

# Recognising non-formal and informal learning: Participant insights and perspectives

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The views and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author/project team and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government, state and territory governments or NCVER

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# About the research



## *Recognising non-formal and informal learning: Participant insights and perspectives*

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Recognition of the skills acquired through non-formal or informal learning is important for a number of reasons. Individuals gain a feeling of worth and self-confidence, which encourages them to continue to upgrade their skills and knowledge, often leading to formal qualifications and improved employment outcomes. The process of recognition of prior learning (RPL) also ensures that knowledge and skills already held do not need to be repeated.

While recognition of prior learning is seen as an integral and valued component of the learning pathway and in many cases a critical catalyst to accessing formal education, both practitioners and learners have criticised recognition of prior learning for being difficult to access and implement.

There have been many studies into the nature, value and uptake of recognition of prior learning. To date there has been only a limited exploration of the experiences of people who have sought to have the skills they acquired through non-formal or informal learning recognised.

By offering interesting insights from the perspective of candidates who have presented themselves for recognition of prior learning, this report fills the gap. It covers how they become aware of their options and the factors that encourage or inhibit access to recognition of their skills and knowledge.

### Key messages

- The language associated with the recognition of prior learning process discourages people from taking advantage of it. Training institutions and systems should undertake a rigorous audit of the language used in the recognition of prior learning process and in the associated documentation, ensuring significant input from present and past candidates.
- Training institutions should ensure that mentors and assessors used in the recognition of prior learning have high-level interpersonal skills, are strongly supportive of the recognition pathway, and have high credibility in their field.
- There is strong anecdotal evidence to suggest that encouraging candidates to reflect on their learning, which should lie at the heart of the recognition of prior learning process, significantly improves their confidence and contributes to successful future learning.
- Many people remain unaware that recognition of non-formal learning is an option for them. 'Word of mouth' has been the most powerful mechanism for promotion, but there is a need for clear information regarding recognition of prior learning to be provided to individuals as early as possible.

Tom Karmel  
Managing Director, NCVER



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# Executive summary

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This study investigated the experiences of people who have used recognition of non-formal and informal learning to enable them to access a formal training qualification and/or further study. In particular, the study sought insights into how people not currently in education and training become aware of their options and opportunities regarding recognition of non-formal and informal learning. The study also investigated the factors that encourage or inhibit people from accessing the non-formal and informal pathways to formal learning.

For the purposes of this report, *formal learning* is defined as learning that takes place through a structured program of instruction and which is linked to the attainment of a formal qualification or award. *Non-formal learning* is defined as learning that takes place through a structured program of instruction, but does not lead to the attainment of a formal qualification or award. *Informal learning*, on the other hand, is not intentionally accessed by the learner, and thus is neither structured nor institutionalised. These definitions were used to ensure clarity of meaning for the people interviewed, and vary slightly from the definitions generally used across the vocational education and training (VET) sector.

A review of the literature suggests that factors likely to encourage learner engagement with recognition of prior learning (RPL) procedures include clear communication, simplified processes, tailored support for learners, and more of a focus on the way individual lives can be transformed through participation in the process of recognition. The literature identifies that the factors impeding uptake of recognition of prior learning include a lack of awareness, the complexity of the process, and the nature of the language associated with it. In addition, the literature suggests that learners devalue their own experiential learning and opt to undertake training rather than access the options and opportunities available through the recognition process.

The research involved semi-structured interviews with 72 people who were undertaking or had completed a formal qualification or award, which they had accessed using a recognition pathway. Participants came from Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory.

The information collected through the interviews was analysed using a thematic approach, which involved identifying the common 'themes' (sets of related issues, suggestions, perspectives) that emerged from an holistic analysis of the responses. The report also presents three autobiographic case studies to illustrate important findings. These case studies are written in the first person, and highlight the feelings and thought processes of each person at critical stages of their story of their recognition of their prior learning journey.

A number of themes consistently emerged from the interviews and autobiographic case studies:

- ✧ Successful access to the recognition pathway appears to be linked significantly to the possession of adequate literacy and communication skills. The companion issue here is that documentation and processes associated with the recognition of prior learning continue to be excessively complex and difficult to understand.
- ✧ Information regarding access to recognition of prior learning should be conveyed to students as early as possible, preferably before they leave school.



- ✧ ‘Word of mouth’ is a powerful mechanism for promoting the recognition of prior learning process.
- ✧ Recognition of prior learning can be an important catalyst for assisting adults, particularly women and older adults, to make changes to their life and career directions.
- ✧ It is important for institutional processes and institution-based staff who are supporting applicants seeking recognition of prior learning to overtly promote the process.
- ✧ The evidence requirements for many recognition of prior learning assessments are viewed by participants to be excessive and an impediment to access.
- ✧ Staff undertaking the role of recognition of prior learning mentor/assessor should have high credibility in their discipline area.
- ✧ The relationship between the candidate requesting recognition of prior learning and the institution-based mentor appears critical for many candidates.
- ✧ It is important for the candidate to receive strong and overt support in the workplace, particularly from the workplace supervisor.
- ✧ Support from peers, both within the institution and the workplace, appears to significantly assist success in the recognition of prior learning process for many candidates.
- ✧ The process of guided reflection, at the heart of the recognition of prior learning process, appears to be critical in promoting learning, personal and workplace outcomes.

The themes emerging from this study are consistent with much that is already known or assumed about promoting, accessing and implementing recognition of prior learning. The question must be asked, however, why the same issues keep arising. The perspectives from the candidates about the challenges faced are perceptive, and it is hoped that they will provide constructive advice, which will improve the experience of those individuals interested in pursuing the pathway of recognition of informal or non-formal learning.

