regional co-ordinators, and the subsidisation of student fees. It may be that this is an accurate reflection of the costs of RPL.

There is potential for employers, unions and VET to work together to develop strategies in other industries that are similar to the Queensland Child Care Statewide Training Strategy. Industry approaches have been used before, for example, in the community sector (Keating *et al.*, 1998). It seems however, that the focus of these previous projects has been on developing assessment tools that relate specifically to the industry, rather than large-scale processes like the Queensland Child Care Strategy. A specific research project that evaluated the outcomes of these projects may be useful in helping to develop effective strategies that make use of economies of scale.

This approach also has potential for higher education. The Learning from Experience Trust (Learning From Experience Trust, 2000), in their study of RPL in higher education institutions in the UK, explained that several universities targetted professional areas that

needed continuing professional development, and that this provided some economies of scale. Some of these universities would only deal with groups, as it was too expensive to work with individuals. There is considerable scope for upgrading the qualifications of para-professionals to professionals in Australia, and for engaging these workers in continuing professional education. This is exactly the kind of group most likely to use RPL.

Another possibility for all sectors is to accredit and fund RPL subjects or modules that support learners in acquiring the skills they need to prepare RPL applications. Not all learners would need to enrol in a subject or module of this sort, but many would benefit. The educational framework for this sort of provision was discussed in chapter 2.[29] This model may be most useful when harnessed to the development of lifelong learning skills (the skills of self-evaluation, self-assessment, career planning, learning to learn, problem solving, etc), and has the additional benefit of being funded provision if harnessed to an accredited RPL subject or module.

It may be time to reconsider the funding and fee arrangements for RPL in higher education for HECS liable students. Debate has surrounded this issue at least since 1994, without any change in the arrangements (Ryan, 2000). Whether students should be charged HECS or a proportion of HECS for RPL assessments for credit (as opposed to access) needs to be considered in the context of debates about the extent to which students should contribute to their education on the one hand, and the need to increase access to RPL for broader social and economic reasons on the other. It does not seem equitable to consider HECS for RPL assessments for entry to university, as this would disadvantage such students who *must* use RPL to gain access, because they do not have the usual prerequisites required for entry. Similarly, HECS should not be considered for credit transfer arrangements based on formal learning, for two reasons: first, students have already paid fees for that learning in the initial course or sector in which the learning took place; and, second, difficulties associated with brokering, sustaining and evaluating credit transfer arrangements are an artefact of the way post-compulsory education and training is organised and funded, and students should not be asked to bear the cost for this. Wherever the balance lies in these debates concerning the relative contribution of the public and individuals to higher education funding, higher education institutions need to be funded to undertake RPL if RPL is seen as a key policy objective by government and stakeholders.

Conclusion

This chapter has considered the way RPL is funded, and the fees charged to students in each sectors. Higher education may not charge fees and is not funded to implement RPL. Considerable diversity exists within the VET sector, and for VET sector provision in the ACE and senior school sectors. This reflects the different policy frameworks in each of the states and territories. Inadequate funding was overwhelmingly reported by interviewees and respondents to the website surveys as a key obstacle to implementing RPL. This was from all sectors, and stakeholders and different positions within each sector. The broader economic and social consequence of not recognising skill levels was discussed. The impact of existing funding models on RPL provision was explored, as was various other possible ways of funding RPL in each sector.

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[29] See chapter 2: What is RPL and why isn't there more of it?

7.   Quality assurance

This chapter considers the extent to which RPL assessment processes and outcomes are underpinned by quality assurance frameworks in each of the sectors. Strategies are suggested to make quality assurance mechanisms more transparent, thereby increasing the confidence one sector has in the RPL assessments made in another sector, and the confidence in RPL assessments by all stakholders.

The key anxiety expressed about RPL is: "Are assessment outcomes equal to outcomes achieved by students who have completed the formal course and assessment, and how do you know?" Eighty per cent of teaching staff who responded to our questionnaire on the project website agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: "Clearer quality assurance mechanisms are needed to ensure the integrity of RPL assessment," while 71% of staff in administrative roles either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.

Concerns about quality assurance can be broken down further. We received the following comments from some of the people we interviewed, and some of those who responded to our questionnaires on the project website:

- students who have successfully 'RPLed' a whole qualification or the major part of a qualification lack something compared to other students/graduates. We call this the problem of defining 'graduateness';
- sometimes the competencies or learning outcomes against which students were assessed were themselves problematic, and that this deficit in the outcomes was redressed through teaching and learning activities. Students who were RPLed did not have access to this more rounded education and training;
- sometimes teachers or institutions are hostile to change in general, and RPL in particular, believing that unless they have taught students something, that students have not 'really' learnt it;
- the different cultures of the workplace and enterprises on the one hand, and post-compulsory education and training institutions on the other, may result in disagreements over the purpose of RPL;
- RPL assessment processes are too subjective and variable;
- the language in training packages and the competencies themselves are not easy to understand and 'we' (in higher education) don't know what 'they' (in VET) have done or what the competencies mean; and,
- there are some 'dodgy operators and practices out there', and 'we know they are giving qualifications away.'

In this chapter we go through each of these concerns, and then examine the quality assurance frameworks in each of the sectors. We also discuss strategies that can be used to ensure the quality and integrity of RPL outcomes, as this determines whether qualifications achieved in full or in part through RPL are held in the same esteem as qualifications achieved as a consequence for formal education and training.

7.1   The problem of defining 'graduateness'

It was explained to us in our interviews and in responses to our website by teaching and administrative staff in all the sectors (including the private sector and enterprise providers), that sometimes when a student was granted RPL for a whole qualification or for a substantial part of a qualification, that they lacked something that other graduates had. Sometimes this was explicit, for example, students were said not to have the same literacy skills as other students. As one higher education academic said in their response to the website questionnaire:

> "My primary concern about RPL is that often it appears that students who enter this way have literacy problems. This is very difficult to work with as it requires specialist skills (properly qualified academic skills advisors) and additional, often intensive support, from academic staff. Currently there is no recognition of this extra workload. Unfortunately it is only one of the areas of unrecognised workload and so often these students do not get the support they need as academic staff individually prioritise this "community service" differently. Having said this I think it is very important to support RPL and would like to see formal recognition of this at a structural level."

Other times it was more diffuse, and it is explained in terms of 'the sum being greater than the parts' – that is, aside from the specific learning or competency outcomes for each subject, module, unit, course or qualification, there was 'something else' that graduates had. This is sometimes described as 'graduateness' and is becoming more widely discussed in all sectors in concepts such as graduate attributes, employability attributes, generic skills, and in higher education in particular, in debates over whether the graduate skills assessment test should be a requirement for higher education graduates.

We interviewed a senior and now retired higher education academic who has undertaken thousands of RPL assessments in his area of professional expertise for people wishing to migrate to Australia through the skilled migration program. He explained that a graduate from a degree should be expected to have a sense of their discipline as a body of knowledge. They should able to use the concepts from their discipline to problem-solve, theorise, identify underlying principles, and to be able to think abstractly. These capacities were (or should be) developed regardless of the discipline area in which they were acquired, although they were contextualised by, and expressed through, that discipline. They were a function of the *level* of qualification – what could or should be expected from a graduate from bachelor degree. For this reason he was generally not prepared to certify someone at the level of a degree in his area, unless they already had a degree, even if it was in a different area. If they had a degree in a different discipline to his area, they were still required to demonstrate their understanding of, and experience in, his discipline, and in many cases received significant RPL.

This view was not confined to bachelor degree levels. In another case we talked to a number of enterprise providers in one industry, and they explained that sometimes people who are 'RPLed' for a diploma or an advanced diploma, 'miss out' on the collegiate processes that lead to the development of leadership skills and qualities. While such individuals may have all the competencies included in the diploma or advanced diploma, they didn't have what was needed to bring it together as a coherent whole, expressed as a deeper understanding of the issues in their profession, and the breadth of vision required to lead others.

We asked interviewees and respondents to the web questionnaires what they thought about a whole qualification being awarded on the basis of RPL in their sector. Almost all of those we spoke to in higher education were opposed to this; they thought that students should be required to undertake some study towards the qualification at their institution. This would provide the institution with assurance that the student acquired the attributes of graduateness, and also that the student was one of 'their' graduates. It was explained that there is little point in a student being issued with a university qualification unless the university had contributed in some way to this result. The web survey indicated that half of the administrators from higher education who responded to our survey were opposed to awarding a full qualification in their sector based on RPL, whereas 24% thought it depended on the circumstances, and only 18% supported the idea. There was less support among higher education teaching staff (3%), while the number who thought it depended on the circumstances were higher (almost 40%). Attitudes in the VET sector were more ambivalent. Administrators were much likely to support awarded a whole qualification based on RPL (44%) than were VET teaching staff (22%), while many more teachers through it depended on their circumstances (43%) compared to administrators (29%). The numbers from the schools and ACE sectors are too small to draw any conclusions. It must be remembered that the numbers from all sectors are relatively small, and are not a statistically representative sample of the populations from which they are drawn. The web-surveys give us an idea of the views of respondents.

Table 21: Educational Administrators What is your attitude towards a whole qualification being awarded on the basis of an RPL application in your sector?

Sector	Support		Don't Support		Depends on Circumstances		Not Sure		Totals	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Schools	0	0.00	1	50.00	1	50.00	0	0.00	**2**	**100.00**
ACE	5	62.50	0	0.00	3	37.50	0	0.00	**8**	**100.00**
VET-TAFE, RTOs	30	44.12	12	17.65	20	29.41	6	8.82	**68**	**100.00**
HE- University	9	18.00	25	50.00	12	24.00	4	8.00	**50**	**100.00**
No sector provided	3	15.00	10	50.00	7	35.00	0	0.00	**20**	**100.00**
Totals	**47**	**31.76**	**48**	**32.43**	**43**	**29.05**	**10**	**6.76**	**148**	**100.00**

Source: RPL web survey for Educational Administrators Q.18

Table 22: Lecturers, Teachers & Trainers : If a student approached you to award a whole qualification on the basis of an RPL application, would you support this?

Sector	Support		Don't Support		Depends on Circumstances		Not Sure		Totals	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Schools	1	33.33	1	33.33	1	33.33	0	0.00	**3**	**100.00**
ACE	1	12.50	1	12.50	5	62.50	1	12.50	**8**	**100.00**
VET-TAFE, RTOs	28	21.54	35	26.92	56	43.08	11	8.46	**130**	**100.00**
HE- University	2	3.17	32	50.79	25	39.68	4	6.35	**63**	**100.00**
No sector provided	0	0.00	2	50.00	2	50.00	0	0.00	**4**	**100.00**
Totals	**32**	**15.38**	**71**	**34.13**	**89**	**42.79**	**16**	**7.69**	**208**	**100.00**

Source: RPL web survey for Lecturers, Teachers & Trainers Q. 20

These are difficult problems and there are no easy answers. However, we can begin to see a way through these issues if we consider the extent to which the learning outcomes reflect the aims of the qualification. It seems to us in the examples we used to introduce this section that

the learning outcomes for degrees and diplomas and advanced diplomas are not complete. Teaching, learning and assessment activities are addressing a broader range of learning outcomes or competencies than those formally contained within the qualification.

If the qualities of 'graduateness' are the outcomes sought, then these need to be made explicit. Students need to know the criteria they are required to meet. If there is a substantial 'hidden curriculum,' then it is difficult for students to second guess this, particularly if they have not had much experience in post-compulsory education and training. We would argue that this problem is not isolated to RPL: students from non-traditional backgrounds have lower pass rates in formal education and training programs than students who come from families with generations of experience in post-compulsory education and training (Dobson, Sharma and Ramsay, 1998; Teese, 2000; Watson, Kearns, Grant and Cameron, 2000; Wheelahan, 2001). The problems of 'cracking the code' in understanding the hidden curriculum are problems for students from disadvantaged backgrounds in all areas of post-compulsory education and training.

A similar point can be made concerning the way in which RPL is used as a mechanism for entry into a course when a student has not met the formal education and training prerequisites. If they are not performing as well as other students, or lack particular skills such as literacy, these skills need to be assessed in some way at the point of entry. The selection criteria need to be clearer and richer, and assessed in a range of ways. Of course, this is a very expensive way of conducting selection, and institutions often use experience as a proxy for learning outcomes in such circumstances. This may be a false economy in the long run: given the amount that is invested in each individual (and the amount they invest in themselves) in education and training, and high attrition rates, it may make more economic sense (and social and moral sense) to invest more in selection, to make sure that there is a 'good fit' between the student's learning needs and vocational and personal aspirations, and the course or qualification to which they are admitted (Pascoe, McClelland and McGaw, 1997; Wheelahan, 2001).

However, this issue or problem of 'graduateness' cannot be resolved with the simple statement that learning outcomes need to be made more explicit (although this is important). The process of learning is more complex than the definitive specification of learning outcomes, although clear and explicit learning outcomes are essential to high quality learning. The over-specification of learning outcomes with increasingly detailed explanations of what the learning outcomes consist of, the contexts of performance, and the assessment approaches that are to be used, can narrow the learning that takes place.

Young (2001: 9) asks if the focus on criterion-based outcomes in qualifications narrows the kind of learning needed for people to become lifelong learners, and to become the kind of workers needed in a rapidly changing society:

> "…it may … also be useful to explore evidence of the extent to which an over-emphasis on qualifications (and in particular, the tendency for this to lead to a greater emphasis on the assessment of outcomes) can unintentionally inhibit the on-going learning that is not geared to testing or assessment. If people are to become lifelong learners it is the learning that is not immediately tested or linked to qualifications that needs to be encouraged."

Young (2001: 9-10) argues that the focus on specific outcomes assumes that "the outcomes of learning are already known…" However, the pace and "unpredictability of technological development and the emergence of new markets" means that the outcomes cannot always be defined in such a way as to lend themselves to detailed, precise, and prescriptive statements. He cites research that shows that "new kinds of learning may need to be encouraged that cannot easily be predicted in advance and may not be readily assessable for qualifications." Further, that:

> "It may be that the balance between control and risk will need to shift, with less emphasis on assessing pre-defined outcomes and more on enabling learners to explore new possibilities that cannot be predefined. In other words, supporting learning may not be equated with a greater emphasis on qualifications, unless qualifications are themselves defined in new ways with less emphasis on prior specification of outcomes and more on learning processes and the judgements of different stakeholders."
>
> (Young, 2001: 10)

This is what is behind the anxiety about 'graduateness' and whether assessment of outcomes in RPL is able to capture the learning that goes on in formal education and training programs. The social contexts of learning seem to be left out of the equation. Do processes such as RPL allow for a situation in which:

> "…the skills for jobs are changing faster than ever [and] qualifications need to provide broad evidence of capabilities and potential; evidence that someone is able to demonstrate specific skills or knowledge will remain important but is likely, on its own, to be less and less 'vocationally' relevant."
>
> (Young, 2001: 10)

So where does this leave us? On the one hand we are saying that clear, explicit learning outcomes need to be defined so that students don't have to second guess the hidden curriculum, and on the other, we are arguing that the over-specification of learning objectives can, in some circumstances narrow the scope of learning. What sort of learning objectives do we need and where does RPL fit in this context? Biggs (1999: 42) summarises this dilemma when he asks:

> "But can complex learning be specified in advance to the degree required by curriculum objectives? Is it not like the drunk who only looks for his lost keys under the street light? That is, what is interesting and important is what you can't see, not what you can."

The model Biggs proposes is called *constructive alignment*. Learning is, he argues, about what the *student* does, not the teacher. The real learning objectives are those that the assessment assesses, not what is written in the curriculum statements, or what teachers have in their head. If the assessment does not assess the learning objectives, then there is a problem, because students will work to the assessment. The assessment needs to be aligned with the curriculum objectives, and this requires the clear specification of those objectives. But these need not be narrowly defined, atomised outcomes statements that give rise to a 'tick and flick' culture. Tick and flick arises from behavioural objectives that were:

> "…born from an exclusively quantitative conception of teaching and learning, which meant that when objectives were defined it was in quantitative terms, in units of knowledge, while the assessment process amounted to counting the number of items acceptably performed. Teaching meant 'teaching to the test'….The alignment was excellent, but what was aligned was a very narrow band of essentially low-level and fragmented activities."
>
> (Biggs, 1999: 42)

He argues that:

> "To make the objectives up-front and salient is not to exclude other desirable but unforeseen or unforeseeable outcomes. The most interesting research is that which yields the unintended and unforeseen. Thus, being clear about what we want in no way pre-empts us from welcoming unexpected outcomes from our students' learning. In fact, higher level activities are open-ended, as indicated by verbs like 'generalize', 'solve unseen problems', 'develop a theory to explain why…' Particular outcomes are here unspecified, it is only the process that is specified, and that allows for surprises in plenty. It is very important that our assessment procedures encourage students to surprise us – pleasantly, of course – and that our grading procedures are sufficiently flexible to allow us to give them credit when they do…"
>
> (Biggs, 1999: 42-43)

Developing open-ended learning outcomes that focus on the process of learning as well as the acquisition of particular skills, and then assessing against these outcomes, is one way of making sure that people who are RPLed for all or a large portion of a qualification have that 'something else' associated with graduateness.

But here again it is necessary to recognise the diversity of qualifications within and between sectors. Sometimes all that *is* necessary is straight skills acquisition in a particular area. A student who wants or needs to be certified for something just in time and just for now (like for example, their skills in using a particular software package) should not be required to demonstrate the 'something else' each and every time they seek certification. It depends on the objectives of the qualification, and the assessment should reflect these objectives.

We may also need to acknowledge that some occupations, skills, disciplines or areas of knowledge lend themselves more easily than others to RPL. Even within a qualification, there may be components where it is more appropriate to use RPL than others. If so, this should be made explicit. It could be that people achieve qualifications through a variety of modes of learning and assessment, including RPL, work-based or work-integrated assessment, and campus-based (in various modes – on-campus, off-campus, full-time, part-time etc). Arguably, a process of learning that leads to a qualification would be richer if all three of these contexts were necessary to achieve the qualification, rather than a learning pathway that was exclusively situated within one context or learning environment. We should not exclude the possibility however, that there are people who have that 'something else' associated with graduateness even if they do not have a formal qualification, and that mechanisms need to be in place to recognise that learning.

Case Study 19: The place of RPL in one learner's life

While Helen works in the VET sector, she teaches programs that are often regarded as ACE provision. In the early 1990s she needed to return to studies to assist her career opportunities, so she commenced studying for a Bachelor of Adult and Vocational Education. When she started work teaching ACE courses she needed to gain a Certificate IV in Workplace Training and Assessment. Her employer was prepared to assist her with the costs associated with acquiring this qualification. She started the RPL process by using assessment consultants to help her go through the compilation of evidence process, and was granted her Certificate IV entirely through RPL. At the same time as Helen was going through the RPL process she was also studying for her degree in adult and vocational education. She was able to use the Certificate IV to gain some credits in the degree, and was also able to use some of her degree work as evidence of prior learning in the Certificate IV.

Sometime later Helen also used RPL to gain a diploma in frontline management. She found the process of gaining her Diploma entirely through RPL an unsatisfying process, although the RTO was very diligent and thorough. The process was merely one of organising the evidence, and Helen felt at the end that her understanding of front line management was not enhanced, and nor was her ability to perform as a manager. She felt it necessary to work with a mentor at a later stage to help her be more effective in her management role.

As a result of her experiences with RPL, Helen has misgivings about the lack of learning that is sometimes the outcome of the RPL process, and thinks that it is not always in the interests of the learner to be granted full qualifications on the basis of past evidence, although granting substantial portions can be appropriate and desirable. In her role as a trainer, Helen encourages students to use RPL to gain credit for units but encourages some parts of the certificate/diploma be taken as a learning process. This provides the opportunity for peer interaction, building the learner's self confidence and ensures that the learner is involved in current curriculum.

The extent to which RPL should be a learning process in itself or only a process of credentialling depends on the objectives of the qualification. See chapter 2 "What is RPL and why isn't there more of it" for a discussion of the differences between the developmental and credentialling models of RPL.

7.2 Problems with learning or competency outcomes

In the previous section we looked at circumstances where the learning or competency outcomes may be appropriate, but they may not reflect the hidden curriculum embedded in the qualification. This problem is different. The learning outcomes or competencies themselves are deficient, and teachers try to accommodate this in the formal learning activities they organise and the way they assess. They do this because they are committed to ensuring students are engaged in high quality learning and achieve high quality outcomes. Therefore, they have 'control' over what happens in formal education and training programs, and this is a form of quality control that is absent from RPL processes.

Even though the sectors have in place processes to ensure the quality and integrity of learning or competency outcomes in qualifications it is possible that learning outcomes or competencies are developed from time to time, which do not reflect the full range of skills and underpinning knowledge required. There is no simple way around this. When this occurs, the learning or competency outcomes need to be challenged through course or qualification review processes. If academics, teachers, trainers or assessors think there is a problem with the learning or competency outcomes, they need to say so. Of course, this is easy to say, and not so easy to do, but our professional obligations require us to do so.

All sectors have quality assurance processes that are required to evaluate courses and qualifications. In theory, this is easier to do in higher education, as universities are self-

accrediting institutions and changes only have to be implemented within the institution. In practice, it is not always so simple. Many higher education courses or qualifications are subject to external accreditation by professional bodies, and this accreditation is required as a condition for certifying the right of graduates to practice in their profession. In addition, the processes in higher education can be as cumbersome and difficult to negotiate as in the other sectors, and the established interests as intransigent.

In VET, ACE and schools the learning or competency outcomes are decided by external accreditation processes, and it may be more difficult in these instances to achieve change, as sign-off by multiple stakeholders is required before change can be implemented. There is considerable distance between VET practitioners and the processes used to review training packages, and some may feel that there is not much scope for them have input. Strategies need to be implemented to facilitate the contribution of VET practitioners, to processes of review.

It essential that learning or competency outcomes are evaluated to the same extent as are program delivery and assessment. These outcomes are a quality assurance issue and have an impact on the end result. The implications of inadequate learning or competency outcomes are wider than just RPL, and result in variable outcomes within institutions, states, and sectors and between sectors. In this instance, ensuring that there are adequate course and qualification evaluation processes, and that these evaluation processes are themselves subject to quality assurance processes is the best way to ensure that RPL outcomes are comparable to outcomes achieved as a consequence of undergoing formal education and training.

7.3   Teacher and/or institutional hostility to RPL

The converse of the above is that sometimes institutions, or teaching staff within institutions, are hostile to RPL, because they believe that unless students have undertaken a formal program of learning, and been assessed at the end of it, that they have not 'really' learnt what they need to.

We heard stories from teachers that colleagues actively opposed RPL, and discouraged students they spoke to from pursuing it. Students who pursued RPL, particularly those who pursued a whole qualification through RPL, were often regarded with suspicion. Sometimes this is because of concerns about graduateness, but can be for reasons such as believing that such students are trying to 'get' something they are not entitled to, particularly a qualification 'on the cheap'. This is similar to concerns about 'double-dipping' – the view that students should not be able to use the same process (for example, an essay) to meet the assessment requirements of a number of subjects or modules. These concerns usually derive from a notion of the amount of 'effort' students are required to put in, and that this should be comparable to other students – anything less is regarded as inequitable. An alternative approach focuses on the extent to which students have met the learning outcomes, regardless of the effort they put in terms of participation in formal education and training. Some students learn faster than others, some have more experience to build on, and some achieve higher standards than others. This is often associated with the extent of effort expended, but is not always, and fears about getting a qualification on the cheap does not take account of the learning that went before participation in formal education and training.

Case Study 20: One learner's experience with using RPL to gain a whole qualification

Hazel had worked in a private, but not-for- profit institution in the human services sector for 15 years. She had established one provider, had organised and managed the recurrent funding (hundreds of thousands of dollars annually) as well as the initial set-up funding, and had managed the process that led to the provider's compliance with the government's accreditation guidelines and the regular auditing processes against those guidelines. This was in addition to being a key part of the day-to-day workforce of the provider. She had no qualification.

She decided that she needed to obtain a qualification, and decided to embark on RPL to obtain a diploma in her area. Hazel developed and submitted a portfolio of evidence against all the competencies at the diploma level in the relevant training package and submitted it to the local TAFE. After weeks of hearing no response Hazel contacted the local TAFE to find out what was happening. She was told that the institution had sent her application to an external assessor, as they had never been asked to assess an RPL application for a whole qualification in this area before.

She could not get feedback on the sort of evidence they required to prove her competency. She pointed out that the process was meant to be collaborative, and not one of second-guessing what was required, but she didn't want to be too assertive for fear of jeopardising her application. In the total absence of collaboration the TAFE institute found her competent in half the competencies for which she applied. She eventually went to a second TAFE institute where she was able to work with the assessor to determine the sort of evidence that was needed.

The process was extremely drawn out. It took approximately a year for it to be complete, and for Hazel to be awarded her diploma, but not before she was required to demonstrate competency for lower level competencies that were pre-requisites for higher level competencies – competencies in which she had already been found competent. Hazel did have to enrol in a couple of modules in the end, and had no problems with this, just with the amount of time it took for her application to be assessed and for this advice to be provided to her. She felt that many students would be discouraged from pursuing an RPL claim, and that it was only because she had had so many years working in the human services field that she had the skills to navigate the difficult, bureaucratic process. She felt that the TAFE institute did not want to give her the qualification, and that she had to work harder to prove she had met the competency outcomes than would students who had actually enrolled in the diploma.

Teachers can exert considerable power: they are usually the ones who assess students and as such can play the role of 'gate-keeper', believing that only those who participate in formal education and training should have the right to enter. It is too complex to explore all reasons why teachers may feel this way, and there could be many factors contributing to this outcome, some of which include hostility to change, a response to lack of support, and particular and settled notions about teaching and learning. Sometimes teaching staff can become so enculturated in their own institutional framework that they identify learning with participation in that framework. This does not apply to all teachers – only to some teachers (and institutions) and this may change from time to time. It would be directly counter to the philosophy driving our project team to try and generalise this observation to all or the majority of teaching staff: too often teachers are blamed for a failure of policy or for outcomes that do not match the policy objectives, and we have no desire to add to that chorus. RPL, like other good policy intentions, will not work without the support of teaching staff.

The problems we have discussed in this section are not unique to RPL – they relate to all processes of social and cultural change within institutions, and similar mechanisms need to be put in place to bring along those who feel uncomfortable with change. Strategies based on forced compliance are only likely to make the problem worse. The best method of persuasion is through implementation of good practice models that lead to demonstrably improved outcomes for students and the institution. This 'problem' would be considerably helped if

RPL outcomes and assessments were explicitly included in quality assurance arrangements, and subject to review.

7.4   Competing cultures and different expectations

This section examines the different expectations of RPL held by employers, teaching staff, and education and training institutions. The discussion focuses on the culture of the workplace and the culture of the RTO in the VET sector. This has been done to illustrate the issues, however, the issues that we raise are relevant to others sectors of post-compulsory education and training in which institutions work with enterprises in delivering training and continuing professional development.

Groups of stakeholders have different expectations of RPL because RPL, as with all education and training, serves different purposes. This gives rise to diverse cultures. Employers want graduates who are work ready, skilled and have the attributes that can contribute to the enterprise. Educators share this view, but often see education and training as a broader process that is concerned with the development of students and helping students to understand their world and their place in it. This includes, but is not limited to, understanding the workplace. Students have diverse expectations, because their goals and aspirations are diverse, and while the overwhelming majority hope their post-compulsory education and training will lead to employment or improved employment, this does not mean they want a narrow educational experience. That is, while the *act* of studying may be vocational, students often study in areas where they have an interest, which is not purely vocational (Marks, 2002). Sometimes students do just want to be credentialled, and their approach is instrumental and focussed. It depends on the course, the qualification, and what they hope to get out of it.

RPL sometimes gets caught in the middle of the differing expectations and cultures. This is related to the discussion we had in chapter 2, where we examined the different models of RPL (the developmental and credentialling models) and their different philosophical premises (humanist and human capital approaches).

Problems arise when employers want the credentialling model of RPL, and educators want the developmental model for the same course and group of students. This is particularly relevant in workplaces where it is necessary for staff to become credentialled as a consequence of government accreditation requirements for providers in particular industries. The human services industry is a particularly good example of where these dilemmas may arise. Many states and territories now require providers in aged care services or children's services to have qualified staff, yet these are industries where there are large numbers of unqualified staff. Employer expectations may clash with teacher expectations about the quantum of RPL that can and should be awarded. Staff teaching students who will work or do work in the human services industry, focus on the development of the whole person, and often try to develop in students a critical and reflective approach to practices in their industry. This isn't necessarily in conflict with employer expectations, but when the agency is under pressure to pay a lot for training, needs to have staff off the job for as little time as possible, and needs them credentialled as quickly as possible, conflicts sometimes arise.

This cultural clash becomes further compounded where the employer is purchasing training and RPL assessment services from the RTO. The awarding of a contract can hinge on the

extent to which expectations about the quantum of RPL and quantum of necessary training are shared between the employer and the RTO. Teaching staff are under pressure, because they have conflicting views about who 'the client' is: it may be funded by employers, but teachers regard students as their clients. Sometimes teaching staff perceive a conflict between themselves and management of the RTO. Management and teachers may have different expectations of how much RPL is reasonable, and how much training is required. This is a subset of a larger argument between management and staff in almost all education and training institutions, over the level of resources devoted to teaching. The employers think that they are the clients, as they are paying for a service. While employers may be very sympathetic to the benefits that will ensue for their agency if their staff engage in rich educational experiences, the realities of funding agreements or maintaining a financially viable service pose a different set of imperatives.

This is an extreme picture, and it certainly does not characterise all workplaces where training is being conducted. This picture has been developed to illustrate the conflicts that sometimes arise, and to explain why they do. There are no simple answers. In part these cultures derive from prevailing national policy frameworks in post-compulsory education and training, and from employer expectations about their own role in education and training, and the extent to which they see it as their responsibility to invest in, and foster a teaching and learning culture within workplaces.

These are discussions which must take place in the education and training policy community at all levels in Australia. These discussions need to occur at the micro level, between individual providers and individual enterprises. It is only through building and sustaining strong partnerships between providers and enterprises that these issues will begin to be addressed.

7.5   RPL assessments are too subjective and variable

One of the perceived barriers with RPL is that RPL assessments sometimes are seen to be too subjective and variable. One teacher/academic explained that there is:

> "Significant variation in interpretation of eligibility by different assessors and even by the same assessor for different student - the process is highly subjective."

However, a TAFE teacher in a comment in their questionnaire response said that:

> "It seems more than possible that students will get RPL credits when they shouldn't. However, it is equally possible that traditional students will gain a pass when they shouldn't."

This captures the problem: it is one of assessment, and not specifically RPL. Assessment serves two broad roles:

- formative assessment, which provides students with feedback on their learning, and is part of the learning process;
- summative assessment, which is used to certify that students *have* met the learning or competency outcomes.
  > (Nightingale, Te Wiata, Toohey, Ryan, Hughes and Magin, 1996; Biggs, 1999)

All assessment, including RPL assessment, is a process of gathering evidence to provide students with feedback, or certify the end result. The processes used to collect evidence, and the evidence itself, needs to be aligned with the purpose of the assessment. The DETYA Recognition Resource (DETYA, 2001) explains that assessment needs to meet the established rules of evidence in that it must be:

- valid (the evidence can be validly used to make a judgement about the learning or competency outcome being assessed);
- current (the evidence should demonstrate that the student is currently able to meet the requirements of the learning or competency outcome, where this is appropriate);
- sufficient (the evidence should be sufficient to make a valid judgement about the learning or competency outcome being assessed);
- reliable (the approach used in the assessment process is likely to result in the same or similar outcome, if implemented again); and
- authentic (the evidence used to make judgements is authentic, and that processes used are able to ascertain authenticity).

If there is a problem in consistency of RPL decisions, it is problem inherent in the assessment process, and not in RPL. Ensuring consistency in RPL outcomes requires the same processes as it does in any other area – moderation between assessors, validation and verification of outcomes, evaluation of assessment processes, and so on. Explicitly including RPL assessment in the moderation, evaluation and quality assurance processes used to ensure the integrity and quality of all assessment within the qualification or course will help to resolve these issues.

7.6 'We' don't know what 'they' are doing

Many of our interviewees and respondents to the web-based questionnaires cited lack of understanding of what was happening in other sectors as a problem. Another problem was the differences between the sectors in approaches to curriculum and assessment. This is not strictly an issue to do with RPL, because once an RPL decision has been made and a student certified with the outcome, any subsequent credit based on the qualification derived in part or fully from RPL is a credit transfer issue. That is, the decision to award access to, or credit in, a subsequent course based on an initial qualification (however that was achieved) is a credit transfer issue, or it should be. In practice it is not so simple. It affects the extent to which staff in one sector feel comfortable about providing credit for qualifications awarded in another sector.

Many higher education interviewees said that they didn't understand the VET sector and training packages, couldn't work out the academic transcripts or statements of attainment, didn't understand what the competencies meant, and weren't sure how an initial TAFE qualification mapped to theirs.

This was expressed most clearly when we asked interviewees and those who completed the website questionnaire, how they felt about awarding credit transfer for a qualification awarded in another sector which was largely based on an RPL assessment. A large number of respondents said they would be happy with that, provided they had a credit transfer agreements in place with the initial institution and were satisfied with the quality assurance and assessment processes used by that institution. This question also provoked range of written responses on the website. Many respondents said they would need to have confidence in the quality assurance and assessment processes in the other sector.

These views were not just confined to higher education staff, they also describe many of the comments made by:
- TAFE staff about RPL assessments in other VET providers (particularly private providers), and RPL assessments in VET in schools and in the ACE sector;
- comments by VET staff about the relevance of higher education studies, and their preference that higher education students go through RPL processes, even if they have undertaken formal study in higher education in the same area, to make sure that the students were competent. As one TAFE teacher said: "University courses are often so academic that graduates have few practical skills suitable for the real world workplace;" and,
- ACE staff about RPL assessments in other sectors or in other providers.

This issue is, to a large extent, about sectoral relations, and not just RPL assessments. It is important we understand this, because the attitudes of staff will determine the outcomes, regardless of what the policy frameworks say. If policy frameworks say that this or that should happen, and staff think there is big problem with it happening, it won't happen.

There are many reasons why the sectoral boundaries are reflected in anxiety about quality assurance, assessment and outcomes of another sector, and it is beyond the scope of this report to canvass these. However, research on cross-sectoral relations has shown that many of these problems can be addressed if staff from the sectors get to know each other, establish collaborative arrangements, and participate in collaborative developmental activities (Sommerlad *et al.*, 1998; Carnegie, 2000; Schoemaker *et al.*, 2000; Wheelahan, 2000; Watson, Wheelahan and Chapman, 2001). This can be achieved through establishing credit transfer and articulation arrangements, but usually also requires institutional leadership and commitment within institutions, centres and providers in each sector.

The development of national common RPL principles and operational guidelines for all sectors of post-compulsory education and training may contribute to the development of a shared language and shared practices concerning RPL. This may increase understanding about what RPL is and how it is implemented, thereby contributing to greater cross-sectoral confidence in RPL outcomes.

It was suggested to us that it would be helpful if institutions and providers were to explicitly include RPL as a component of credit transfer and articulation agreements. This would allow issues and concerns to do with RPL to be aired, and increase confidence in RPL outcomes.