# Introduction and methodology

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## Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to document and analyse the reported experiences and perspectives of people who have used recognition of non-formal and informal learning for access to a formal training qualification, and thereby offer insights into factors with the potential to enhance use of this recognition pathway. These insights can be used to inform policy development and implementation.

The specific research questions used to guide the study were:

- ✧ How do people not currently in education and training become aware of their options and opportunities regarding recognition of non-formal and informal learning?
- ✧ What factors encourage people to document and use their non-formal and informal learning for access to formal learning?
- ✧ What factors inhibit people from accessing the non-formal and informal learning pathway to formal learning?
- ✧ What support do people report as being necessary or useful if they are successfully to transform their non-formal and informal learning into a formal learning pathway?
- ✧ What do people who have used the non-formal and informal learning pathway consider to have been the major benefits for them of the experience?
- ✧ What suggestions do people have for improving current processes and expanding access?

## Definitions

### Formal learning

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in its 2005 report, *The role of national qualifications systems in promoting lifelong learning*, defined *formal learning* as learning that takes place through a structured program of instruction and which is linked to the attainment of a formal qualification or award. Expanding on this definition, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) suggests that the qualification or award should attest that ‘a person has achieved learning outcomes or competencies relevant to identified individual, professional, industry or community needs (ABS 2007, p.29).

### Non-formal learning

*Non-formal learning* was defined by the OECD as learning that takes place through a structured program of instruction but does not lead to the attainment of a formal qualification or award. Colardyn and Bjornavold (2004, p.71) describe this educative form as consisting of learning ‘embedded in planned activities that are not explicitly designated as learning, but which contain an important learning element’.

## Informal learning

The OECD defines informal learning as the learning that results from experience of daily work-related, social, family, hobby or leisure activities. Informal learning 'is often haphazard and influenced by chance, [occurring] ... inductively through action and reflection' (Marsick & Volpe 1999 cited in Conlon 2003, p.285). During the course of this study, the researchers found that many of the candidates interviewed had considerable difficulty understanding the difference between non-formal and informal learning, as defined by the OECD. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, *informal learning* was explained as that not intentionally accessed by the learner.

## Recognition of prior learning (RPL)

The Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board (2004) has defined recognition of prior learning as:

... an assessment process that 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.

In 2007, the Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard (AVETMISS) made a minor addition to this definition, emphasising that the process is designed to focus upon 'previously unrecognised skills and knowledge' gained outside the formal education and training system.

Van Kleef (2007) suggests that recognition of prior learning is founded upon three basic beliefs: first, there is an acceptance that post-secondary-level learning does occur informally; second, that it is possible to assess such learning without endangering student success, the integrity of qualifications or the credibility of educational institutions; and third, that these educational institutions can and should recognise any prior learning that is assessed as relevant to education and training programs. In a similar vein, Harris (2006, p.1) suggests that there is general agreement that adults possess learning gained from life and work experiences, and that this learning 'when subject to reflection, articulation and assessment, may be worthy of recognition and accreditation within formal education and training or workplace contexts'.

## Methodology

The study was designed around a series of 72 semi-structured interviews (Borg & Gall 1989) with learners who had used recognition of prior learning as a pathway to their formal learning. Participants came from a range of social, cultural and employment backgrounds and were identified with the assistance of personnel directly involved with recognition processes in public and private training institutions in New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory. All but three of the learners interviewed had applied for recognition of prior learning at the time of enrolling. This reflects the fact that all of the training institutions involved in the study advise, to varying extents, newly enrolling students that recognition of prior learning is available and should be considered prior to commencing their program of study.

Interviews were generally of 45 minutes duration and, wherever possible, were conducted face to face. The information collected through the interviews was analysed using a thematic approach (Leedy 1997). Essentially, this involved identifying the common 'themes' (sets of related issues, suggestions, perspectives) that emerged from an holistic analysis of the set of interview notes, rather than a collation of ideas and issues based on an analysis of each individual respondent. At the time of interviewing, respondents were asked if they would be available if the researchers sought to contact them at a later date to get their feedback on what appeared to be the major findings of the study. The findings of the report were subsequently validated with a randomly selected sample of 12 of the learners interviewed.

Six of the people interviewed were subsequently asked to work with the researchers to construct autobiographic case studies (Creswell 2005). These people were chosen on the basis of their capacity to provide rich information about the key variables identified in the literature as influencing decisions relating to access to recognition of prior learning, namely: geographic location (rural/urban); age/work experience; and cultural background (particularly immigrants in relation to native-speaking Australians). Autobiographic case studies are written in the first person by the individuals themselves, and make a particular contribution to knowledge, in that they highlight the feelings and thought processes of the person at critical stages of their recognition of prior learning story. Each 'story' is presented in the words actually used by the respondents. Three of the people asked to write autobiographic case studies subsequently chose not to have their stories reported in this study for reasons that they decided not to convey to the researchers. In line with the ethics approval for the study, the researchers were not able to probe further the reasons for the withdrawals. The other three stories are reproduced later in this report.

A literature review was also undertaken to establish what is already known about the strengths and weaknesses of the non-formal and informal learning pathway.

The major limitation of the methodology used for the study relates to sampling, and the subsequent capacity to generalise from the findings. While the researchers requested access to a representative sample of learners who had used recognition of prior learning pathways, the reality was that the contacts provided tended to be biased towards those enrolled in hospitality and business studies, more recent (and therefore younger) candidates (whose contact addresses the institutions were more likely to still retain), and those for whom this process had proved successful. Another limitation of the study is that candidates who had not used recognition pathways were not included in the sample interviewed. The reason for this was primarily related to available time and resources, but it does mean that some issues—particularly those relating to student motivation to access recognition of prior learning—were not pursued as comprehensively as might otherwise have been the case.

Further discussion of the methodology employed in the study and the questions asked of interviewees is provided in appendix 1.