Case Study 21: Queensland Police Service Management Development Program

The following case study was provided to us by Dr Bryan Humphrey, Manager, Education and Training Support Program, Queensland Police Service

The Queensland Police Service established its Management Development Program in 1996-97 as a post-graduate level program of six core units and one bridging unit (Foundation Studies). The program is designed at three levels to prepare sergeants, senior sergeants and inspectors. Each level has a management unit and an operational law unit. Completion of relevant units at each level is a prerequisite for promotion.

The Management Development Program (MDP) developed Recognition of Prior Learning policies and processes to take account of the fact that many officers who may wish to gain promotion had previously completed relevant tertiary study or were currently undergoing study in relevant courses. MDP staff evaluated particular courses (undergraduate and post graduate) and built up a precedent register that was a part of the QPS Bulletin Board and MDP intranet website. In some cases applicants used relevant work experience as part of their RPL applications.

The Queensland Police Service was keen to offer MDP students a pathway into other qualifications as well as considering whether to use the MDP as a pathway to offer higher education qualifications to gain external recognition for the student achievements. A decision was made to seek advanced standing agreements with higher education providers.

Negotiations were conducted successfully with five universities over a four year period. The universities included Southern Cross, Southern Queensland, Charles Sturt, Central Queensland and QUT. The degrees varied in the five universities but were mainly in the area of Master of Business Administration, Master of Public Administration, Master of Business etc. The Queensland Police Service offered preferred provider status to those higher education institutions that recognised all units and that also recognised the RPL decisions made by the Queensland Police Service.

The process included a discussion on content, range of readings, level of assessment, specific samples of assessment, staff qualifications and policies and procedures, including RPL. In each case, following a general discussion, materials were sent to the higher education provider that enabled the HE provider to make a judgement in each area. In some cases the reviewers commented that the Queensland Police Service procedures exceeded their own and in the five cases the negotiations were concluded successfully with each becoming a preferred provider and advanced standing agreements in place with the Queensland Police Service.

The complexities of the VET sector were cited as a barrier to RPL from staff within the VET sector, particularly by staff from private providers and enterprise providers. Compliance with the AQTF was seen as an onerous burden, although it was understood that the AQTF had contributed to raising the standard of provision and ensuring consistency in outcomes. It was felt that a balance needed to be struck between the record keeping and processes required for audit against AQTF standards, and the need for cost-effective, flexible processes that were easily accessible.

Case Study 22: A private provider rethinks their RTO status

We interviewed a senior staff member of a well regarded private VET organisation, which works mostly with large companies in providing frontline management training, interpersonal skills development and workplace training and assessment courses at Certificate IV level. Recent changes to the assessment and audit processes flowing from the introduction of the AQTF have led to significant changes in the level of reporting, and record keeping required. The RTO is finding that the costs associated with assessment procedures are as high as the cost of providing the training.

The companies with whom the RTO work are not very interested in their staff receiving a national credential – their interest is in the skills and behavioural changes that the training program will produce. The experience of this RTO is that the companies they work with recognise the training their staff undergo in the courses they fund, regardless of formal accreditation associated with it (unless it is necessary for workers to be credentialled to meet industry accreditation requirements).

This situation is leading the RTO to develop targeted training programs in conjunction with companies and not using specific nationally recognised training packages, although the quality is as high and the competencies gained by participants are similar. The RTO is finding increasing interest from companies in using on-the-job, on-site and some off-site specific skill development courses, and this approach does not easily fit the nationally accredited training packages. Processes associated with customisation of competencies or qualifications from training packages or accreditation of courses not based on training packages require an investment of time and resources. This trend is pronounced enough for this RTO to consider not renewing their RTO status as the administrative cost of maintaining this status for the few times the RTO now delivers training based on national packages is becoming less viable. If this is typical of other private providers, the situation will lead to the need for a more visible and useable RPL/RCC system as many workers will be undertaking high quality but non-accredited training that is not obviously transportable.

7.7   'There are some dodgy practices out there'

This was raised in our interviews and through the web questionnaires. This was not just one sector raising concerns about another or public providers raising concerns about private providers (or the reverse), it was raised by practitioners who were worried about the authenticity of the evidence supplied by students who knew how to effectively 'work the system,' and the difficulties and time involved in establishing authenticity.

There is no doubt that there are some dodgy practices in all sectors. However, all sectors have increased their focus on quality assurance policies, procedures and processes, and this is (and will) reducing the scope for unacceptable practices. A group of TAFE teachers also explained to us that providers who 'give away qualifications' won't last in the long run, because their qualifications will become known as worthless in the industry. They said that rigour in assessment is necessary to sustain public confidence in the qualifications issued, particularly in the industry they were designed to serve.

This is not simply an assertion that things will get better. The focus on quality assurance in all sectors of post-compulsory education and training means that considerable attention is paid to ensuring unacceptable practices cannot continue, and where necessary, processes are put in place to limit these practices. An example of this is the way in which unscrupulous providers of English language courses in Australia have been largely eliminated, thanks to the steps taken by government and the industry to put in place processes that ensure only genuine practices and genuine providers can operate.

The AQTF was implemented to ensure the quality of provision in the VET sector, and the confidence of stakeholders in VET outcomes. The AQTF directly audits providers against a range of standards and asks for evidence that these standards have been met. The Australian Universities Quality Agency audits all universities and state and territory government higher education authorities. The focus of the AUQA is on the quality assurance *processes* that institutions use, and the extent to which they can make the claims that they make. While these measures do not guarantee the complete elimination of unacceptable practices, they make the cost of indulging in such practices much higher, and the consequences for doing so more severe.

7.8   Sectoral quality assurance frameworks

The quality assurance frameworks used in each of the sectors are different. As discussed in the preceding section, higher education institutions are subject to the Australian Universities Quality Agency, while VET and most ACE provision is subject to the Australian Quality Training Framework. VET provision in schools is subject to the AQTF, while other provision is subject to the normal processes used ensure the standards of the senior school certificates.

7.3.1 Higher education

As discussed in the chapter 5, the extent to which universities have formal RPL policy frameworks is varied, ranging from statements that said that it *might* be possible to use RPL for access or credit, to fully elaborated policies like that of the University of Canberra.[30] While the university policies stated that maintaining the integrity and quality of the university's awards and the university's standing were important principles of the policy, they did not elaborate the quality assurance mechanisms that would be used to ensure these outcomes.

All of the higher education staff we interviewed either said there was no specific quality assurance policy relating to RPL, or they didn't know if there was one or not. It can be argued that the same quality assurance mechanisms that the university uses to assure the integrity of assessment and academic standards can also apply to RPL. However, given the level of RPL in universities it is doubtful whether RPL is explicitly incorporated in quality assurance reviews. This is more of an issue for post-graduate courses than undergraduate courses, as there is currently more RPL in the former than the latter.

At present University quality assurance processes are monitored by the Australian Universities Quality Agency. Private providers are not directly audited by AUQA for their quality assurance processes, rather the state and territory jurisdictions that accredit these providers and courses are audited. As RPL and credit transfer become more widespread in tertiary education, this may be an issue that the state and territory jurisdictions need to explicitly consider.

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[30] See Chapter 5: RPL policy frameworks and practice in the sectors

7.3.2 VET

The Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) is used to ensure quality of provision in the VET sector, and in accredited VET or further education provision in other sectors (schools and ACE). The AQTF consists of the following12 standards, which providers are audited against:

1. Systems for quality training and assessment
2. Compliance with Commonwealth, State/Territory legislation and regulatory requirements
3. Effective financial management procedures
4. Effective administrative and records management procedures
5. Recognition of qualifications issued by other RTOs
6. Access and equity and client service
7. The competence of RTO staff
8. RTO assessments
9. Learning and assessment strategies
10. Issuing AQF qualifications and Statements of Attainment
11. Use of national and State/Territory logos
12. Ethical marketing and advertising

RPL assessments are to be moderated, evaluated and subject to quality assurance processes in the same way as are other assessments. Providers will be audited and required to provide information about the basis upon which assessments were made, the nature of the evidence that was used, and so on. Our discussions with providers, particularly private and enterprise providers, as well as other stakeholders, have emphasised that the AQTF has and is contributing to ensuring confidence in the system, and the standard of outcomes (while recognising that there needs to be a balance between this and the demands placed upon providers, as discussed in an earlier section of this chapter).

However, this may not convey much information to higher education about *what* was assessed, the extent to which such assessments included assessment of underpinning knowledge, and how this relates holistically to developing an understanding of a body of knowledge. This is a problem that RPL shares in common with credit transfer. As discussed earlier, the only way it can be resolved is if RPL is included in credit transfer and articulation arrangements between institutions. Ultimately, it is a matter of trust and confidence – trust and confidence in the staff who assess, in the rigour of the assessment process, and the quality of the learning process. These are issues which need to be made explicit in credit transfer and articulation arrangements. They are more likely to occur, when staff work together professionally.

Case Study 23: Case study: the approach to quality in the Army

This case study was provided to us by Ken Jorgensen, Director, Training Systems Policy, Defence Education and Training Policy Branch

The Department of Defence has 17,000 civilian staff. The Department, through its enterprise Quality Endorsed Training Organisation (QETO), is committed to the proper implementation of the National Training Framework within its vocational education and training. The QETO operates across Australia, against 31 qualifications from three national Training Packages and 17 qualifications for 'accredited courses'. It has over 800 qualified assessors (all volunteers) registered with it who between them provide assessment services to over 200 sites. These assessors are organised into regions, with each region having an assessor coordinator. The assessment coordinators have been formed into a network, with a central organisation established to provide them with support and assistance. The major issue for the QETO, therefore, is one of quality assurance and quality control.

Quality assurance is enhanced through several measures. Assessors are all trained externally to the QETO, by approved, long established, credible providers such as the University of Technology or the Kangan Institute. This pathway has been taken to enhance the perceived 'credibility' of the assessors.

On registration with the QETO, each assessor receives a verbal briefing and copy of the QETO's codes of practice, assessment policy, procedures and processes contained within an Assessment Kit, centrally developed assessment guidance (at the unit level, as appropriate to their likely assessment activity), a unique identifier (and stamp) which has an inbuilt coding system to assist in the verification of assessor identity, access to a centrally produced newsletter, website and helpline, and access to 'professional development days' conducted by both their local assessment network (varies from quarterly to half yearly) and the central assessment policy area (annually). To complete registration they are required to sign and return a letter confirming that they have been briefed, received their materials and agree to assess on behalf of the QETO in accordance with its codes and practices.

Policy is for assessments to be conducted by a panel, with all members qualified assessors and subject matter experts. However, as this is only rarely possible the qualified assessor convening the panel is required to enlist the support of appropriate subject matter experts for the panel.

Members of the assessment panel are issued with and briefed on the QETO's "Code of Practice for Assessment Panels", which includes specific advice on steps to be taken if a member feels in any way the assessment process is less than it should be. All assessments are filed with the central recording body for recording and issue of appropriate Statement of Attainment and or qualification. This central body conducts appropriate quality control, especially with respect to the membership of the panel, the methodologies employed, sufficiency of evidence and the verification of evidence gathered. Processes have been developed for the conduct of 'assessment audits' randomly across assessment activity by the QETO.

All potential candidates for assessment receive a copy of, and are formerly briefed on the QETO's "Code of Practice for Assessment" that details not only their rights and responsibilities and the responsibilities of the Assessment Panel, but also processes to be followed if for any reason they have concerns about any aspect of the assessment process.

As each assessor is not conducting a large number of assessments, particular attention has been paid to the development of the QETO's Assessment Kit so that it provides sound, detailed, but easily understood and accessible support to the assessment panel not only on process, but also on policy and procedures. This Kit is now in version four. It has twice received National Recognition for its content, detail, structure, and most importantly, utility and usability for assessors and members of assessment panels. These latter qualities have been achieved through three comprehensive indexing systems: one based on content by subject matter heading, another based on the processes, and the third based on the responsibilities of each person within the process.

The Kit places particular attention on the implementation of the Codes of Practice and the utilisation of a range of appropriate assessment methodologies (12 are detailed in the Kit). It provides detail on the compilation and completion of the assessment plan for each assessment and the legal responsibilities of assessors and subject matter experts. There is guidance on issues such as: the legal responsibilities of assessors and subject matter experts, inappropriate behaviour by candidates (cheating), the nature of acceptable evidence, the verification of evidence, sufficiency of evidence, recency of evidence, and the technical aspects of evidence gathering. Each

area addressed is done so on a new page so that content can be readily photocopied and compiled to meet individual or particular needs.

The whole assessment system of the QETO is completely 'open'. Copies of the Kit and Assessment Guidance have been placed within all Defence libraries and on a central website.

While not perfect, the QETO believes that the measures it has implemented do contribute to its intent of making its "assessment procedures and judgements open, understandable and defensible to all".

7.9   Conclusion

This chapter canvassed issues associated with ensuring the quality and rigour of RPL outcomes. The main anxiety is: "are assessment outcomes equal to outcomes achieved by students who have completed the formal course and assessment, and how do you know?" This problem was broken down and examined through exploring the following issues:

- the problem of defining 'graduateness';
- competencies or learning outcomes that are inappropriate or inadequate;
- hostility to RPL by teaching staff and/or institutions;
- different expectations arising from different cultures of enterprises and education and training institutions.
- variable and subjective RPL assessments;
- one sector not knowing what the other is doing or how they do it;
- inappropriate or inadequate or 'dodgy' practices
- existing sectoral quality assurance frameworks and how they may be improved.

There is no simple answer to the problem of quality. It requires a suite of strategies and approaches, and clear identification of what the problems may be. Often the problem is not RPL as such, it is:

- the appropriateness or otherwise of RPL for particular areas;
- the extent to which learning or competency outcomes reflect the 'hidden curriculum' embedded in qualifications;
- hostility to change and unwillingness to consider new approaches to teaching and learning;
- the different outcomes sought by diverse groups of stakeholders in education and training;
- assessment practices in general;
- sectoral relations; or,
- difficulties in complying with onerous requirements.

Each of these require a different response, but taken together will do much to improve the confidence in RPL outcomes.

However, it is clear that quality assurance processes surrounding RPL need to be made more explicit. This does not mean that they have to be distinguished from other quality assurance frameworks, only explicitly included among them, particularly those relating to assessment. It is important that the quality assurance mechanisms and assessment processes relating to RPL

are not *more* rigorous than other mechanisms and processes, but they do need to be explicit and transparent, and decisions need to be accountable.

8 Partnerships with indigenous communities

> This chapter considers issues associated with the relatively low use of RPL by people from Indigenous communities, and examines the nature of the partnerships that are needed to make RPL more accessible to, and inclusive of, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

One of the key drivers for RPL was its perceived capacity to recognise the learning of those who have not had the opportunity to participate in post-compulsory education and training or who are from disadvantaged backgrounds. This has not happened to the extent envisaged by policy objectives: the beneficiaries of RPL are more likely to be from relatively advantaged social backgrounds. RPL and credit transfer are regarded as two key issues for Indigenous education, as was made clear by the submission to the Nelson enquiry into higher education by the Australian Indigenous Training Council (Andersen, 2002). However, Indigenous communities in particular are under-represented in post-compulsory education and training, and once in education and training, are less likely to be granted credit through RPL.[31]

Much of the literature suggests that one of the reasons this may be the case is that those from disadvantaged backgrounds (not just Indigenous communities) may not have had the same opportunity to acquire the skills and knowledge which would qualify them for credit through RPL. Another possible interpretation is that:

- the academic and educational discourses are not sufficiently inclusive, and that existing processes exclude different ways of understanding the world, and different contexts in which knowledge, skills and competencies are expressed;
- the learning outcomes, competencies and qualifications that currently exist may be too narrow to accurately reflect the needs and aspirations of disadvantaged communities; and,
- knowing about, and successfully applying for, RPL requires an understanding about the structure of qualifications and the language used in education, which presupposes experience in the system, so disadvantaged communities are caught in a Catch 22 situation.

The responsibilities of, and challenges for, education and training systems are to:

- provide Indigenous communities with the 'passport' they need to participate in, and help shape, the broader society of which they are a part, and to benefit equally from participation in social and economic processes and outcomes. This means that there can be no acceptance of lower levels of access and participation in education and training by Indigenous communities, or outcomes that do not equate to other social groups;
- be inclusive, and accommodate diverse Indigenous communities, and to see them as partners in, as well as beneficiaries of, the education and training system
- provide choices for Indigenous communities and Indigenous individuals in terms of the range and type of courses that are available, accessible and inclusive. This means that Indigenous people should be able to access courses that are designed to train

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[31] See chapter 4: Who receives RPL

workers to work with their own communities, and courses that allow graduates to obtain work outside their communities. It is not possible to develop a single blue print to address the issues of Indigenous disadvantage in post-compulsory education and training, and in RPL. The different Peoples in different parts of Australia have diverse needs and aspirations. People living in remote Australia may have different goals and learning requirements compared to Indigenous people in urban Australia. However, as with all disadvantaged groups, additional resources may be required to allow participants develop skills to participate in post-compulsory education and training. This needs to be part of a suite of strategies designed to provide support and maximise choice. ANTA and ATSIC have recently embarked on a major project to trial and develop assessment models for VET courses and qualifications suitable for remote communities. This project is nearing completion, and its insights will be valuable for all sectors of post-compulsory education and training, not just VET.

These challenges for post-compulsory education and training systems are expressed clearly in RPL, which is the assessment of learning, skills and competencies acquired through life and work experience. In theory, RPL *should* be able to bring new ways of understanding and demonstrating competency into education and training. However, RPL has failed to provide opportunities for Indigenous discourses to be accepted into, become part of, and contribute to shaping, education and training in Australia. The Canadians pose the problem in this way: "We must be careful that we do not fall into the trap of using PLA [RPL] to legitimize knowledge and skills that reassembles the academic norm and which extends the academy's traditional gate-keeping function of barring alternative cultures of knowledge and calibrates the legitimacy of students' knowledge according to sameness and correspondence" (Barker, 2001: 7);

We learned from our interviews at Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education that this situation will not be addressed except through entering into partnership with Indigenous communities. This requires validating Indigenous discourses, and providing a framework for the engagement of these discourses with academic and education discourses, which can contribute to shaping new knowledge in which all Australians will benefit. Such partnerships must be respectful of existing community structures, Indigenous languages and culture. Educators must be 'prepared to sit on the ground with people', be aware of cultural etiquette and aware of issues such as women's business and men's business, and ensure that the assessment approaches are culturally appropriate for that community.

This does not mean that the standards against which assessments are conducted should be less rigorous; rather it means that the standards being assessed should in fact be those standards, and not the extent to which someone is able to reproduce mainstream discourse. It means recognising that there are many ways in which people can provide evidence that they have met the required standards. This is related to the processes that we put in place to help students to 'translate' their life and work experience into the framework required to demonstrate they have met the competency and learning outcomes in qualifications. Institutions need to undertake this process of translation on behalf of students, and/or support needs to be provided to students so they can undertake this process themselves.[32]

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[32] See chapter 2: What is RPL and why isn't there more of it?

**Case Study 24: Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education
Certificate IV/Diploma of Business (Community Management)**

Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education offers programs from certificate to degree level. Staff teaching the Certificate IV/Diploma of Business (Community Management) aim to draw on existing Community structures and roles for evidence that participants have met the competency outcomes. In one case, an Elder in the Community who is both a Ceremonial Man and a Community Liaison Man, will be credited for his skills in conflict resolution. Women will be able to use their skills in managing services such as meals on wheels and homehelp against competencies that deal with communication, conflict resolution and organisational skills.

Conclusion

This chapter has considered the reasons why RPL has failed to act as a mechanism for social inclusion for Indigenous communities. It considered the way in which Indigenous people and Indigenous discourses are not sufficiently included into the way in which learning outcomes are constructed and assessed. Partnerships between providers and jurisdictions with Indigenous communities are needed, ones that use culturally appropriate RPL assessment processes that allow individuals to demonstrate that they have met the required learning or competency outcomes, while providing students with support to learn the skills of participating in post-compulsory education and training.

9   RPL as teaching practice

This chapter considers how RPL is integrated into teaching practices in ways that cannot be included in formal reporting requirements. Two key factors are identified: the difficulties associated with formal RPL processes; and, RPL principles as reflected in flexible learning approaches. It considers how RPL can be conceptualised as a *teaching practice.* When examined as a teaching practice, RPL is implemented in similar ways by teaching staff in all sectors of post-compulsory education and training.

The formal reporting of RPL does not capture the extent to which RPL is implemented in all sectors of post-compulsory education and training, and maybe it never will. We make this statement based on the literature (Wilson and Lilly, 1996; Gibson, 1997; Smith, 1997; Bateman and Knight, 2002), the interviews we conducted with teaching staff in all sectors, and from information provided by staff from the questionnaires on the website.

There are two reasons why this is so, and they need to be distinguished. The first is a response by staff to the difficulties associated with the process of implementing RPL, and the second reflects attempts by teaching staff to implement more student-centred and flexible approaches to learning.

Feral or creative?

Teaching staff told us in interviews with them and through their responses to the website questionnaires that it was easier to enrol students in a subject, unit or competency rather than undertake formal RPL. About 68% of teaching staff said that it was easier to enrol students than undertake a formal RPL process compared to 21% who disagreed, and almost 10% were unsure. The percentages are comparable for administrative staff.

Table 23: views about costs and processes

	Teaching Staff			Administrative Staff		
	Agree	**Disagree**	**Not sure**	**Agree**	**Disagree**	**Not Sure**
The RPL assessment process can be expensive for the institution to implement	66.2%	16.4%	19.4%	51.9%	31.3%	16.9%
The RPL process may result in smaller, financially unviable classes	47.9%	29.5%	22.6%	45.3%	34.6%	20.1%
RPL processes are overly bureaucratic	44.4%	36.5%	19.0%	40.3%	34.6%	25.2%
It is easier to enrol students in a subject, module, unit or competency and assess them rather than undertake formal RPL	68.4%	21.4%	10.2%	64.9%	24.2%	10.8%

If both teaching and administrative staff feel this way, this means that the extent of unreported RPL may be considerable. The web-based surveys make no pretence at being a statistically valid sample of teaching and administrative staff across the sectors, so we cannot say that this represents the views of the majority of staff in post-compulsory education and training, but it gives an indication that the practice may be considerable.

There are a number of reasons why this may be the case. In the next section in this chapter we look at the way RPL is implemented in teaching practice; in this section we look at some of the systemic reasons.

As shown in Table 23, there is considerable ambivalence as to whether RPL processes are overly bureaucratic. Approximately 44% of teaching staff thought the processes were overly bureaucratic, compared to almost 40% of administrative staff. Similar percentages in both groups disagreed with the statement that RPL processes were overly bureaucratic, and large numbers in both were not sure.

There are some differences in view between the two groups as to whether RPL may result in class sizes that are smaller and financially unviable, but the greater differences are around whether RPL assessment processes are expensive for the institution to implement. Almost two thirds of teaching staff thought they were, compared to 52% of administrative staff. Almost 31% of administrative staff disagreed with this statement compared to 16% of teaching staff, while the number of staff who were unsure were similar in both groups. The differences in view between the two groups may be that there are some differences of perception in the way in which the work of teaching staff is constructed. Assessment is regarded as 'academic' work by both, but there may less differentiation by administrative staff as to the processes that underpin such work. Teaching staff, on the other hand, find that it increases workload if additional requirements are imposed, which cannot be accommodated in the normal rhythm of teaching and assessing. RPL processes that are not incorporated in this way may constitute an increase in work load. This is speculation however, as more research is needed to uncover the reasons why there are differences between the two groups, and whether these differences are representative of those that would be found in statistically valid sample.

There are clear disincentives built in to the system which may encourage the practice of enrolling students and accelerating their progress by assessing them earlier. RPL processes may be one, and if a considerable number of teaching staff think the processes are overly bureaucratic, they will enrol them rather than go through the process.

More difficult are the funding disincentives. In higher education students are not charged fees, and institutions are not funded for RPL. Students *will* be charged HECS if they enrol and undertake the subject, so this is likely to put a brake on the practice.

In the other sectors students are charged similar fees regardless of whether they undertake the module or competency, or whether they go through RPL, so for students there is little difference. Institutions on the other hand, incur considerable financial disincentives, particularly in South Australia, Queensland and New South Wales which funds RPL module enrolments at a reduced rate compared to normal funding. Even in the states and territories that fund the full amount incur a financial disincentive, for the reasons discussed in the chapter on fees and funding. All in all, in these circumstances, it is easier to enrol the students and assess them rather than go through formal RPL processes.

When confronted with obstacles, difficult processes, and funding disincentives, teaching staff will go feral, and will find a way around the problem. Most often, teachers are acting in the interests of students in doing so, however, the problem is that these processes are opaque and less accountable. The solution is not to increase levels of surveillance, but to build in simple processes and funding incentives to promote RPL.

RPL as flexible learning

If RPL is considered as a form of *teaching practice,* which is used as part of student-centred and flexible approaches to learning, then it is clear that it is implemented to a greater extent than the data indicate. We asked teaching staff (through direct interviews and through the website questionnaire) if they integrated RPL principles into their teaching practice. Almost 73% of teaching staff responding to the web-site questionnaire said they either frequently or sometimes included RPL in their teaching practice (45% said sometimes and 28% said frequently), with almost 21% saying that they never did.[33]

This includes practices like allowing students to submit evidence from work, or a social or community context as part of the assessment process. This could be a *requirement* of assessment, or students may be able to *substitute* a work 'product' for the designated assessment.

Integrating what people do at work or in their social or community life in this way often reflects a commitment to flexible learning and to student-centred approaches, which try to make the student's learning relevant to their life. This also helps to result in deeper learning, with the student actively involved in constructing knowledge, and using the concepts of their discipline or course to help them understand the world and their place in it. This is particularly important when assessment is designed to assess *functioning* knowledge; the holistic and coherent knowledge that individuals need in order to *perform* as a professional or in a particular role, as opposed to *declarative* or *procedural* knowledge (knowing about or knowing what) (Biggs, 1999).

Several respondents to our questionnaire told us that assignments were usually work-based, or that students were encouraged to "submit evidence of previous work related to the Unit outcomes as part of their formal assessment." Specific courses, for example those related to public service training, required students to include work examples. Others explained how they encouraged students to draw on their experiences and current events in their lives to understand how the theories and ideas they were discovering related to everyday practice.

In many circumstances it may be preferable to use RPL in this way, rather than as credit for a whole subject or unit. Several interviewees explained that students benefit from the social process of learning with peers, even if formally they may meet the requirements of the assessment. This is not just in 'academic' learning; it also includes vocationally specific learning in applied courses or qualifications at certificate level. Other students also benefit from having colleagues who have a depth of experience and knowledge in the same class. A student may be also able to demonstrate that they have met the requirements for part of the assessment in a particular subject, module or competency, but not all of the assessment. Incorporating RPL flexibly in this way provides students with opportunities they may not otherwise have.

RPL and flexible learning approaches are clearly intrinsically related. In many instances it is impossible to distinguish between work-based learning and RPL. This is particularly the case with vocationally oriented or vocationally specific courses. Accelerated assessment or assessment on demand is a feature of competency based training and other self-paced learning models. The emphasis is on assessing students when they are ready, and can

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[33] Information was missing for approximately 6% of respondents.

demonstrate they have met the requirements, rather than at the end of a defined period of time. Some students may be able to be assessed far earlier than peers because of their prior learning experience. Alternatively they may be assessed on the job, or bring work current 'products' that they have generated on the job to be assessed. In this latter instance it is an example of recognition of *current* learning: students learn where-ever they are, and one form of learning will inevitably inform another. Diverse teaching and learning methods offer scope for embedding RPL in *all* learning, and not just that that is formally recorded (Learning From Experience Trust, 2000).

Conclusion

This chapter has considered how RPL is implemented into teaching practice. There are two key reasons why this occurs, which must be distinguished from each other. The first is that it is used as a way of circumventing the obstacles to using RPL. These include bureaucratic obstacles, and funding disincentives. While this may open possibilities for students that would not otherwise exist, it may lead to practices that are not as transparent and accountable as would be desired.

The second reason is that RPL is implemented into teaching practice as a key element of flexible learning practices. This is more likely to happen where the assessment for courses, subjects, modules, and units are designed to result in functioning knowledge, the knowledge that is needed to perform as a professional or in a particular role. Students are encouraged to make links between their learning and their lives and work, and this hopefully results in deeper learning. This is more likely to be transparent and accountable, as the assessment for the course, subject, module or unit are based on flexible approaches to learning and assessment, and hence are subject to the normal evaluation and review processes.

Both reasons that lead to RPL being implemented into teaching practice mean that the extent of RPL is under-reported, and that it may not ever be possible to quantify the full extent of it. While this is so, it is important that processes and funding incentives be put in place to make it less likely that teaching staff need to circumvent existing policy frameworks in order to implement RPL. This is not a problem when RPL is used as part of a flexible approach to learning and assessment, but is a problem when it is used solely to avoid problems inherent in the formal process.

10 RPL information on the web

This chapter reports on a survey that we undertook to analyse institutional websites for the accessibility of information about RPL provided to students and the quality of that information. Our survey builds on previous work undertaken by Childs, Ingham and Wagner (2002). We used the same approach as did Childs, Ingham and Wagner, and this provided insight into how and if changes had occurred. The chapter concludes with recommendations as to how to make information about RPL on websites accessible to students and easy to understand. A list of institutional websites that demonstrate aspects of good practice is also included.

We surveyed Australian university and TAFE websites to see how easy or difficult it was for students to access that information and for the quality of information provided. Websites are an established and important source of information for students, and ideally provide a readily available source of information about RPL for prospective and current students.

As we discuss in chapter 2, viewing RPL as a process as well as an outcome requires consideration of how students are supported to learn and use RPL.[34] Students need to understand their learning options, the RPL process, and the procedures at their institution. Students have to be able to understand how to *translate* their prior learning into the language used in their sector, institution and course. The provision of relevant and clear information about RPL and RPL processes to students is vital.

Institutions need to plan information provision, including web-based information, to maximise the likelihood that users will find what they need quickly and easily (Neilsen 2000). An understanding of the nature of information provided on institutions' websites to inform and guide students through RPL processes contributes to the development of best practice guidelines.

10.1 Background

A comprehensive study undertaken by Childs, Ingham and Wagner (2002) of thirty-eight Australian university websites between 2000-mid 2001 indicated that university students, in general, were not being provided with adequate information about RPL through this medium. The authors took the position of a prospective student looking for RPL information, and examined each website for ease of access to information and the quantity and quality of the information provided.

In general, Childs, Ingham and Wagner (2002: 39-51) found that there was a wide variation in the quality of information provided and often this information was 'absent, poorly written or hard to find'. They found that only thirteen of the thirty-eight websites mentioned RPL by name. Further, they ranked only four of these sites as 'good' in terms of the quality of information and accessibility. They assessed each website according to the following criteria:
- whether or not information about RPL was provided on 'Entry via Prospective student' pages;
- the extent to which students could use 'Quick, easy steps'; and,

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[34] See chapter 2: What is RPL and why isn't there more of it?

- • 'Clear information showing how to' use RPL.

They felt that students should be able to find information quickly and easily "without them having to know or understand a whole series of associated terms" (Childs, Ingham and Wagner, 2002: 51). That is, it should not be assumed that students know the jargon used describing prior learning and that clear procedural steps should be included.

Their findings led to the development of a website for prospective students wanting to know more about RPL. This site provides students with information about RPL and the steps involved in the process. While it was developed for the University of Western Sydney, this site provides all students with an understanding of the fundamentals of the RPL process in clear, understandable language.[35]

Based on the findings of Childs, Ingham and Wagner, we updated this research to August 2002 and extended the survey to include several TAFE institute and college websites. We did this to provide an indication of practices across these sectors.

Child, Ingham and Wagner acknowledged that websites are not the only source of information about RPL, but that students expected to be able to use the web to obtain information online. In our project website questionnaires respondents rated the provision of web-based information as 'very important' (52%) or 'important' (32%) (we recognise the problem of using a website questionnaire to validate the importance of websites, but the point still stands!). Also rated as important was the availability of a contact person to discuss RPL, the provision of information about RPL in the unit, module or subject outline, and an RPL support package. We assumed that the provision of online information to students that is understandable, useful and consistent within and between sectors would improve the development of RPL processes.

We acknowledge, as did Childs, Ingham and Wagner in their study, that we have previous knowledge of RPL and that we are experienced web users, and that this limitation should be noted. The assumption is that students are computer literate, have access to computers and the web and use the web as an information source for enrolment or course information. We recognise that not all students have these skills, and as such, it was not possible to simulate the experiences of all students.

10.2   The study

The research questions used in this study were based on those used by Childs, Ingham and Wagner (2002: 43):

1. Does the institution's website contain information about RPL?
2. How easy was the information to locate on the site?
3. How helpful would the information be for prospective and current students?

A selection of university websites was surveyed for this project to confirm and build on Childs, Ingham and Wagner's' findings, one year out from their study (August 2002) and to explore the issues raised in terms of the aims of this project. This selection of websites was not to provide a statistically relevant sample but to gain an understanding of trends and how

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[35] See: http://www.uws.edu.au/obd/ashs/rpl/index.html

these can inform best-practice guidelines. Eighteen university websites were selected to cover each of the states, and to be representative of the different types of universities. We included in our sample universities from the Australia Technology Network,[36] universities established in the 1960s and 1970s, universities established as a consequence of the Dawkins reforms,[37] and Group of Eight universities. We also undertook a similar survey TAFE websites: twenty TAFE websites were selected to cover each state and regional and metropolitan locations.

We adopted the research method used by Childs, Ingham and Wagner to collect and analyse the data. These included limiting the time taken to search a site (if a student couldn't find information quickly, then they were not likely to continue looking), recording the number of steps (clicks to relevant web pages) required to locate relevant information, recording the usefulness of information provided in terms of clarity (translating the jargon) and explanation of processes (how to do it).

As RPL can be used both for admission to a course and for the award of credit in a course or qualification, we assumed that information provided from Current Student links and Course information on websites was also important. We included these links to encompass currently enrolled students with an interest in using RPL during their studies. However, it was expected that many of the sites would have student intranets or portals with login and password restrictions for current students, and it is possible that information about RPL was available to students in this way. We also looked for RPL information for post-graduate students.

Childs, Ingham and Wagner included the use of website search facilities if they could not readily find relevant information. Based on their findings, we argue that students should be able to find this information without depending on the search facility and second guessing terms used. Thus, the search facilities were not used in our study and the search time was limited to about five minutes to find relevant information (i.e. at least a definition of RPL).

10.3   Findings and recommendations

In general, our analysis of university websites supports Childs, Ingham and Wagner's' (2002) general findings about ease of access to, and quality of information about, RPL. In line with the findings of Childs, Ingham and Wagner, we found that most sites provide little information about RPL. This comparison suggests that there has not been a change in the provision of information about RPL on university websites over the previous year. It was easier to find information on the TAFE sites, and the quality of information was better in comparison to the University websites, however, the standard and quality of information was variable from one site to another.

While overall, the standard and quality of information on websites left much to be desired, there were several very good sites in both sectors, and we have drawn on these and on the findings of Childs, Ingham and Wagner (2002) to identify features that contribute to good practice in the provision of web-based RPL information. We think good practice means that sites should provide students with ready access to information about RPL, should explain the concept of RPL, and give students information about the processes they need to undertake at

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[36] The Australian Technology network comprises Curtin University of Technology, University of South Australia, RMIT, University of Technology Sydney, and Queensland University of Technology.