Characteristics of the sample interviewed for the study are provided in appendix 2.

# A review of the literature

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A number of substantial studies over recent years have documented the implementation and practice of recognition of prior learning in Australia (Wheelan et al. 2002; Bateman & Knight 2003; Bowman et al. 2003; Smith 2004). Recognition has been presented as a key plank in lifelong learning, a critical strategy for enhancing skill development and addressing skill shortages, and a mechanism for promoting equity and social inclusion.

The research generally has identified relatively limited uptake of recognition of prior learning, particularly by those who could gain most from having their work and life experiences assessed and certified. Factors identified as barriers to successful uptake include: a general lack of awareness about recognition; an acknowledgement by learners and educators that recognition processes are too bureaucratic, complex and costly; a dearth of good-quality recognition information and support for the candidate; unsupportive funding arrangements; and a devaluing of recognition of prior learning by educational institutions and practitioners.

## The extent of non-formal and informal learning

The Victorian Qualifications Authority (2004, p.19) notes that ‘it is difficult to estimate the provision of informal learning. This reflects the scale and diversity of the programs and activities as well as the nature of informal learning which is often both a part and a product of seemingly non-educational activities.’ Nevertheless, data provided by the Productivity Commission in 2008 suggest that less than 5% of VET learners undertook recognition of prior learning in the period 2002–06.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics survey of adult learning in Australia 2006–07 found that, while 1.3 million (12%) of Australians aged 25–64 years had participated in some type of formal learning, almost three times that number (3.3 million or 30%) indicated that they had been involved in non-formal learning, and over six times that number had been involved (8.1 million or 74%) in learning informally (ABS 2007, p.3). The same survey revealed that the major focus for those participating in non-formal learning was a work-related course, which was either undertaken as a requirement of a job, as a means of gaining extra skills, or for personal interest. The types of informal learning most commonly engaged in by Australians were: learning from a family member, friend or colleague; reading manuals, reference books, journals or other written materials; and using computers or the internet.

A survey conducted in Canada by Livingstone (2000) concluded that adult informal learning is very much like an iceberg—‘mostly invisible at the surface and immense in its mostly submerged informal aspects’ (p.9). The survey, undertaken by the National Research Network on New Approaches to Lifelong Learning (NALL), found that Canadian adults dedicated approximately 15 hours per week to informal learning. Livingstone (2000, p.1) concluded that: ‘Virtually all Canadians are active general learners who know a lot more than they will ever be able to demonstrate in specific education and training courses, and they will get more out of these courses if they can put more of their relevant prior learning and experience into them.’

## Benefits of recognition: The policy perspective

Since the release of the 1996 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report *Lifelong learning for all*, lifelong learning has been seen as a strategy to enhance economic prosperity and aid in building and sustaining social stability. Lifelong learning is described as the development of articulation, credit transfer and recognition pathways and qualifications frameworks which are designed to open up universal access and opportunities for further and ongoing education and training. Thus, recognition 'is seen as a way to bridge different forms of learning outcomes, as a tool for strengthening the permeability of qualification systems and as a way to facilitate lifelong learning' (Bjornavold 2007, p.6).

The major benefits of recognition of prior learning to the Australian economy have been identified as: avoidance of unnecessary duplication of training; encouragement of upgrading of skills and knowledge; improved employment outcomes; accelerated progression through learning programs; and savings in time and money for individuals, employers and systems (Bateman & Knight 2003; Blom et al. 2004; Victorian Qualifications Authority 2004; Misko, Beddie & Smith 2007). Acknowledging the economic importance of these benefits, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in 2006 established an initiative that sought to improve the capacity of existing workers and employers to have their skills identified and certified. Supporting the policy, the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry argued that:

If upskilling of existing workers is to reach its full potential to contribute skilled workers, RPL is an essential factor. Many workers have developed skills from long time employment in industries ... but are reluctant to commence trade training from the beginning. RPL provides a pathway for their skills to be recognised and their period of training shortened making the commencement of training more attractive and completion more likely.

(Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry 2006, p.4)

Recognition, therefore, is seen as a critical mechanism for improving pathways to training and work in a setting where a shortage of skilled workers is a major concern for governments and the broader economy (Spencer 2005), although it is important to note that recognition can not, of itself, *create* skills (Werquin 2007).

Policy-makers and educators alike consider recognition of non-formal and informal learning as an important means for addressing social inclusion (OECD 2005; Misko, Beddie & Smith 2007). The contention is that recognition of prior learning has the potential to alleviate marginalisation and promote equity by opening up learning pathways to formal education for 'disadvantaged and discouraged learners' (Victorian Qualifications Authority 2004, p.24). Harris (cited in Blom et al. 2004, p.24) contends that recognition of prior learning provides an opportunity to 'break down (often discriminatory) barriers to access and routes to progress; to advantage the disadvantaged and the excluded; to challenge the exclusive practices of formal institutions'. However, Bateman and Knight (2003) found that engagement with recognition of prior learning was lower for those in equity groups, a factor confirmed by Cameron (2004) in her study of recognition of prior learning and mature-age job-seekers.

## Benefits of recognition: The learner perspective

Much is made in the literature of the potential of recognition to transform the lives of individual learners by building their confidence and self-esteem. By engaging successfully with the process, learners are perceived to be better able to understand and value the usefulness of personal skills and knowledge gained from various experiences and contexts outside any formal educational setting. Little research-based evidence exists, however, regarding the extrinsic and intrinsic benefits that can accrue to individuals from participation in the recognition process.

A trial recognition program conducted by the Victorian Qualifications Authority in 2004 suggested a range of extrinsic benefits that may accrue from recognition of prior learning to learners, including: enhanced employment prospects; formal validation and certification of prior learning; augmentation of individual portfolios; and improved access to formal education and training opportunities. Similar benefits were identified in a limited national study undertaken by Bowman et al. in 2003, although this study found the key extrinsic benefit to be a reduction of time in gaining a qualification.

Blom et al. (2004) found that employees who had accessed skills recognition in an enterprise-based training organisation considered that the main benefits for them were: having existing personal and technical skills learned through life and work experience recognised and certified; being able to identify gaps in their skill set; and having opportunities for networking with other staff within their organisation. Moreover, these employees saw real value in going through the recognition process: firstly, because it was a useful reminder of 'how much I do know'; and secondly, it was a means of 'certifying' the outcomes of the often extensive non-formal training they had previously undertaken.

Commenting on recent Canadian research, Van Kleef (2007, p.4) reports a further set of extrinsic benefits for the learner from recognition of prior learning, claiming that those who have undertaken this process 'have been found to be successful in their subsequent studies, achieving higher grades and graduation grade point averages, as well as having lower course failure rates and higher program completion rates than traditional students'. A more recent Canadian study by Arscott et al. (2007) found that successful assessment of prior learning was a positive indicator of future success in both education and training and employment in the human services field. There is, however, no methodologically rigorous Australian research regarding these potential benefits.

Whittaker, Whittaker and Cleary (2006, p.314) suggest that many of the benefits of recognition 'often go unnoticed and unrecorded' because they are intrinsic to individual learners, being personal and often subjective in nature. Research into the recognition of prior learning has consistently identified the transformative benefits of recognition, particularly greater self-confidence, improved self-esteem, and higher motivation for learners to continue with their studies. According to Whittaker, Whittaker and Cleary (2006), another transformative effect noted by participants in the recognition process is an increased self-awareness as learners, 'a perceived change in status ... by way of a change from "non-learner" to "learner"' (p.314).

## Barriers to recognition

Recent Australian studies have suggested that the major barriers to engagement with recognition of prior learning include: a lack of awareness of recognition; the complexity of the process; the exclusivity of the language surrounding recognition; a devaluing by learners of their own experiential learning; and a preference for participation in training (Bateman & Knight 2003; Bowman et al. 2003; Wheelahan et al. 2002; Smith 2004).

Australian studies have consistently found ignorance among learners about recognition and how to access it. Booth et al. (2005), for example, found that employees in the Australian residential aged care sector had low levels of understanding about the complexities of vocational education and training and were unfamiliar with the concept of recognition. This lack of knowledge meant that they elected not to undergo recognition, despite the fact that they would gain considerable benefits from doing so. Overseas research strongly supports the Australian experience. The Aarts et al. (2003) study in Canada, for example, found that a third of learners had no knowledge about recognition of prior learning before enrolling in their program of study.

Most recent Australian research has identified the complexity of the recognition process as a major barrier to access (Wheelahan et al. 2002; Bateman & Knight 2003; Bowman et al. 2003; Smith 2004). The contention is that the recognition of prior learning process, particularly at the institutional level, is overly bureaucratic, time-consuming, costly, excessively detailed and difficult

to understand. The types and amounts of evidence required have demanded excessive time to accumulate, while assessment processes have been identified as daunting, burdensome and unnecessarily complicated (Blom et al. 2004; Booth et al. 2005). This issue of jargon and the language surrounding the recognition process is also seen as a critical barrier to successful learner engagement with the process. Summarising these perceptions, Smith (2004, p.5) concludes: 'Complexity, as well as the appearance of complexity, appear to be major disincentives for students seeking RPL, and it further seems that many providers will not be motivated to promote and implement RPL as a valued process for students if they themselves must interpret complex, often imprecise and jargon-riddled policies and documentation.'

Many of those writing on the subject of recognition have concluded that learners do not necessarily have the language to describe their work and life experiences in a way that meets the requirements of academic discourse (Wheelahan et al. 2002; Northedge 2003; Bowman et al. 2003; Spencer 2005). Peters (2006), for example, described the experiences of candidates seeking to reflect on and express the products of their prior learning against a set of learning outcomes. She noted that they all struggled to describe how their experiential learning translated into a framework of formally constructed learning outcomes. Wheelahan et al. (2002, p.9) argues that '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 application.'

A consistent theme in the literature is the lack of appreciation by individuals of the value and extent of what they have learned through work and life experiences. Reporting on a Canadian study, for example, Livingstone (2000, p.16) noted that 'much of the individual and collective adult learning that this survey documents had previously been unrecognized by the respondents themselves'. In fact, there is considerable evidence to indicate that people either have denied that they have skills, are unaware that they might have valuable knowledge, or have not considered that the extent of the knowledge gained from informal learning is sufficient to make them eligible for recognition (Hoffman & Dyson 2002; Wheelahan et al. 2002; Werquin 2007). As Hager (1998, p.533) notes, 'learners themselves, influenced by prevailing assumptions about education and knowledge, are often unaware of the significance, range and depth of their informal learning.'

Data collected by the Centre for Curriculum, Transfer and Technology (2001) found that many learners felt a much greater sense of security from 'doing the course' than they did with engaging with a process of prior learning assessment and recognition. In a similar vein, Bowman et al. (2003) found that, even when some learners went through the process and were granted recognition for parts of their courses, they preferred to undertake the course in full because they placed greater value on the formal learning experience, or preferred the social interaction with their peers, or considered the training was an opportunity to update their existing knowledge.