[37] This refers to universities that were established as a consequence of reforms by Labor Education and Training Minister Dawkins in 1987/88, which abolished the binary divide between universities and colleges of advanced education, through processes of amalgamation, and resulted in the creation of a number of new universities.

their institution. All of this needs to be presented in student friendly language. In this section we outline what we found, and suggest what should be done to make web-sites an effective and accessible source of information for students.

10.3.1 Ready access to information about RPL

Information about RPL was often not available or referred to indirectly in descriptions about seeking entry based on work or life experiences and skills, or informal study. The information universities provided on their websites did not necessarily reflect their policies[38]. That is, some institutions had extensive policy frameworks but did not make this information available to students on the web. The absence of links to RPL on an institution's website could indicate to students (both undergraduate and post-graduate) that there is no policy supporting RPL procedures. The variable nature of information (and indeed whether information was provided) on websites within the TAFE sector could suggest to students that some colleges and institutes within the same state do not support RPL. Good practice would consist of:

- presenting information about RPL consistently on the website in a way which reflects the institution's RPL policy. If there is a central website (as is the case for TAFE in some states) this website could provide RPL information for students with links to individual TAFE sites which provided information about local contacts and RPL processes.

Information provided about RPL on these sites was often difficult to find and would require the student to be actively looking for RPL information. We found that it was often necessary to second-guess the terms used for RPL and to use four or five 'clicks' from the institution's home page to guess where the information may be located. Students would need an understanding of institutional jargon to follow these links. Using the Prospective Student or Current Student links often did not lead to any information about RPL. Links to information (i.e. at least a definition of RPL) was found variously under other links including admissions, enrolment, academic and enrolment issues, services for students and course information. At some sites it was necessary to select another link requiring students to identify what type of enrolment they were seeking (such as special entry, special admission, alternative entry or mature age applicants) to find information about RPL. Good practice would consist of:

- ensuring links are provided directly to information about RPL from many relevant institutional home web page index links. This would alert students who may be unaware of this option about the existence of RPL. Links to information about RPL could originate from pages for prospective students, current students, admissions, enrolments, course information, information for students and frequently asked questions. This could encourage student awareness of RPL and provide students actively looking for RPL with a direct link to the information.

The language used to describe RPL varied considerably both within and between the university and TAFE websites. On the university sites there was a tendency to include RPL under a heading referring to credit transfer (with variations, for example: academic credit, transfer of credit, credit, advanced standing, credit for prior learning). In general, there was

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[38] See chapter 5: "RPL policy frameworks and practice in the sectors" for information about RPL policies

far more evidence of information about credit transfer than RPL on the university websites. The term 'recognition of prior learning' was used more often on the TAFE sites, although other terms were used (for example, advanced standing, skills recognition, recognition of current competence). Some sites had presented this as a link in student friendly language, under headings such as, "Getting credit for previous study or experience". Good practice would consist of:

- consistently using the term 'recognition of prior learning' to indicate a distinctive pathway that students can use. Increased consistency in definitions and the way the term is promoted will contribute to greater student understanding of RPL and how it may be used. This could be clarified with a brief definition of RPL at the link written in student friendly language. This is particularly important seeing that we expect students to move in and out of education and training for the rest of their lives, and to use RPL and credit transfer in constructing their own pathways. If they become familiar with the concepts in one context, it will easier to use them in another, provided the language is similar. We also know that students rely on word of mouth to a great extent in finding information about post-compulsory education and training (James, McInnes and Baldwin, 1999), and this will help to contribute to disseminating information among students about RPL.

10.3.2 . Information about translating the RPL process

Where a link was provided to RPL, it was common for this to lead to a brief description reflecting the ANTA or AVCC definitions. Instructions to contact the institution for further information were usually provided. Other sites linked the definition of RPL to the institution's policy or rules page on their handbook with no further information on how to apply. Institutional policies need to be translated into language that students can understand. Good practice would consist of:

- presenting RPL as a pathway that students can use to enter a course, or to seek credit in a course, and explain how it works in each instance. It should also be accompanied by an explanation of how students can use their life and work experiences for access into, or credit in, a course. This would be more useful for students if case-studies were provided so students could see the type of life experience that can be used in RPL.

- providing detailed information about RPL processes in both web and print formats. This would help to demystify the process, and help students understand what they need to do to use it. Those of us who work in post-compulsory education and training understand, and think in terms of, the language and concepts of our sector and institutions. Students may not understand what is meant by learning or competency outcomes, how these relate to a qualification, and what it means to use their own life and work experiences to show that they have fulfilled these requirements.

A few sites had made a considerable effort to provide this information to their students. One university had translated all the learning outcomes for their courses into possible RPL pathways. They explained what sort of experience students could use, how to present it, and the different ways in which it could be assessed. One TAFE site provided RPL information for specific courses on individual course information pages, and explained how students could use RPL for that course. Good practice would consist of:

- providing information about RPL for specific courses, and explaining the range and type of life and work experiences that are particularly relevant to that course. While effort is required to establish and maintain these web-pages, the availability of this sort of course-specific information on the web makes it more accessible for prospective and current students and information can be readily updated. It may also lead to more informed and targeted RPL applications by students.

While information about RPL is most often text-based on university and TAFE websites, several sites had developed interactive web pages that attempted to lead students through the RPL process. These sites were particularly effective. Good practice would consist of:

- translating the RPL process into steps for students and using the interactive features of the web to navigate these steps and to enhance their understanding of the process;

- providing links to a glossary of terms and other links providing further information, such as a frequently asked questions web page; and,

- providing information about contact details and administrative information on the web, such as the names and contact details of support persons, related forms and the cost of applying for RPL.

10.4   Conclusion

The use of web pages to provide information has become an established practice with post-compulsory education and training institutions in the VET (particularly TAFE) and higher education sectors, and is increasing in the ACE and school sectors. Current practices in the provision of web-based information about RPL for students reflect the diversity of policies and practices in institutions and sectors. RPL information, in general, is not being made available through institutional websites, particularly in the higher education sector. The few sites that have developed a web presence for RPL information do not necessarily provide easy access to this information from the institution's home page. The use of the web's features to provide easily accessible, interactive and consistent information about RPL to students needs to be considered by institutions in all sectors.

Example sites:

The following sites reflect some of the good practices that are included in the above discussion:

University of Western Sydney
http://www.uws.edu.au/obd/ashs/rpl/index.html

University of Canberra
http://www.canberra.edu.au/secretariat/rpl/rpl_index.html

Deakin University
http://www.deakin.edu.au/aasd/students/admission/advanced_standing.php

Brisbane Institute of TAFE

http://www.brisbane.tafe.net/rpl/

North Sydney Institute of TAFE
http://www.tafensw.edu.au/nsi/index.cfm?PageID=101&Area=CoursesCareer&Menu=Recognition&ItemSelection=WhatIsRecognition

Central TAFE-WA
http://yourcentral.tafe.wa.gov.au/CollegePortal/Dynamic/DynamicPge.asp?a=93,0,Std (link to Government of Western Australia Dept of Training Skills Recognition site)

Kimberley College of TAFE
http://www.kimtafe.wa.edu.au/course/rol.asp

http://www.brisbane.tafe.net/rpl/

11   Barriers and facilitating mechanisms[39]

> This chapter considers the barriers that limit the extent to which RPL is implemented, and the factors that facilitate its greater implementation. Our discussion is based on the barriers and enabling mechanisms identified in the RPL literature, on the interviews we undertook with stakeholders, and the responses received through the questionnaires on our RPL website.

This chapter examines the facilitating mechanisms and obstacles to implementing RPL based on the literature, interviews with stakeholders, and the responses received through the questionnaires on our website. We have already discussed some of these issues elsewhere in the report. The obstacles that have already been discussed include:

- the extent to which people are able to identify and articulate what they know (chapter 2: What is RPL and why isn't there more of it?);
- the problems encountered in 'translating' learning acquired through life and work into the post-compulsory education and training discourse, and the relationship this has to membership of a disadvantaged group in society (chapter 2: What is RPL and why isn't there more of it?);
- focussing on RPL at the point of entry rather than making it available at different times during a student's enrolment (chapter 2: What is RPL and why isn't there more of it?);
- not sufficiently distinguishing the different purposes of RPL to enable the implementation of models that are aligned with these purposes or goals (chapter 2: What is RPL and why isn't there more of it?);
- the time that it takes to provide advice and support to students, and the time it takes to assess RPL applications (chapter 5: RPL policy and practice in the sectors, and chapter 6: Fees and funding);
- funding disincentives (Chapter 6 Fees and funding);
- the problem of defining 'graduateness' and the reluctance to grant RPL because students may miss out on important learning in a course, which may happen because 'the sum is greater than the total of the parts' (Chapter 7: Quality assurance);
- problems arising when the learning or competency outcomes are inadequate, and teaching staff try to compensate for this through teaching and learning activities (chapter 7: Quality assurance);
- hostility by staff or institutions to RPL, based on the belief that students haven't really 'learnt' something, unless they have participated in the formal education and training course, subject, unit or module (chapter 7: Quality assurance);
- the competing cultures of workplaces and of education and training institutions, which arise as a consequence of the different outcomes sought by stakeholders;
- problems arising from lack of understanding of the curriculum and assessment approaches in other sectors (chapter 7: Quality assurance);

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[39] See the following authors for further discussion of the barriers to, and facilitating mechanisms for, RPL: Kenyon, Saunders, and Gibb, (1996); Wilson and Lilly, (1996); Gibson, (1997); Smith and Keating, (1997); Learning From Experience Trust (2000); Simosko, (2000); Barker, (2001); Centre for Curriculum Transfer and Technology (2001); Ryan, and Watson, (2001); AQF Advisory Board (1997); Bateman and Knight (2002);

- deficient RPL assessment processes, which sometimes result from inconsistent and subjective assessment processes, and in other instances, from unacceptable practices (chapter 7: Quality assurance);
- the extent to which RPL processes and approaches to assessment are inclusive of cultural and social diversity and different ways of knowing, and in allowing students to demonstrate in diverse and flexible ways that they have met the required learning or competency outcomes (chapter 2: What is RPL and why isn't there more of it, and chapter 8: Partnerships with Indigenous communities);
- bureaucratic processes (chapter 9: RPL as teaching practice); and,
- lack of clear, simply written and accessible information about RPL, particularly on institutional websites (chapter 10: RPL information on the web).

The facilitating mechanisms that have been identified include:

- supporting learners to understand and use RPL (chapter 2: What is RPL and why isn't there more of it?);
- aligning the appropriate RPL model (developmental or credentialling model) with the course or qualification aims and objectives (chapter 2: What is RPL and why isn't there more of it?);
- harnessing processes that help learners develop skills in using RPL to processes that help learners develop lifelong learning skills (chapter 2: What is RPL and why isn't there more of it?);
- providing support for teaching staff to develop relationships with people in industry, and to participate in shaping developments within the industry (chapter 5: RPL policy frameworks and practice in the sectors);
- developing funding models that act as an incentive to use RPL, including industry wide strategies in partnership with industry stakeholders, and other strategies that build on economies of scale (chapter 6: Fees and funding);
- explicitly incorporating RPL into quality assurance processes used to assure the standard and integrity of assessment in general (chapter 7: Quality assurance);
- including RPL assessment processes as part of institutional negotiations about credit transfer and articulation within sectors and between sectors (chapter 7: Quality assurance);
- providing opportunities for staff from different sectors to work together professionally, and to develop relationships of trust (chapter 7: Quality assurance);
- developing partnerships with indigenous communities and using culturally appropriate models to assess learning (chapter 8: Partnerships with Indigenous communities);
- incorporating RPL principles into flexible and student-centred approaches to learning (chapter 9: RPL as teaching practice); and,
- using the web to promote RPL, and provide students with clear and accessible advice as to the sort of evidence they need, the process, who to contact for more information and so on (chapter 10: RPL information on the web).

This chapter discusses the remaining barriers and facilitating mechanisms that have not been previously covered. Many of the issues identified are common across all sectors, despite the differing policy frameworks in each.

Factors inhibiting the development of RPL

We identified the factors that inhibit RPL through the literature, interviews and the website questionnaires. The factors that have not yet been discussed in this report that may inhibit the development of RPL include:

- fragmentation of the post-compulsory education and training system across levels of government, funding systems, states and providers. This systemic complexity contributes to difficulties in understanding what is available, and inhibits the development of mechanisms that promote consistent national practice. One proposal suggested to us by a stakeholder in VET, was that a 'skills passport' be implemented, that would allow individuals to acquire a qualification based on studies accredited in various institutions and providers, and different sectors. This is similar to the idea floated by the Federal Government's first *Crossroads* discussion paper, but in this case it was called a "customised portfolio approach" (Nelson, 2002: 19). (See the case study of the VETASSESS 'skills passport' in the chapter 5: RPL policy frameworks and practice in the sectors);

- onerous reporting requirements in some states in the VET sector ;

- fragmentation and duplication of programs: this results in similar but slightly different learning or competency outcomes, making it harder for students to find an 'exact match' (rather than being broadly equivalent), where that is necessary for RPL to be granted;

- RPL (and credit transfer) is frequently granted for a proportion of a course in a way which does not reduce the real time or cost to the student.

- some professional bodies are resistant to RPL, and have stipulations as to the maximum credit that can be granted;

- lack of public awareness of RPL. This was strongly emphasised by students, teaching staff, administrators, unions, employer bodies, peak bodies, and individuals in jurisdictions. Many students told us that there was not enough information, and the information that was available was often difficult to understand. Similarly, stakeholders, particularly those from unions and employer bodies, told us that many workers and employers did not know about RPL, or how to access it. This situation was made worse by the complexity of the VET system, and the language which at times can appear impenetrable to those not directly working in the system.

  The lack of public awareness is perhaps among the most significant of barriers to the greater implementation of RPL. The very people who RPL was meant to benefit most – those without experience in post-compulsory education and training but with years of learning – are the least likely to know of its existence, and how it can benefit them. Interviewees, particularly those from the ACE sector, told us that many people from this background assume they cannot obtain a qualification because they lack the prerequisites to enter. RPL as a mechanism for *access* needs to be heavily promoted in the community. Similarly, because participation in post-compulsory education and

training may not be something that has been contemplated, many people who could benefit do not know that their learning through life can count towards a qualification.

- lack of awareness is augmented by lack of process. Several students told us about their frustration in trying to find out what the process was, who to speak to, and so on. One university student explained:

  "My experience was just to write to the University and request RPL. They denied it. No forms were completed, nor were they suggested."

  Another student told us that she had successfully used RPL, and was glad she did, but that she found out about it entirely by accident. She came across a lecturer who was sympathetic to RPL, and the lecturer advised her about its existence and how she could use it.

- The lack of staff training in RPL. Many of the people we interviewed felt that teaching staff (and often, administrative staff) needed specific training to become proficient in RPL. This view was strongly expressed through the website questionnaires: the percentage of teaching staff and administrative staff who expressed this view was 84% in both cases, whereas 7% of teaching staff and 3% of administrative staff thought specific RPL training wasn't necessary. Most stakeholders we interviewed outside the formal post-compulsory education and training system felt strongly that staff training was essential. These results are surprisingly high seeing that it is established orthodoxy for many, particularly in the VET sector, that RPL and RPL assessments are only one facet of teaching and assessment, and if a teacher is qualified then they should not need specific RPL training. It is clear that the majority of people who responded to the web questionnaires did not agree with this view. It is not clear whether these views are held because respondents felt that RPL processes as they currently stand are quite different to other processes associated with teaching and learning, or that even in an ideal world staff need training in implementing and assessing RPL.

- The practice in Australia of awarding students an ungraded pass or credit was cited as an obstacle to the greater implementation of RPL. This applies to RPL when it is used for access to a course, or for credit in a course. Higher education respondents explained that this often disadvantaged students in competitive entry processes. Moreover, the single most important indicator of success in tertiary education, is previous successful study in tertiary education (Pascoe *et al.*, 1997), and when there is unmet demand, students who are seeking a place through RPL are disadvantaged. This point was made in interviews with stakeholders, but was also explained to us by students who responded to the website questionnaire:

  "I believe RPL is a good system. However, it did not help during the process of my PhD application. It is confusing to be told by institutes that if one has RPL subjects they are considered as not good enough – especially when it disadvantages one's opportunities of scholarship. In fact it is unforgivable for institutes to mislead people this way. This research is focused on the process of RPL. I did not have problems with it personally. I think it is important to address the issue of the purpose of RPL not the process."

One TAFE institute director told us that she thought many students did not use RPL, because they wanted to obtain a grade so they could use it for work or further study. A group of TAFE teachers told us that employers preferred grades, and this meant some students felt they would be jeopardising their job prospects if they used RPL to the extent that was justified by their prior learning. It seems clear that many VET providers use graded assessment on academic transcripts, while the results that are reported to government are limited to either competent or not yet competent.

- it is sometimes extremely difficult for students to get the evidence they need, if it is based on work they have undertaken in the past. For example, one university student told us that:

   "Applying for RPL was almost impossible when the prior learning was interstate. It proved to be too costly and difficult to find the information required. Also, many people had moved, so references etc were impossible to find."

- some students seemed particularly frustrated that higher education would only provide credit for prior credentialed study, and not on the basis the learning they had acquired from their life experience:

   "In my case the University would not even consider anything outside TAFE or University i.e. [they] only took credit transfer. I was only informed after applying for the RPL they would not consider on the job experience or internal training programs completed in the organisation's national Training Centre (even though these were written by consultants who were from Universities)."

   "It's about time Universities paid more than just lip service to the process given how difficult it is to have RPL recognised from one institution to the another. Try to have the first year's study of an MBA from one institution recognised by another within their MBA Program, it's almost impossible unless the relevant unit is *exactly* the same. Try it, I have."