## Strategies for improvement

Several studies have noted that recognition outcomes could be improved if providers of recognition services made better connections between learners and the process. Improved information and information dissemination, clear guidelines, the use of plain English and a range of communication mechanisms beyond the printed form have been regularly described as essential elements in raising the profile and understanding of recognition (Cleary et al. 2002; Bowman et al. 2003; Blom et al. 2004). Making better connections, Dyson and Keating (2005) conclude, means promoting the process to potential candidates in such a way that they can clearly see where their non-formal and informal learning fits or matches with learning outcomes, or the system that they were wanting to access. Of equal importance is the active promotion of the many benefits that can be gained by engaging in the process. The Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning (2002, p.4) proposes the following strategies for improving learner connectivity: literature targeted specifically



at community-based locations; the use of websites; greater communication between institutions and other organisations; information-sharing between organisations; and information in languages other than English.

One constant theme throughout the literature is the need to make the processing of recognition as streamlined and user-friendly as possible (Bateman & Knight 2003; Bowman et al. 2003). Ensuring that systems and processes are flexible and reliable and that strategies for assessment are efficient in both time and cost are deemed to be integral to improved implementation and administration of recognition of prior learning (Dyson & Keating 2005). Significantly, many authors have proposed that, for recognition of non-formal and informal learning to make a difference to the socially excluded, the processes must be carefully tailored to address the specific needs of the various client groups that fall into the category (Cameron 2004; Bowman et al. 2003; Booth et al. 2005; Whittaker, Whittaker & Cleary 2006).

The importance of effective models of support for candidates is also emphasised by a number of writers. Blom and her colleagues (2004), for example, found recognition processes worked well where candidates were supported by mentors or assessors with available time to assist, explain and encourage. Other approaches described as effective involve the use of coaches and the development of peer support networks (Bateman & Knight 2003; Bowman et al. 2003; Bateman 2006). There is also a strong case in support of a group approach to recognition of non-formal and informal learning. For example, the Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning (2002, p.4) has recommended 'an egalitarian network be created by encouraging an environment of group sharing and team working'. In a similar vein, Whittaker, Whittaker and Cleary (2006, p.314) suggest that enhanced interactions between learners and the assessor could 'generate discourse that involves an exchange of ideas and perspectives aiming to help individuals in the group identify their learning from these experiences'.

Another strategy for improving the uptake and outcomes of recognition described by a number of authors (Cameron 2004; Whittaker, Whittaker & Cleary 2006) is making more effective use of the transformative possibilities that the process can provide. Rather than simply focusing on the academic value gained from recognition, it is also important to openly acknowledge and promote the impact that recognition can have on preparing learners for life and work, as well as further education.

Learners undertaking RPL as a route into further learning should be encouraged to think about their involvement in the process more directly in terms of the way it can transform their sense of self. They should be encouraged to perceive themselves as taking control of their own learning, which is both empowering and motivating, rather than as simply responding to the demands of academic validation, which, though necessary, can be highly de-motivating. (Whittaker, Whittaker & Cleary 2006, p.314)

## Conclusion

Learning gained through work and other life experiences is acknowledged in Australia and other countries as a vast, often untapped resource that can be mined for the economic, social, political and psychological benefit of individuals, communities and society. As a consequence, recognition of non-formal and informal learning is a critical focus in the relevant policies of many governments. It is seen to be essential to the development of lifelong learning and a key mechanism for cost-effective upgrading of skills and knowledge, so essential in an environment where skill shortages are a major concern.

Recognition of learning accumulated outside the formal educational system is also seen as a means of opening up access and opportunities for the marginalised and disadvantaged. However, learner engagement with the process remains low, even though it means not having to repeat learning already achieved, allows accelerated progression through training, lessens the costs and workloads of learners and increases their confidence and self-awareness. Factors impeding uptake have been

identified as a lack of awareness, the complexity of the process and the nature of the language associated with it. In addition, learners devalue their own experiential learning and opt to undertake training rather than access the options and opportunities that recognition offers. To expand learner engagement, the literature emphasises the importance of improved communication, simplified processes, tailored support for learners and more of a focus on the way individual lives can be transformed through participating in the process of recognition.

# Themes from the interviews

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This section presents the major themes to emerge from the interviews and autobiographic case studies. A theme was considered ‘consistent’ if it was raised by at least 20% of the sample (that is, at least 15 respondents), although in all cases, the themes identified emerged from a clear majority of respondents. The themes identify areas worthy of further research, debate and consideration for their possible contribution to policy and practice at both system and local levels.

The themes are ordered according to the frequency with which particular issues or concerns were raised by those interviewed. It is important to note, however, that frequency of comment is not an indicator of importance—real or perceived.

*Successful access to the recognition pathway appears to be linked significantly to the possession of adequate literacy and communication skills. The companion issue here is that the documentation and processes associated with recognition of prior learning continue to be excessively complex and difficult to understand.*

Of the 72 learners interviewed, 57 made some mention of difficulties in reading and understanding the explanatory documentation accompanying recognition of prior learning. Typical comments were ‘I was totally bamboozled by the language’; ‘I simply couldn’t understand what I was supposed to do’; and ‘it was not clear at all what documentation I was expected to provide, or what would or would not be acceptable.’ People who have limited confidence and competency in English language, including migrants for whom English is not their first language, appear to have particular difficulties in reading and understanding recognition requirements, completing necessary paperwork and providing documentary evidence.

The key point that respondents made here is that language should not be a barrier to vocational access. Suggestions for addressing this issue made by those interviewed included:

- ✧ have students help write the rules so that they are in language that potential students can read and understand
- ✧ make the recognition of prior learning requirements ‘less complex and less pedantic’, particularly the forms and required documentation
- ✧ rationalise documentation, thereby cutting down how much is needed
- ✧ expand the use of voice recognition software ‘to avoid pressure on candidates to have to use high-level written communication’
- ✧ use multiple-choice rather than short-answer questions wherever possible
- ✧ provide as many online examples as possible for filling out the forms and providing documentation
- ✧ provide ‘interpreter assistance for migrants and mentors for those with literacy and learning difficulties’.