- Some students expressed disillusionment in the lack of recognition given to the effort they had put into their RPL application, and the learning that they had experienced as a result. From their comments, it seems this was quite a demoralising experience:

   "The TAFE teacher glanced at my RPL application then said, just tell me what you've done. I thought this was not good practice given it had taken a very long time to get the evidence together and complete the documentation. I had to provide evidence for outcomes that were repeated across each module. My application was for the Trainer sections of the Cert IV Assessor and Workplace Trainer."

   "I put in the information that was required but no-one ever even read it."

   One TAFE student told us in response to a question which asked what they would do differently, if they were to apply for RPL again:

   "I would aim at a higher level and incorporate RPL with learning. By seeking to obtain recognition for existing skills, I found it frustrating that the amount of work was not reflected in the outcome."

Another said:

"I would only apply for RPL again if I was confident it wouldn't be a waste of time. I spent 12 hours preparing a document no-one ever bothered reading."

Several expressed disillusionment in the lack of recognition of their life experience:

"I have built complex systems at work and yet am still required to demonstrate my skill again in a little mini project. Why?" (TAFE student)

"I would insist and negotiate with those concerned about accreditation of my life experiences as a mother and education worker [and how this] is relevant to my studying as a teacher." (Higher education student in response to being asked what she would do differently if she were to apply for RPL again.)

"[Universities should] adopt a less defensive stance on prior learning. There seems to be an environment of suspicion surrounding advanced standing / prior knowledge issues. People applying should be considered a bonus, rather than somehow trying to cheat the system!"

- If students are granted RPL, this could jeopardise their status as a full-time student, thus making them ineligible for Austudy or the Youth Allowance, or in the case of overseas students, transgressing their visa requirements, which require them to maintain full-time status. One overseas student advisor at a university wrote to us and said:

"Only in exceptional circumstances may international students be enrolled in less than a full-time load. This does not include the granting of RPL. This can particularly affect students in the initial semesters of their courses, as they must enrol in enough subjects to be full time, even where they've received credit for previous studies. However the structure of many courses makes this a difficult task in numerous cases every semester. No adequate suggestion has yet been forthcoming to address this problem. For example, enrolling students in subjects they don't need, and charging them tuition fees for units not relevant to and indeed not even required for completion of their qualification, is not considered a solution."

"In addition, since the introduction of the ESOS Act 2000[40] there has been extensive debate as to the definition of full-time enrolment. Institutions still await clarification as to whether 100% of a nominal full-time load as documented in the program curriculum is full-time for international students, or anything more than 75% of the standard load is full-time, as for local students. This lack of clarity and dispute over interpretation of certain sections of the Act and the National Code continues to frustrate universities' efforts to implement measures to address significant issues such as the effects of RPL on full-time enrolment and course structure."

A domestic university student said:

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[40] Education Services for Overseas Students Act 2000

"There needs to be a streamlining of the process. It is difficult when you apply for RPL then have to wait forever to hear back. Meanwhile Uni has started and for Centrelink purposes you need to be a fulltime student then you get RPL for a unit then you withdraw from that unit (with RPL grade) and by then it is too late to register for another unit."

- Smith and Keating (1997) explain that there are risks in RPL for institutions and for students which may affect the extent to which it is implemented. The institutions risk their reputation if they make an error in judging someone competent, when in fact they are not. There may also be significant health and safety consequences in many professions and occupations from a 'false positive' assessment. They risk being regarded as hostile to students if they do not grant RPL when it is due. Students risk their educational progress if they are falsely certified as competent if they are not, and do not subsequently have the skills they need for progression. An over-zealous assessment that does not grant the student RPL when it should be runs the risk of demoralising and demotivating students.

Facilitating mechanisms

This section explores facilitating or enabling mechanisms for RPL, where they have not been discussed elsewhere in this report.

- it is necessary to develop a strategic approach to drive cultural change processes, if institution-wide, accessible RPL policies are to be implemented. This needs the active support of senior management, the allocation of strategic funds, and freeing and resourcing institutional champions to drive the process. Institutional champions require recognition, training and support. The process needs to be driven from the top, through setting strategic directions, while allowing the form of the process and implementation to unfold and be driven from the ground up.

  We interviewed a group of staff at one TAFE institute who were involved in such a process. They explained that they first flew the banner to see who was interested, and then actively looked for champions within the institution. Management had allocated strategic funds, and designated the development of institutional-wide policies as a key priority. The way the process developed was driven from the ground up to ensure that the end result was an intrinsic part of the normal rhythms of the work of administrative and teaching staff, and that it was owned by staff. Initially there was considerable resistance to the process, particularly from the technical areas, but less from the trades. Significant changes were made to the process, to ensure it did not rely on students second-guessing the policy, process, and assessment requirements. It was helped because the state government moved from partially funding RPL, to funding institutions for the full student contact hours for RPL enrolments. Staff were offered training, and were themselves put through the RPL process. Over a period of some months attitudes towards RPL changed, and it became embedded in the mainstream of the life of the institution. It changed the way teaching occurred: teachers were much more willing to incorporate flexible approaches towards assessment, and actively encouraged students to use work-based 'products' towards their assessment. In some areas, teaching staff were freed up to work most of the time in industry and have been

able to generate the same number of student contact hours as they would if all their teaching took place on campus. Not everyone thinks these changes are for the better, and they are still resistant to RPL. This is inevitable in any process of institutional cultural change.

- In interviews and comments received from the website questionnaires, many people said that it is important to actively market RPL to existing and potential students, community groups, employers, unions and industries. One student said simply: "Tell us about it." Language needs to be accessible, and not, as one student explained "in academic English."

  It was suggested to us by stakeholders, particularly from the ACE sector, that RPL needs to be marketed actively in the community. An interviewee from the ACE sector explained that one provider distributes brochures to 450,000 households four times a year, and this is the sort of vehicle that could be used to publicise RPL. Of course, if such publicity is undertaken, we need to be careful that we are able to respond to the demand that it may generate. Again, the ACE sector can perhaps play a crucial role in disseminating information about RPL to people in the community, and in helping them to effectively access it, but the sector would need to be supported in doing so. The reason why the ACE sector is particularly well-placed to play this role is because of its close connection to the community, and the links it has with individuals and groups who are among the most disadvantaged in society.

- Many students (and others) said that they would welcome exemplars and case studies. Exemplars demonstrate a good RPL submission, while case-studies give students an idea of the type of learning from experience that can be used, how to document that, and how to identify the areas where RPL may be relevant.

- Access to mentors and assessors was also cited by students as a mechanism that would improve existing processes: One ACE student explained that it would help if there was an:

  "Opportunity to discuss your options with someone who is skilled and knows the background and the framework to which your previous studies stood for"

  Others suggested a formal short course to allow students to learn the skills they need to use RPL effectively:

  "…I think it [RPL] should be part of a formal course undertaken prior to application. The time frame would not have to be extensive but should be enough to signify commitment" (university student).

- Clear identification of subjects, modules or units that lend themselves to RPL applications would help students to target their RPL applications. As one student explained in response to a question that asked them for advice on how to facilitate RPL:

  "Perhaps if institutions identify areas where RPL might be appropriate and perhaps even the development of some generalised subjects in some courses which are designed for RPL applications."

There are a number of other facilitating mechanisms that are implied throughout the report, and have been discussed in one way or another, but we have stated them explicitly here to focus discussion:

- there needs to be greater consistency in the way RPL is applied within sectors and across sectors. This was raised often in interviews, and by respondents to the website questionnaires. It is believed that greater consistency would contribute towards more confidence in RPL decisions made by one sector in another sector. It would also help students to learn how to use RPL more effectively if there were greater consistency, as students would become familiar with RPL, the way it is applied and how they can use it.

- more active partnerships are required between providers (in all sectors) and enterprises and organisations. These partnerships need to be funded, recognised and rewarded, if they are to be sustained;

- the development of RPL networks within sectors, but also across sectors. This project has identified RPL researchers in all sectors, and they are keen to work together, but it is expensive and time consuming to establish and sustain such a network. However, it may be that resourcing a cross-sectoral RPL network would result in greater dissemination of good practice in all sectors, and the emergence of cross-sectoral RPL projects.

Conclusion

This chapter has identified obstacles to, and enabling mechanisms for, RPL that have not been discussed elsewhere in this report. Our interviews with stakeholders and the responses to the website questionnaires show that many of the issues that confront the sectors in implementing RPL are common: many of the obstacles and facilitating mechanisms that were identified were raised by students and staff from all sectors, as well as external stakeholders. The way in which these issues are expressed in each sector may differ, particularly those relating to funding mechanisms and quality assurance frameworks, but the issues underlying them are common. This shows that there is potential to develop national common RPL principles and operational guidelines to encompass the senior secondary school, ACE, VET and higher education sectors.

12.   Conclusion and recommendations

This chapter brings together the discussion and findings in the previous chapters and makes recommendations on how to increase the extent to which RPL is implemented in post-compulsory education and training, and strategies for developing more consistent approaches across the sectors. A key focus of this chapter is the proposed national cross-sectoral RPL principles and operational guidelines.

The aim of this research project was to develop national cross-sectoral RPL principles and operational guidelines to provide advice on the national level about RPL, and to guide the four sectors of post compulsory education and training (senior secondary school, adult and community education, vocational education and training and higher education) to develop RPL policies and procedures that assure:

- opportunities for Australians to have their non-formal and informal learning recognised and counted towards a qualification;
- diverse and inclusive pathways to lifelong learning;
- consistency in the principles used in implementing RPL within sectors and between sectors; and,
- the quality, integrity and standing of Australian qualifications.

An additional aim of this research project and the national common RPL principles and operational guidelines was to provide information to individuals and organisations about:
- provide information to individuals and organisations about how RPL is defined;
- provide information to individuals and organisations about the principles and processes used by institutions to implement RPL; and
- promote greater awareness and understanding of RPL and how it can be used.

The remainder of this chapter provides advice on how to realise these aims.

National cross-sectoral RPL principles and operational guidelines

The purpose of this research project was to research existing RPL policy and practice in each of the sectors of post-compulsory education and training, and to use that as the basis for the development of a set of national RPL principles and operational guidelines which are common to all sectors. We had to find out if it was possible and feasible to develop a set of principles and operational guidelines that each sector could use to guide policy development. Our view is that it is. While there are differences between the sectors over the extent to which RPL can be implemented, and the processes for doing so, there was remarkable consistency in both the obstacles that were identified, and the enabling mechanisms that would lead to its greater implementation.

The basis of this commonality is that each of the sectors shares a common commitment to:

- increasing awareness about, and access by Australians to, education and training pathways that are "personally meaningful, and [have] social recognition and status" (OECD, 1998: 160);

- creating opportunities that result in access to further education and training and improved employment prospects, particularly for those from social backgrounds under-represented in post-compulsory education and training;
- recognising learning that has already been achieved, regardless of when or how that learning was acquired;
- recognising the diversity of learners and the need for culturally inclusive practices in transmitting existing knowledge and in creating new knowledge;
- accelerated progression and cost-savings for students by not requiring them to repeat and pay for learning or competency outcomes they have already achieved;
- encouraging lifelong learning by creating pathways between the sectors of post-compulsory education and training and qualification levels;
- increasing the skill level, flexibility, and creativity of the Australian workforce;
- meeting the education and training needs of Australian enterprises, in particular, signalling to employers the knowledge, skills and competences potential employees have through successful completion of a qualification; and,
- ensuring the effective and efficient expenditure of resources on education and training.

This is the broad framework for national post-compulsory education and training policy in Australia within which all sectors operate. The actual implementation of RPL may differ between sectors, as the way each sector implements RPL will shaped by:

- its mission;
- the relative efficiencies of RPL processes and established assessment practices; and,
- the respective quality assurance frameworks which ensure the quality, integrity and standing of Australian qualifications.

Draft national common RPL principles and operational guidelines have been developed, based on extensive consultation with stakeholders in all sectors. Comment is sought on these principles and guidelines, to ensure that the end result is useful to the sectors, and effective in providing institutions with a framework and guidance to develop their own approaches, in a way that meets the needs of students, and the communities they serve. Please visit the project website at http://www.scu.edu.au/research/rpl/index.html to obtain a copy of the draft principles and guidelines, and for information about deadlines for submissions.

Recommendations

While the national common RPL principles and guidelines will be an important component of strategies to increase the extent to which RPL is implemented, there are still systemic, sectoral and institutional issues that require attention. These recommendations augment the draft RPL principles and operational guidelines. This section outlines recommendations based on the discussion and findings in the report.

These recommendations are the considered views of the project consultants, resulting from the extensive research into and consideration of the issues. The recommendations have not been endorsed by the AQF Advisory Board or its RPL Steering Committee.

Recommendation 1: support for learners

That institutions, sectors and jurisdictions develop a suite of strategies to support learners to understand and effectively use RPL. This may include the development of formal subjects, units, modules or competencies in which students can enrol to:
- determine if RPL is an appropriate strategy in their circumstances;
- determine which subjects, units, modules or competencies in which to seek RPL in their circumstances;
- prepare their RPL applications;
- receive advice and support from teaching staff as to the sorts of experiences and learning that will be considered, and how to produce evidence that is valid, authentic, and sufficient; and,
- where appropriate and aligned to the course or qualification outcomes, develop the skills of self-assessment, self-evaluation and career planning.

Such subjects, units, modules or competencies may or may not be credit bearing in their own right. However, they may be most effective if harnessed to strategies to help learners acquire the skills they need to become lifelong learners, and if this is the model chosen, the award of credit in its own right for such a subject is a legitimate outcome.

Recommendation 2: information for learners

That institutions, relevant sectoral bodies, and jurisdictions develop information about RPL that is easily accessible and simple. It is recommended that information include the following components:

- information on the web about RPL that includes advice as what it is, how to use it, the type of learning and experiences that will be considered, what sort of evidence is required, who to contact for more information, where to go for support in preparing the application, expected timelines, and appeals processes;
- information in handbooks, and course, subject, module, unit and competency guides along the same lines;
- a clear statement of learning or competency outcomes that will be used to assess RPL applications;
- simple, introductory leaflets and other advertising to let students know about RPL and where to go to get more information;
- exemplars of effective RPL applications;
- case-studies, to provide examples of the sort of experiences and learning that can be used in RPL processes; and,
- active promotion of RPL among existing and potential students.

Recommendation 3: international RPL policy development

That the AQF Advisory Board give consideration to how Australia can participate in, contribute to, and learn from, international RPL projects, and countries that are developing national RPL policy frameworks and implementation projects.

Recommendation 4: funding

That the jurisdictions give consideration to introducing funding models that act as an incentive to implement RPL. RPL needs to be fully funded if it is to be implemented. Such funding models may focus on ways in which economies of scale can be achieved, through identifying groups or industries where RPL may contribute to addressing particular needs. Review of existing funding frameworks are necessary, particularly in higher education where universities are not funded to, nor allowed to charge students fees to, implement RPL. In the VET sector, consideration is needed to achieve consistency in the funding models used for RPL across all jurisdictions.

Recommendation 5: quality assurance

That in all sectors, jurisdictions and institutions:

- RPL be explicitly included in institutional negotiations and agreements regarding credit transfer and articulation;
- RPL processes and assessments be explicitly included in institutional quality assurance processes, particularly those to do with assessment, to assure all stakeholders of the standing and integrity of RPL outcomes;
- audits of institutional quality assurance processes and procedures include examination of the quality assurance arrangements used to underpin RPL policies and processes.

Recommendation 6: RPL as flexible learning

That institutions and jurisdictions encourage teaching practices and approaches to assessment that incorporate RPL as a component of flexible, student-centred learning, and that staff development be made available to assist teaching staff in developing these practices and approaches.

Recommendation 7: staff development

That institutions provide support for teaching and administrative staff to develop the knowledge and skills needed to effectively implement RPL, and to incorporate RPL into the mainstream of the life of the institution.

Recommendation 8: partnerships with Indigenous communities

That jurisdictions and peak bodies give consideration to funding and developing a research partnership with Indigenous communities to develop approaches to RPL that are:

- culturally appropriate;

- explore culturally inclusive approaches to providing evidence that learners have met the required learning or competency outcomes; and,
- explore approaches that draw on existing Community structures and roles for evidence that participants have met the learning or competency outcomes.

Such research partnerships need to build on the joint ANTA/ ATSIC project on developing appropriate and effective RPL models for use by and in remote Indigenous communities for VET qualifications. The findings of that report and project need to be used as a basis for the higher education, school and ACE sectors in developing appropriate models.

Recommendation 9: partnerships with industry

That jurisdictions and peak bodies give consideration to funding and developing a research partnership with industry, peak bodies, employer bodies and unions to develop industry-wide RPL projects, particularly in areas where there are low levels of educational attainment.

Recommendation 10: supporting the development of RPL in schools

That jurisdictions, ANTA, and DEST give consideration to funding a research project that seeks to understand how principles such as RPL and RCC can be effectively incorporated in the senior school certificates, while maintaining the integrity and standards of these certificates. The implementation of RPL in the senior secondary school system is in the very early stages. Research is required to develop effective approaches for including learning that occurs outside school as part of the learning that occurs within schools, particularly in the senior school certificates. The ANTA *Due Credit* Report (ANTA 2001) is timely, and the focus in that report is congruent with objectives that seek to increase the extent to which RPL is used in the secondary school system.

Recommendation 11: supporting the implementation of RPL in the ACE sector

That MCEETYA funds pilot projects that aim to:

- develop RPL modules or subjects that provide learners with support in understanding RPL and how to use it. Funding provision of this sort in the ACE sector may help learners access VET and higher education, as ACE is often used by people as a stepping stone to the other sectors, and recognising and enriching this role currently played by ACE will help to further this process;
- assist ACE in developing systems and processes that allow it to meet the AQTF audit requirements relating to RPL. Providers in the ACE sector do not have access to the same resources as do larger institutions in the other sectors, and providing this level of support will help to embed RPL as part of mainstream provision in ACE;

- develop, trial and evaluate a model which allows ACE providers to share access to trained RPL assessors to work with providers, particularly providers that are not Registered Training Organisations. This would ensure that students and clients in all ACE providers have access to RPL, even if their provider is not an RTO. This should include developing a network of trained assessors who can support each other, disseminate good practice, and ensure geographic coverage.