*Information regarding access to recognition of prior learning should be conveyed to students as early as possible, preferably before they leave school.*

When asked to identify the most effective ways of making people aware of recognition of prior learning, one of the most common suggestions from those interviewed was ‘do it while students are still at school’. Nevertheless, not one person interviewed was aware—on the basis of their own experiences or those of their children, colleagues and friends—of any school having provided any ‘real information’ about recognition to students. The consistent view was that school teachers seem to be overtly encouraging students to get work experience while at school, or to take a year off after Year 12 to travel and get work experience (the ‘gap year’), yet seem unaware that students might be able to subsequently use those experiences for recognition towards a formal award in a training institution.

*‘Word of mouth’ is a powerful mechanism for promoting the recognition of prior learning process.*

A consistent message from those interviewed is that informal communication networks—recommendations from friends, employers, work colleagues, community members and teachers—are given high credibility and can have a significant influence in convincing people to seek recognition as access to a formal qualification or award. ‘If one of your mates has done RPL, and it worked, you are going to believe it can work for you too.’

A parallel and consistent message was that ‘RPL advertising—brochures, websites, and so forth—is largely a waste of time. People generally don’t read it, and even if they do, it doesn’t mean much. I mean, you know it’s advertising and only half truth.’ This view would appear to be in conflict with attempts to better market recognition of prior learning in workplaces through written or web-based media. The researchers were not convinced, however, that the situation in the workplace is as clear cut as those interviewed were suggesting.

Among the suggestions made for improving the dissemination of information about recognition of prior learning were having people who had successfully used these processes talk at social gatherings, community organisations, sporting clubs, and to staff in the workplace itself. A number of respondents lauded the ‘shop front approach’ which is part of the Skilling Solutions Queensland model. Their view was that: ‘people who haven’t done any education since school, or who have bad experiences, aren’t likely to go to a formal TAFE [technical and further education institute] or whatever to get information about RPL. But they might check out a shop in a shopping centre that doesn’t look like a school or college.’

*Recognition of prior learning can be an important catalyst for assisting adults, particularly women and older adults, to make changes to their life and career directions.*

Many of those interviewed indicated that they had found out about recognition of prior learning when tentatively seeking information about a training course for the purpose of changing the current direction of their life. Many of these people were women looking to return to the workforce, either because their children had now left home or because of financial pressures, particularly associated with the drought in rural areas. Few of these people indicated that they would have enrolled in their training course if they had not been granted significant recognition of prior learning. In some cases, this was because being granted recognition gave them the personal confidence and self-esteem to go on and do the program. In others, it was because they simply were not prepared to commit to the time commitments of the full course. (This particularly applied to people over 45 years of age.)

*It is important for institutional processes and institution-based staff supporting recognition of prior learning applicants to overtly promote the recognition process.*

Of the 72 people interviewed for this study, 51 stated that they did not believe that their training institution was genuinely committed to the recognition of prior learning process. Typical comments

were ‘They’re only interested in RPL as a way of making money, not to help students’; ‘if they can’t make money from it, they’re not interested’; and ‘if they genuinely supported RPL, they would promote it much more enthusiastically and make their procedures a lot more user-friendly.’ Many of those interviewed indicated that ‘front office’ staff usually were very supportive, but ‘the language and body language of the teachers when you talk to them about RPL is a real put down. They don’t seem to think it is something you should be doing.’ A number of teachers responsible for assessing recognition of prior learning applications allegedly make statements that convey a strong negative message about the process, such as: ‘The reason we’re doing this is to see if you are as good as those who have done the proper course.’

A consistent message from those interviewed was that unless training institutions and their teachers openly and genuinely support recognition of prior learning, potential candidates will be frequently turned away from the process. Of the 72 people interviewed in this study, 43 made a complaint about the turnaround time for documentation. The allegation is that paperwork ‘bounces back and forth for what are often quite minor modifications or additions, but it can take weeks—sometimes months—to come back’.

*The evidence requirements for many recognition of prior learning assessments are viewed by participants to be excessive and an impediment to access.*

Quite simply, some recognition of prior learning assessors ‘seem to want a semi-trailer full of documentation to confirm even the simplest competency’. Candidates who are already achieving at a high level in the workforce appear unconvinced about the level of written detail required by many technical teachers. ‘If you know your trade, you don’t need mountains of evidence. You just need the right evidence.’ Further, many of those interviewed commented that being able to document evidence ‘is more a test of your written skills rather than technical skills. If they want to know if we can do the tasks, then they should be observing most of that in our workplaces.’

Over 90% of those interviewed indicated that they knew one or more friends or colleagues who had decided not to pursue recognition of prior learning because of the amount of paperwork required to be completed. A majority of those who did persevere with the paperwork said they only did so because of the strong support of their institutional mentor. This is an issue about risk management, about balancing the quality dimension of having sufficient relevant evidence and the motivational dimension of minimising bureaucracy for candidates.

*Staff undertaking the role of recognition of prior learning mentor/ assessor should have high credibility in their discipline area.*

Concerns about the level of industry knowledge and recent experience of the teacher undertaking the assessment process were raised by 19 (26%) of those interviewed. A typical comment was: ‘It quickly became obvious that the assessor did not know anywhere near as much about aged care as I did, and clearly had spent very little time in a facility, at least in the last few years when so much has changed. How, then, could she be making valid assessments about my knowledge and skill?’

*The relationship between the recognition of prior learning candidate and the institution-based mentor appears critical for many candidates.*

Every person interviewed had some comment to make, either positive or negative, about the critical influence of the recognition of prior learning ‘mentor’. In every case where the candidate was happy with the process and its outcomes and felt that he or she had gained a great deal professionally and personally through the pathway, the institution-based mentor was posited as a major reason. Those interviewed indicated the criticality of having someone they could contact at any time during the recognition of prior learning process for explanation or moral support: ‘the open-door policy of my mentor provided the safety net I needed to succeed.’ What was stressed, however, was the need for a candidate to connect with the ‘right’ mentor—someone with whom they could feel comfortable,

with whom they could share both positive and negative experiences, and whom they feel confident will do the very best they can to support the candidate.