Government policy is increasingly focussing on the ACE sector as a key avenue for supporting people to become involved in learning, particularly those who have not had the opportunity to do so, and those whose experiences in other sectors have resulted in feelings of marginalisation and alienation from formal education and training. The MCEETYA Ministerial Declaration on ACE (MCEETYA, 2002) lists the use of RPL as a key enabling strategy for involving people in learning. The above recommendations are suggested as a means of operationalising the MCEETYA Ministerial Declaration on ACE as it relates to RPL.

Recommendation 12: developing an Australian RPL network of practitioners and researchers

That DEST considers funding and supporting the development of an Australian RPL researchers and practitioners network to undertake RPL research, and disseminate good practice models. Such a network would also help contribute to the development of more consistent policies and practices across the sectors. This project has identified RPL researchers and practitioners all over Australia in all sectors and this provides the basis for such an approach. Moreover, a cross-sectoral RPL network can build upon the existing RPL assessor networks in the VET sector in some States and Territories.

Recommendation 13: reporting

That consideration be given by the Federal, State and Territory governments to developing consistent reporting for RPL across sectors to allow for the development of nationally comparable data that provides accurate information about RPL, the extent to which it is being implemented, where it is being implemented, who benefits most, and where emerging needs are being identified.

Conclusion

RPL is intrinsic to lifelong learning policies and strategies. It will become more important as more people in society embark on lifelong learning pathways that include formal, non-formal and informal learning. The report has identified two key RPL models: the developmental and the credentialling model. RPL is a key developmental learning process that aims to support learners in developing the skills they need for lifelong learning, particularly the skills of self-assessment, self-evaluation, career planning, learning to learn and learning to be assessed. It is also is a key process that individuals use to have their existing skills recognised and credentialled. Both purposes are legitimate, and need to be supported by the development of appropriate RPL models. Individuals will need to have recourse to both models at different

times in their lives, and sometimes these purposes will overlap. The development of funding, assessment, and support models that are aligned with the course or qualification objectives remains a key challenge for the sectors of post-compulsory education and training in Australia.

RPL is still not used to the extent that would be anticipated if judgements were made on the basis of policy frameworks and the attention given to RPL by government and accrediting bodies. It has not lived up to the promise that it would act as a mechanism for social inclusion for people who have not had the opportunity to participate in post-compulsory education and training.

However, progress has been made, and this project was able to identify many examples of good practice. It is clear that there is an increasing focus on RPL, partly because it is difficult to implement lifelong learning policies without focussing on, and increasing the use of, RPL. The adoption of national RPL principles and operational guidelines common to all sectors of post-compulsory education and training represents a new stage in the development of RPL in Australia. It contains guidelines for effective practice, which if implemented, will lead to greater consistency in the way in which RPL is implemented in all sectors of post-compulsory education and training.

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14.1 Appendix: Method

This project aimed to research existing RPL policy and practice in each of the four sectors of post-compulsory education and training in Australia, as the basis for developing national RPL principles and operational guidelines that were common to all sectors.

14.1.1 Project team

The project team consisted of a consortium led by Southern Cross University. It was assembled to ensure that a researcher/practitioner from each sector was included. This was essential for two reasons:

1. to ensure that the key issues confronting each sector were at the forefront of the research process.
2. to ensure practitioner understanding was brought to bear in analysing each sector's policy frameworks, processes and strengths and weaknesses.

The extent to which policy frameworks are implemented and achieve their stated goals depends on the broader context in which policy is implemented, and the constraints and impediments, contradictory frameworks and pressures that arise in the process of implementation. In our experience, it is often essential that 'insiders' from each sector interpret and analyse the relationship between policy and implementation to ensure accurate interpretation. The team was constructed so that we could achieve this outcome.

The project team included those with cross-sectoral research and practitioner experience as well as individuals with considerable experience in their own sector. This combination was sought to ensure that sectoral issues were adequately included, while providing the cross-sectoral overview sought by the AQFAB. The project team members consisted of:

- Ned Dennis, President, Adult Learning Association
- John Firth, Assistant General Manager, Curriculum, Head of the Curriculum Branch at the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority
- Dr Peter Miller, Senior Lecturer, Southern Cross University
- Diane Newton, Research Associate, Southern Cross University
- Susan Pascoe, CEO, Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority
- Peter Veenker, Director, Canberra Institute of Technology
- Leesa Wheelahan, Lecturer, Southern Cross University (principal researcher)

The team was also supported by Rod Brightman, Senior Manager, Institute Directorate, Canberra Institute of Technology.

14.1.2 Key research questions

The key research questions that shaped the project were:

1. What are the key findings of national and international research relating to RPL, and what are the policy implications of these findings?

2. What is the RPL policy framework in each sector and jurisdiction?
3. Who applies for and receives RPL in each sector and jurisdiction?
4. What are the practices and processes in each sector and jurisdiction?
5. To what extent is RPL incorporated into teaching and learning processes, and other forms of providing credit transfer and advanced standing?
6. What policy levers promote or hinder the implementation of RPL?
7. Do the sectors share principles in common despite differing policy frameworks, processes and cultures: where are they similar and where do they differ?
8. What is the attitude of stakeholders in each sector towards facilitating RPL, particularly, the granting of credit where substantial components of awards (or entire awards) have been granted through RPL?
9. What principles do stakeholders consider should underpin a cross-sectoral approach to RPL?
10. What policy objectives should be attempted?
11. What examples of good practice exist?

14.1.3 Our approach

The approach that we used was to develop a comprehensive picture of RPL policies and practices, and facilitating mechanisms for, and obstacles to, the implementation of RPL through:

* undertaking a literature review that examined Australian and international literature on RPL, qualifications frameworks, and post-compulsory education and training policy;

* identifying international projects related to RPL, and preparing in-depth case studies of RPL in three other countries: The United Kingdom, South Africa, and the province of British Columbia in Canada. This was done to learn how other countries were implementing RPL, and to examine the consequences for policy and practice in Australia.

* ascertaining the policy of each sector and jurisdiction, and the funding models in each. We interviewed stakeholders and researched publicly available information, particularly that which was available on the web, and where such information was not publicly available, we contacted appropriate individuals who could us with information about institutional and jurisdictional policy frameworks. The outcomes of this are reported in chapter 5: RPL policy frameworks and practice in the sector, and chapter 6: Fees and funding;

* ascertaining the policy of the representative or peak bodies through direct interviews with stakeholders, and reading policy documents and information available on the web. The outcomes of this are reported in chapter 5: RPL policy frameworks and practice in the sector;

* analysis of data on who applies for, and receives RPL. We used data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001 Survey of Education, Training and Information Technology (SETIT) to analyse and compare all sectors of post-compulsory education and training, and data from the NCVER Students Outcomes Survey and NCVER

S*tatistics in Detail* to analyse RPL in the VET sector. This was augmented by findings reported by Bateman and Knight (2001?). The outcomes of this are reported in chapter 4: Who receives RPL?

- semi-structured interviews with more than 150 individuals either face-to-face or by phone. We travelled to all States and Territories to conduct the interviews. Interviews were conducted with individuals or with small groups. The interview format is contained in Appendix 14.3. We have outlined whom we talked to in the paragraphs that follow.

- interviews with staff at representative institutions that reflect the diversity within each sector. We covered universities, VET providers (including public, private and enterprise providers) and ACE providers in every state and territory. The institutions or providers were chosen to reflect the diversity within each sector, and to ensure coverage of all states and territories. We also tried to ensure that as a minimum, we interviewed an institutional leader, a member of teaching staff, and an administrator at each to try and reflect the range of perspectives within institutions. The list of people we interviewed can be found in Appendix 14.2.

  In comparison to the number of interviews we conducted with practitioners in the higher education, VET and ACE sectors, we interviewed fewer people from the school sector, although we did include some teaching staff from schools in our interviews, and their insights contributed considerably to our understanding of the issues relating to RPL for the senior school sector. The difficulties we experienced in identifying a range of practitioners in the senior school sector in all states is a reflection of the relative newness of RPL in the sector, and we recognise that our report is limited as a consequence of this. We did however, encompass all of the state and territory accreditation bodies in the school sector through extensive consultation with their representative body, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Certification Authorities (ACACA), and our project team included senior members from that sector. This participation by the accreditation bodies in the project was crucial, as it is only with the support of these bodies that RPL can begin to be meaningfully incorporated into credentialled outcomes for school students. It is clear that we are at the beginning of a process of thinking through the relevance of RPL for the school sector, and the way in which it can contribute to outcomes for students to maximise retention and success;

- discussions with, or reception of written responses from, stakeholders. In some instances organisations used our semi-structured interview format to prepare a detailed written response. In other instances, organisations responded to a short series of questions that we prepared. These questions were designed to be suitable for a small meeting or committee to discuss, minute, and form the basis of a written response. These questions are contained in Appendix 14.4. We interviewed stakeholders from, or received written responses from, the:
  - ➢ Australasian Police Professional Standards Council;
  - ➢ Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry;
  - ➢ Australian College of Educators;
  - ➢ Australian Council for Private Education and Training;
  - ➢ Australian Council of Trade Unions;
  - ➢ Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Certification Authorities;

> ➢ Australian Education Union;
> ➢ Adult Learning Association of Australia;
> ➢ Australian National Training Authority;
> ➢ Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee;
> ➢ National Tertiary Education Union;
> ➢ Construction, Forestry, Mining, Energy Union;
> ➢ Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations; and,
> ➢ TAFE Directors Australia.

- interviews with other key stakeholders, including individuals from jurisdictions, researchers, and RPL practitioners.

- interviews with people who contacted us upon hearing of the project, or people who were referred to us by others with an interest in the project. This was an important way of identifying existing practices in each of the sectors, as is demonstrated by the range and depth of case studies that we have used throughout the report.

- developing case studies that were illustrative of the issues, principles and examples of good practice. While we identified several case studies prior to commencing the project, most of the case studies we have used were identified as the project commenced, either because we found out about them from interviewing people, or people contacted us with information. In every instance, the case-studies we prepared were checked by the people who provided us with the information, and all their changes were incorporated. In other instances, we reproduced the case studies as they were written and sent to us;

- presentation of a background paper to the 11th National VET Training Research Conference, North Point Institute of TAFE, 9-12 July 2002, and the publication of this paper on the website constructed for this project. The feedback we received from conference participants and from those responding to the background paper helped to shape the parameters for the project. We participated in an ANTA Reframing the Future seminar on RPL on 4 September in Melbourne, and used the discussions there to help frame the project and report. We also participated in, and conducted consultations at, several ACE conferences in different States and Territories. In addition, we were asked to present to, and conducted a consultation with, the Australasian Police Professional Standards Council;

- an analysis of institutional websites at a representative sample of higher education and TAFE websites to determine if information was available, and the extent to which it was accessible to students. A preliminary investigation found that ACE and school sites did not have the same range of information as did those in VET and higher education, and consequently, we did not examine these to determine the existence of, and quality and accessibility of, information about RPL. We examined the websites of several private educational institutions, but in general the depth and range of material was not as extensive, and so our main focus was on public institutions in the VET and higher education sectors. We recognise that this does not cover the range of providers in post-compulsory education and training, and that our analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of institutional websites reflects only TAFE and university websites. However, we would argue that our findings and advice about good practice are

equally relevant to all post-compulsory education and training institutions and providers.

We analysed the websites of 18 universities, which included regional and metropolitan universities, and every State and Territory. The sample included universities from the Australian Technology Network;[41] the Group of Eight universities;[42] the universities established in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the universities established as a consequence of the reforms instituted by then Federal Education Minister John Dawkins in 1998. We also analysed 20 websites of TAFE institutions and/or central TAFE or VET jurisdictional authorities. The sample was chosen to be representative of the states and territories, and regional and metropolitan Australia. The outcomes of this are reported in chapter 10: RPL information on the web.

- a project website was established with questionnaires for academics, teachers, trainers, assessors, administrative staff, researchers and students. Data were collected from these questionnaires for a month (7 August to 6 September) and responses were received from 220 students, 219 Academics, 165 Administrators and 18 Researchers (622 in total). We received many more after this time; however, we have not included these numbers in the report, because we were unable to take these responses into account in writing the report.

Table 24 shows the number of respondents in each category and the sector that they come from. It shows that respondents overwhelmingly came from the VET and higher education sectors. This reflects the level of access to computers, and the extent to which using computers, email and the web is integrated into the daily rhythms of work and study. Post-graduate students are the most numerous category of students to respond to the questionnaire, and this reflects their access to the web, and to networks that disseminate information about research projects. We did make an effort to increase the number of students from other sectors, in particular from the VET sector, and contacted people we knew who could encourage VET students in general, and TAFE students in particular, to participate in the research. However, despite posting information about the project on the TAFE student websites, and encouragement by TAFE teachers to participate in the project, we did not receive a big response from TAFE students. Rather than draw any conclusions from this outcome, it is probably sufficient to say at this point that the predominance of post-graduate student responses reflects the cultural environment in which they study, which relies to a considerable extent on communication technologies such as email and the web.

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[41] The Australian Technology Network consists of Curtin University of Technology, University of South Australia, RMIT, University of Technology Sydney, and Queensland University of Technology.
[42] The Group of Eight universities consists of The University of Adelaide, The Australian National University, The University of Melbourne, Monash University, The University of New South Wales, The University of Queensland, The University of Sydney and The University of Western Australia.

Table 24: respondents to RPL project website questionnaires by sector

	Schools	ACE	VET	HE	Total
Students	4	5	26	173	**208**
Administrators	2	8	73	55	**138**
Academic/teachers	3	8	139	65	**215**
Researchers	1	1	6	7	**15**
Total	**10**	**22**	**244**	**300**	**576**

*622 responses were received between 7 August to 6 September, and these were used in the report. Some respondents did not provide a sector, and others were unclear about their sector. This mainly relates to the ACE and VET categories, and the ACE category may be under-represented partly (but not wholly) for this reason. While some respondents did not indicate their sector, they did indicate the position they held, or whether they were a student.

We were not seeking to get a statistically valid or representative sample from our web questionnaires, and if we had sought this, our approach would have been quite different. We were seeking feedback on RPL, and use of the web was an effective mechanism to achieve this. We recognise that it excludes those who do not have access to, or confidence in using, web-based questionnaires, and acknowledge that this is a limitation. However, the 620 questionnaires that were completed represent the views of a large number of people with an interest in RPL, and this provided us with useful information. Apart from the information that we gained through the questionnaires, many people took the time to contact us directly to discuss the issues in more detail, and to offer us case-studies.

We developed the website questionnaires on the basis of the findings in the literature in Australia and overseas. We used this to identify factors that facilitate or hinder the implementation of RPL. The website questionnaires were used to validate the literature, but there was also scope for open-ended responses to help us identify issues that were not covered in the literature. The approach we took means that the questionnaires were not 'objective' or (more accurately) disinterested in the sense that much research is, particularly that which seeks to start from a 'neutral' standpoint. Our website and our project were premised on the assumption that RPL is a good thing; we were seeking advice from people as to what the obstacles were, and what needed to happen to implement it more effectively. As well, our project team members provided input from the perspective of their sector, as did the AQF Advisory Board's RPL Steering Committee. We also piloted the questionnaires with students, administrators and teachers from all sectors before finally putting it up on the web.

A few respondents criticised the questionnaire not from the perspective that it was biased, but that it was not clear whether the issues that we were discussing were descriptive or normative.[43] For example, respondents were asked tell us the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement that "RPL provides students with improved access and equity to education and training." One respondent pointed out that this question was a difficult one to answer because in an ideal world RPL would provide students with improved access (that it, it is normative statement), but that in the real world, as things currently stand, RPL does not provide students with access (that is, it is a descriptive statement). We accept this criticism, and in retrospect would make it clearer as to whether the statement was normative or descriptive. While this is so, this criticism does not apply to all questions that we asked in the questionnaires, and we gained valuable insights from the responses of individuals to the questionnaires, including the open-ended questions. We were surprised at, and grateful for, the number of people who took the time to write detailed answers to the open-ended questions, and these responses provided valuable

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[43] There were a few who criticised the questionnaires on the web for being biased, however we do not think this is a valid criticism, for the reasons discussed.

information, at least as much as did the responses to the closed questions in the questionnaire.

14.1.4 Process

The next stage of this project is a public consultation on the draft national RPL principles and operational guidelines common to all sectors of post-compulsory education and training. These principles and guidelines were developed on the basis of the research, interviews with stakeholders, and responses from the web questionnaires. We are now seeking public comment on the draft principles and operational guidelines. The discussion paper with the principles and guidelines can be found at our website for this project:

http://www.scu.edu.au/research/rpl/index.html

Alternatively, a copy of the discussion paper can be obtained by writing to:

Leesa Wheelahan
RPL Project Co-ordinator
School of Social and Workplace Development
Southern Cross University
P.O. Box 157
Lismore NSW 2480

Comments on the discussion paper and draft principles and operational guidelines must be received by Monday 25 November 2002 at the above address. We welcome all feedback, and it is not necessary for comments to be confined to the specific focus questions in the paper.

The feedback we receive from the public consultation will shape the final national common RPL principles and operational guidelines. These will be submitted by the project team to the AQF Advisory Board for consideration and further action.

14.2 List of interviewees

The following is a list of:
- those who were interviewed directly for the project, either face-to-face or by phone;
- those who provided written responses using either the semi-structured interview format (Appendix 14.3) or the questions prepared for committees or organisations (Appendix 14.4); and,
- individuals who provided us with information either in the form of case-studies, or general information that we used in the report.