One critical role of the mentor, which is elaborated below, is to guide the process of reflection. 'Without my mentor, I wouldn't have realised how much I had done and, more importantly, how much knowledge and skill I had to have to do it'.

*It is important for the candidate to receive strong and overt support in the workplace, particularly from the candidate's workplace supervisor.*

Many of those interviewed stated that it is very important for people seeking recognition of prior learning to a formal award or qualification to 'believe' that they will be strongly supported by their workplace supervisor and colleagues. Support is not only seen to relate to assistance in documenting and validating experience but also to 'emotional support—the feeling that they are with you, that they think what you are doing is valuable, that they are proud of you for doing it.' The critical role of the workplace supervisor in helping recognition of prior learning candidates 'unpack' their already acquired knowledge and skill was emphasised by many of those interviewed.

*Support from peers, both within the institution and the workplace, appears to significantly assist recognition of prior learning success for many candidates.*

Many of those interviewed stressed the importance of being able to discuss issues with other people going through the same processes and experiences. 'It's good to be able to talk to people who, you know, aren't threatening but who understand what you're going through. It gives you a lot more confidence. It's also good to be able to let out the frustrations to people who you know will understand and not judge you for doing that.' A small number (six) of those interviewed had been involved in a group or team approach to recognition of prior learning assessment. All six people felt that the approach had been particularly valuable, and helped them to reflect better on their experiences. 'It was great to have people going through the same process as you, challenging what you had to say. Listening to what they had to say also made me think about a lot of things I had done but probably wouldn't have remembered by myself.'

*The process of guided reflection, at the heart of the recognition of prior learning process, appears to be critical in promoting learning, personal and workplace outcomes.*

There was universal agreement among those interviewed that the most valuable part of recognition of prior learning was not the credit granted but rather the confidence and self-esteem they gained by reflecting on what they already had done and learned. There was also universal agreement among those interviewed that the reflective process was far more powerful and effective when guided by a mentor. 'It is amazing how much you have really done and learned in your life, but you'd never realise it thinking about it yourself. There are so many things you just don't even think about on your own. It was so good having someone probing and probing my memory deeper and deeper. I think that was the best thing about RPL, no doubts.'

An interesting assertion made by 12 of those interviewed was that the process of reflection could be carried beyond the recognition of prior learning procedures, creating 'an approach to learning and doing' which contributed to greater success in their program of study and, it was alleged, greater effectiveness on the job because knowledge and skills could be contextualised better in what had already been experienced.

# Autobiographic case studies

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This section presents autobiographic case studies of three people who have accessed the recognition pathway. Jenny is 45 and lives in a capital city, Annette is 57 and lives in rural Australia, and 32-year-old Joe is an immigrant. These stories provide personalised insights into the influence of geographical location, age, work experience and cultural background on the experiences of recognition of prior learning candidates, as well as addressing many other issues identified through the literature review and interviews conducted for this study.

The case studies are written in the respondents' own words, and provide the information they wanted to present in the form they wanted to present it. The names of the people have been changed to protect their privacy, as have the names of the institutions and people with whom they interacted. The stories, however, are true.

## Jenny

I was a trainee and did my Diploma of Children's Services. I've been living in this city all my life, my family has been here for five generations. I've done my Year 10 in High School. I'm 45.

The highlights of my life are having my two children and I count doing my Certificate as an achievement too. I first enrolled with the XYZ Training Company and got RPL'd bits and pieces with them as well. Half way through doing the course with XYZ Training I swapped to TAFE 'cause I wasn't getting anywhere with them. Got some RPL with TAFE, they looked at what I'd done with XYZ Training.

What prompted me to do the course was my old manager (of the Child Care Centre where I worked), who I've worked with on and off over the last few years. She was the room leader and I was the assistant. She said I should do it. I ended up working for her again, as she owned the Centre that I was working at. She told me that I should do my Certificate '[because] I'll get RPL'd for heaps of it' and I decided to go for it. I've been doing Child Care for 21 years now and I know it all, without actually knowing that I know it. Do you know what I mean? Really I'm not a good learner, I'm a little bit slow and it takes lots of time and people to explain things simply to me. That's why I really hadn't wanted to do any kind of training, but she said, you'll be fine, she was going to help me. And I thought, well why not.

I thought it would be great having that piece of paper saying that after all these years I've already done stuff—yes that I AM capable of doing it. Oh I also just thought it would give me a head swell. And it would look really good on my resume. Yes that piece of paper would back up what I already know. But I was worried about whether I would be able to understand it and to put it into the right words, 'cause I'm not fabulous with my words. But then I thought it was about time, I've been working in Child Care for so long that I should have the paper work to say that I am capable.

I was sent out some paper work from both training places as I did some RPL. But I got frustrated with XYZ Training, that's why I swapped over to TAFE. The paper work was very, very confusing. I ended up sitting with my manager and she helped me get through what we needed and then I went and gathered the information which we thought was relevant and had a look at it and sent it off. There were a few bits and pieces that XYZ Training needed more information on, they hadn't

explained it properly. Then with TAFE they sent out paper work explaining what we had to do and they actually said that I was able to use the information that I had gathered with XYZ Training, 'cos a lot of stuff sort of cross-referenced, and went from one unit to another. It was still confusing with TAFE but not as much and Tessa the TAFE teacher, oh she was wonderful. She actually came out on several occasions and sat down and went through and crossed off what I had and what I didn't. If there was something that I needed she sent me off running to my room to get stuff that I needed. So that was great—fabulous.