Australian Capital Territory

Title	Name		Organisation	Position
Ms	Karen	Bisset	University of Canberra	Director Secretariat
Mr	Stephen	Bramah	Dept of Education & Community Services	Training & Education Branch
Prof.	Marie	Carroll	University of Canberra	Pro-Vice Chancellor (Academic)
Ms	Berwyn	Clayton	Canberra Institute of Technology	Researcher
Mr	Vaughan	Croucher	Canberra Institute of Technology	Dean of Learning Services Division
Ms	Colleen	Daly	Education Department	ACE Unit
Mr	Bob	Edwards	ACT Board of Secondary School Studies	Chief Executive Officer
Mr	Ken	Jorgensen	Department of Defence	Director, Training Systems Policy, Defence Education and Training Policy Branch
Ms	Barbara	Pamphilon	University of Canberra	Head of Department
Assoc Prof.	John	Raynor	University of Canberra	Chair RPL Committee
Ms	Robyn	Sainsbery	Canberra Institute of Technology	Head of Department - Communication, Media and Music
Ms	Trixie	Van Leeuwen	Canberra Institute of Technology	Senior Manager – Education Development Centre

National

Title	Name		Organisation	Position
Dr	Carolyn	Allport	National Tertiary Education Union	National President
			Australia Vice-Chancellors' Committee	Written response
Mr	Steve	Balzary	Australia Chamber of Commerce and Industry	Director, Employment, Education and Training
Ms	Francesca	Beddie	Adult Learning Australia	Executive Director
Mr	Paul	Byrne	Australian National Training Authority	General Manager
Ms	Margo	Couldrey	ANTA	Director-Client Relationships
Mr	Jim	Cumming	Australia College of Educators	Executive Director
Mr	Lindsay	Fraser	Construction, Forestry, Mining, Energy Union	Assistant National Secretary
Mr	Rex	Hewitt	Australian Education Union	Federal TAFE Secretary
Mr	Bill	Mansfield	Australia Council of Trade Unions	Assistant Secretary

Mr	Dan	Nicholas	EdnA Online Project	Administrator
Ms	Leisa	Ridges	Council of Australian Post-Graduate Associations (CAPA)	President
Ms	Gillian	Shadwick	TAFE Directors Australia	Chair
Mr	Tim	Smith	Australia Council of Private Education and Training	National Executive Officer
Mr	Arthur	Townsend	DEST	Branch Head, Quality Schooling Branch
Mr	Helmut	Winzler, & members of the Council	Australasian Police Professional Standards Council	Executive Director

New South Wales

Title	Name		Organisation	Position
Ms	Donna	Rooney	Local Community Services Association	Project Officer
Ms	Jill	Albrecht	Hunter Institute of TAFE	Recognition Coordinator
Mr	Ben	Bardon	Central West Community College	Principal
Ms	Sue	Blythe	Western Sydney Institute of TAFE	General Manager – Strategy
Mr	Graham	Brophy	Department of Education	Curriculum Resourcing & Operations Unit
Prof	Ross	Chambers	Charles Sturt University	Deputy Vice-Chancellor
Dr	Merrilyn	Childs	The University of Western Sydney	Senior Lecturer in Adult Education Director, Research Centre for Learning and Social Transformation
Mr	Rick	Flowers	University Technology of Sydney	Director Centre of Popular Education
Dr	Lynn	Gribble	Angus Knight	Director, People Management
Prof	Martyn	Hayden	Southern Cross University	Head, School of Education
Ms	Jenny	Sinclair	Central West Community College	Department head
Ms	Sandra	Sirasch	The University of Newcastle	Deputy Executive Dean, Faculty of Education and Arts
Dr	Erica	Smith	Charles Sturt University	
Dr	Andrew	Smith	Charles Sturt University	Director of Research, NCVER (former)
Mr	Garry	Traynor	Sydney Community College	Administrator
Ms	Maria	Trevaskis	Western Institute of TAFE, Sydney	A/Director Research Policy and Evaluation
Ms	Elaine	Harris	Sydney Community College	Faculty head
Ms	Lauren	Hall	Charles Sturt University	Manager, Student Administration, Wagga Wagga Campus
Ms	Robyn	Jay	ACE NSW mid-North Coast	Education Consultant
Prof.	John	Mack	University of Sydney	
Ms	Kerri	Neveldsen	University of Sydney	
Dr	Erica	Smith	Charles Sturt University	Senior Lecturer, School of Education
Mr	John	Ward	NSW Board of Studies	General Manager

Northern Territory

Title	Name		Organisation	Position
Mr	Antoine	Barnaart	Northern Territory University	Pro-Vice Chancellor TAFE and International
Mr	Byron	Davis	Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education	Assistant Director
Ms	Elizabeth	Desailly	Northern Territory University	Associate Dean of Teaching, Faculty of Law, Business and Arts
Mr	Philip	Jones	NT Board of Studies	General Manager – School Services
Mr	Bruce	Keeley	Northern Territory University	Senior Policy Officer, TAFE, Office of the Pro-Vice Chancellor, TAFE and International
Ms	Bev	Maxwell	Northern Territory University	Senior Projects Officer, Higher Education and Research Branch
Mr	George	Sack	Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education	Lecturer

Queensland

Title	Name		Organisation	Position
Ms	Linda	Bird	University of Queensland	Chair Academic Board
Mr	Tony	Christensen	Queensland Teachers' Union	TAFE Organiser
Prof	Rod	Gerber	Queensland Studies Authority	Director
Ms	Cathy	Hazzard	Sunshine Institute of TAFE	Manager, Queensland Child Care Strategy, Cooloola
Dr	Bryon	Humphrey	Queensland Police Service	Manager, Education and Training and Support Program
Ms	Kerry	Smith	Logan Institute of TAFE (Child Studies)	Teacher
Ms	Kumara	Tarr	Gold Coast TAFE Child Studies	Gold Coast Regional Co-ordinator, Queensland Child Care Strategy

South Australia

Title	Name		Organisation	Position
Ms	Rita	Bennink	Adelaide Institute of TAFE	ALA National Executive, former WEA Adelaide
Mr	Denis	Binnion	Workers Education Association Adelaide	Director
Assoc Prof.	Vicki	Feast	University of South Australia	Dean Teaching & Learning- Division of Business & Enterprise
Mr	David	Hallan	SATAC	Manager-research and development
Ms	Jan	Keightley	Senior Secondary Assessment, Board of South Australia	Director
Ms	Adrienne	Nieuwenhuis	University of South Australia	Manager Academic Administration
Assoc Prof.	Geoff	Page	University of South Australia	Head School of International Business
Dr	Jill	Slay	University of South Australia	School of Computer and Information Science
Ms	Karin	Smith	Torrens Valley Institute of TAFE	

Tasmania

Title	Name		Organisation	Position
Ms	Irene	Allen	University of Tasmania	Student
Mr	Chris	Carstens	University of Tasmania	Registrar
Ms	Jan	Dunsby	Tasmania Assoc. of Community Houses	
Dr	Lesley	Harrison	University of Tasmania	Lecturer
Ms	Donna	James	University Tasmania	Student
Ms	Susan	O'Kane-Powell	Dept Premier and Cabinet	Women's Development Officer
Ms	Helen	Rees	Productivity Plus	Training Manager
Mr	Malcolm	Salier	Tasmanian Secondary Assessment Board	Chief Executive Officer

Victoria

Title	Name		Organisation	Position
Ms	Ruth	Barnes	Ballarat Regional ACE	Program Manager
Ms	Andrea	Bateman	University of Ballarat	
Ms	Merial	Clark	Assoc Neighbourhood Houses and Learning	Executive officer
Mr	Richard	Carter	Victoria University of Technology	Deputy Vice Chancellor, TAFE
Ms	Merryn	Davies	University of Melbourne	Research Fellow, Educational Outcomes Research Unit, Department of Education Policy and Management
Ms	Christine	Denmead	Geelong Adult Training	Director
Ms	Maria	De Sensi	Victoria University of Technology	Articulation Officer
Ms	Jane	Dewildt	ACFE Board of Vic	Member
Mr	Gareth	Evans	Scope Quality Learning	CEO
Dr	Dennis	Gunning	Victorian Qualifications Authority	Director
Ms	Judy	Jameson	Geelong Adult Training &Education	Manager-VET
Em Prof	Peter	Juliff	Deakin University & Australia Computer Society	
Ass Prof	Jack	Keating	RMIT	Faculty of Education, Language and Community Services
Mr	David	Kearney	Country Fire Authority	Manager, Training and Development, Barwon/Corangamite Area
Ms	Martha	Kinsman	The Gordon Institute of TAFE	Director
Dr	Stephen	Lamb	University of Melbourne	Senior Fellow, Educational Outcomes Research Unit, Department of Education Policy and Management
Ms	Cheryl	Lewis-Fitzgerald	RMIT	Regional learning networks –Project officer
Mr	Danny	O'Donahue	ACE Managers Network, Wangarratta	Convenor
Ms	Kirsten	MacLeod	La Trobe University	International Student Adviser, International Programs Office
Mr	Phil	Quinn	Precision Consultancy	
Dr	Terry	Stokes	Office of Higher Education, Office of Training and Tertiary Education	Director
Ms	Sue	Stolley	Kyabram Learning Centre	Executive Officer
Mr	Rob	Stowell	VETASSESS	Director

Mr	Mick	Walsh	MaST International	Managing Director
Mr	Rod	Wangman	Wodonga Continuing Education Centres	CEO
Ms	Leone	Wheeler	RMIT	Regional networks manager
Ms	Donna	White	Centre for Adult Education	Course Coordinator
Ms	Carolyn	Wood	Victoria University of Technology	Head, Admissions and Orientation, Enrolment Management Branch

Western Australia

Title		Name	Organisation	Position
Mr	Colin	Barlowe	Challenger TAFE	Teacher
Mr	Rees	Barrett	Curriculum Council of Western Australia	Director of Accreditation and Moderation
Ms	Linda	Bright	Challenger TAFE	Training Consultant
Mr	Nigel	Carrington	University of WA	Extension Unit
Mr	Neil	Caver-Smith	STARA Training	Training manager
Dr	Tim	Delaney	Challenger TAFE	Manager, Curriculum Services
Ms	Ellen-May	Eaton	Private Consultant	
Ms	Janelle	Fawkes	Pheonix Centre	Trainer
Ms	Michelle	Fletcher	Mandurah Secondary College	Teacher
Ms	Cathryn	Foot	Mandurah Secondary College	Teacher
Mr	John	Forrest	Challenger TAFE	Teacher
Mr	Malcom	Goff	Challenger TAFE	CEO
Ms	Paula	Goulding	Murdoch University	Program Chair, Information Systems
Ms	Gwen	Goodreid	Nannup Telecentre	Coordinator
Mr	Peter	Graham	Challenger TAFE	Teacher
Ms	Deb	Hamblin	Murdoch University	Executive Officer
Mr	Graeme	Harvey	Mandura Secondary College	Executive Officer, Mandurah Youth Commitment
Ms	Norma	Jeffrey	Curriculum Council of Western Australia	Chief Executive Officer
Ms	Jan	Kouwenhoven	Mandurah Secondary College	Teacher
Prof	Peter	Lee	Curtain University	Executive Dean, Division of Engineering and Science
Prof	Kateryna	Longley	Murdoch University	Pro-Vice Chancellor Regional Development
Ms	Jane	Lorrimar	Challenger TAFE	Executive Officer
Ms	Gaynor	Mitchell	Learning Centre Link-WA	Educational coordinator
Ms	Cath	O'Leary	Fitzroy Crossing Community Centre	
Ms	Wendy	Shearwood	Adult Learning Australia-WA	National executive
Mr	Richard	Strickland	Department of Training-Armadale ACE	
Ms	Barbara	Stuart		Chair Committee of Management
Ass Prof	Jo	Ward	Murdoch University	Department of Mathematics and Statistics
Mr	Phil	Westwood	Challenger TAFE	Program Manager, Hospitality
Mr	Gary	Yates	Mandurah Secondary College	Deputy Principal

14.3 Semi-structured interview format

14.3.1 Definition and policy framework[44]

1. What is recognition of prior learning? (Ask for respondent's definition and then explain how we define RPL for the project)

For the purposes of this project we have defined RPL and credit transfer as follows:

- RPL assesses the *individual's* learning to determine the extent to which that individual has achieved the required learning outcomes, competency outcomes, or standards for entry to, and/or partial or total completion of, a qualification.

- credit transfer assesses *the initial course or subject* that the individual is using to claim access to, or the award of credit in, the destination course to determine the extent to which it is equivalent to the required learning outcomes, competency outcomes, or standards in a qualification. This need not confine credit transfer to credentialed courses within the AQF framework. The key distinguishing characteristic is that it is the *course* or *subject* that is assessed for equivalence, not the student.

2. Does your institution have an RPL policy? If yes, could you please outline its key features? Ask questions in case this is understood by a different name. For example, in South Australia, the secondary school curriculum authority uses the term 'status' to grant adults exemption from the first year of their two year Senior School Certificate. If yes, could you please outline its key features? If no, go to question 5.

3. What principles underpin the RPL policy in your institution?

14.3.2 Views about RPL

4. Is RPL an important issue? Why or why not?

5. What principles do you think *should* underpin national cross-sectoral RPL principles and guidelines?

6. What *outcomes* do you think we should be trying to achieve through RPL?

7. What sort of policy framework do we need to maximise RPL?

8. What is your attitude towards a whole qualification being awarded on the basis of an RPL application in your sector?

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[44] A slight variation of this semi-structured interview format was used in interviews with, or in written responses provided by, jurisdictions, particularly from the school sector. However, we have not reproduced this, as it is essentially the same.

9. What is your attitude towards granting credit for awards based on RPL applications approved in other sectors of post-compulsory education?

including awards granted in another sector in which *partial* exemption has been attained through RPL?

including awards granted in another sector in which the *whole* award has been attained through RPL?

10. What factors impede the implementation of RPL? Can you recommend someone who can provide us with a case-study of problems that arise in implementing RPL? (Such a case study will not identify the institution or individuals involved.)

11. What factors facilitate the implementation of RPL? Can you recommend someone who can provide us with a case-study of good practice in implementing RPL?

14.3.3   Administration, funding, monitoring and data

12. How is RPL administered in your institution? Is it managed and co-ordinated centrally?

at the faculty/school/department level?

at the course level?

a combination of the above (ask the respondent to elaborate)?

13. What RPL funding mechanisms are in place in your institution?

are staff granted paid time to perform RPL assessments or provide RPL advice?

are departments/schools/courses funded to administer RPL?

what funding mechanisms do you think would facilitate RPL?

14. Do you monitor RPL and its outcomes at the level of:

the enterprise?

the institution?

the faculty, school or department?

the course?

the subject or module?

15. Do you keep data on RPL outcomes? What do the data say?

16. What do you know about who applies for and receives RPL? For example, how many, from what background?

Do non-English speaking background students, ATSI students, and students from a low SES background make use of RPL to the same extent as students from other backgrounds? Please break it down by category for each group of students.

14.3.4   Assessment and quality assurance

17. Who assesses RPL in your institution?

18. What kind of assessment processes are used to assess RPL applications?

19. What quality assurance mechanisms are in place to ensure the integrity of RPL outcomes?

14.3.5   Students

20. How are students made aware of RPL in your institution?

21. Does your institution provide advice to students in whether they may be eligible for RPL and how to prepare their application? If yes, ask the respondent to describe the process. If no:
do you think students should be provided with advice?
who should provide that support?

22. (If the answer to question 20 yes) Do you think the support provided by your institution is sufficient? If no:
what other support do you think should be provided?
who should provide that support?

23. What do students need to *know* to prepare an RPL application?

24. How easy or difficult do you think it is for students to understand RPL principles, and to prepare RPL applications? Can you give any examples?

25. Do students pay a fee to submit an RPL application?

14.3.6   Teachers/trainers/lecturers/assessors

26. To what extent is RPL included in teaching practice – for example, through allowing students to submit evidence from a work, social or community context as part of the assessment process? (This question is trying to elicit the extent to which RPL may be included *informally* in the teaching and learning process, while not necessarily going through formal RPL procedures. For example, a teacher may allow students to submit evidence in lieu of undertaking part of the assessment. In such a case a student may still be enrolled in the subject, attend all activities, and undertake other parts of the assessment. However, this sort of RPL activity would almost never be reported, but it is important to get an idea of whether these of practices take place, and the extent to which RPL is blurring the boundary between formal and non-formal or informal learning.)

27. What do teachers/trainers/lecturers/assessors need to know to implement RPL?

28. Do teachers/trainers/lecturers/assessors need training or staff development to implement RPL?

29. What standards should teachers/trainers/lecturers/assessors required to demonstrate to be able to implement RPL? Are they required to demonstrate they have met these standards in your jurisdiction/sector/institution?

14.4 RPL project consultation: Questions for committees, and organisations

Definition

This project has defined RPL and credit transfer as follows:

- RPL assesses the *individual's* learning to determine the extent to which that individual has achieved the required learning outcomes, competency outcomes, or standards for entry to, and/or partial or total completion of, a qualification.

- credit transfer assesses *the initial course or subject* that the individual is using to claim access to, or the award of credit in, the destination course to determine the extent to which it is equivalent to the required learning outcomes, competency outcomes, or standards in a qualification. This need not confine credit transfer to credentialed courses within the AQF framework. The key distinguishing characteristic is that it is the *course* or *subject* that is assessed for equivalence, not the student.

Questions

1. What are the key principles that should underpin national cross-sectoral principles and operational guidelines?

2. What factors facilitate use of RPL?

3. What factors inhibit use of RPL?

4. What quality assurance mechanisms contribute towards ensuring the standard and integrity of RPL outcomes?

14.5 Appendix: Web questionnaires