Along the way, I felt very apprehensive and frustrated. I wasn't sure whether I was gathering the right information and some of the wording they were using I couldn't relate it to what I actually needed, I got confused. I think it could have been a little bit clearer, more specific. Yes I was frustrated with XYZ Training, but I was also getting frustrated at myself because I was starting to panic and thinking oh, I'm not getting the right information to them, I'm not understanding what they actually want. If they had made it a bit clearer, it would have made it easier. What helped me most was having Tessa [from TAFE] come out and telling me exactly what I needed.

One of the things that made it hard to get RPL was me not understanding some of the questions, wondering if I had the right information to go with the question. I haven't got confidence when it comes to things like that, I feel a little bit dumb and backward. But I know that I'm not, so that's why it was great when they actually came out and observed me, it just gave me confidence. The other thing that made it hard was not knowing exactly what was needed, the specific information and also me not being confident in myself.

I probably wouldn't have done the course if I hadn't got RPL. I don't think I would have had the time. Also I found some of the things very similar, they should have joined them together into one module. I felt like I was doing some things over and over again. I felt the things I got RPL for did help me through the rest of my course. Having the experience and knowing, I felt like I knew the answers because I'd been doing it for so long. The RPL was good as it reinforced things again; it made me think about things that I hadn't thought about. Refreshing what I knew.

The major advantage of RPL is that you are refreshing things in your mind that you hadn't thought about. You're kind of going over stuff that is second nature to you, but seeing it written, you think, oh yeah, I do know that. Getting the Certificate faster was also good. Also just checking that you are doing things right and that you were current and up to date. There aren't a lot of disadvantages with doing RPL, there are more advantages. The major disadvantage is that it needs to be more hands on, there needs to be someone there and clearer ideas about what information is needed.

To make sure the RPL process goes smoothly you have to really find out what information to gather. To have someone that is really helpful would be good, someone that you could go to on the premises. Not just a TAFE person, but someone in your workplace that is responsible and can be the go between me and the TAFE. They need to have a clear idea of what is needed, so you are not always bothering the TAFE and that way you're not as frustrated and you're getting answers straight away.

To make the RPL process better have someone come out and watch you while you are on the floor and get them to walk around the room, looking at the information that's there and relevant for the module. They know what they're after and they can see me doing it, it is better. It makes the learning process really daunting and apprehensive, when you haven't got that confidence. What would also be good is to have something [the paperwork] in more layman's terms.

Yes RPL was definitely worthwhile, it made the process a lot faster and I think having my manager push me towards it was great. Tessa [from TAFE] was just absolutely fabulous, I can't say enough about her. Child Care is something that I've done for most of my life and I enjoy it and to be scared and not go ahead because I haven't got the confidence ... I think there are people out there, who are like me ... the easier it is the better.



RPL is worthwhile, particularly for people who have learning problems and are worried about failing. I'm very happy I have it over and done with. Yes it was a worthwhile experience even though it was scary and confusing and frustrating.

## Annette

I completed my education to Year 12 at Wheatbelt High School in regional Australia. My major interest at school was in what we called in those days Home Economics—you know, things like cookery, dressmaking, nutrition, laundry and all those sort of things. All I wanted to be when I left school was a Home Economics teacher, and I actually was offered a scholarship to do that, but it didn't work out that way. My family were third generation farmers, and there simply was no money for me to go and live in the city while I did my course, so I got a job locally.

I spent the next couple of years working in the kitchen at a flour mill. I was employed to make bread and scones—not mainly for eating, but for testing the flour. The job was OK, but it wasn't exactly what I wanted to do either.

Then I got married to a farmer-grazier, and for the next 35 years I basically worked on the property. We had four kids, and basically got on pretty well. When the kids left about 14 years ago, I did some work at a local retirement village as a kitchen hand and then as assistant cook. That lasted about five years. Then the village decided to outsource its cooking to a catering firm. I made a bid for the contract, and was successful, working there as contractor for another 7 years.

Then two years ago, we realized the property was simply too large for someone my husband's age, so we sold it to our eldest son and his wife and moved to a much smaller property of around 50 acres. That property was too far away for me to travel to the retirement village, so I had to give up the contract. Unfortunately, the drought quickly hit us, and it became necessary for me to obtain new part-time work.

All my training was in hospitality, but now I was in a less remote location, I quickly found that it is very hard to get a job—even part-time—without a formal qualification. So I fronted up to the local TAFE to see what I needed to do to get a qualification.

The TAFE people told me that my first step should be to go and have a chat with the people at Skilling Solutions Queensland who specialized in something called recognition of prior learning. The people at Skilling Solutions were very friendly, and the lady there said: 'Look! A lot of what you have done would be classified as RPL'. She referred me back to the TAFE college, where I was introduced to a hospitality teacher called Dave.

Dave asked me for all of my records from over the years. He wanted references from employers, contracts of employment, and even menus and staffing rosters I had put together while a contractor. Luckily I still had most of these. I was going to dispose of a lot of the documents, thinking I would never use this stuff, and I really did come close to throwing it all. It was also lucky that I had done a number of food safety courses and the like over the years because Dave said these were great for RPL.

For the next couple of months, I had to meet with Dave for 2 hours a week to show him what documents I had, to tell him what I had done, and to answer lots of questions he wanted to ask. The travel was pretty exhausting, but I thought it would be all worthwhile. I also found that time and time again I couldn't remember things I had done—you know, the details—and they would come back to me days or even weeks later, and we had to adjust everything. Eventually, Dave told me I would be able to finish my Commercial Cookery course—which normally took 4 years—in just 3–4 months. That was fabulous!

RPL had saved me over three years of study—fantastic. On top of that, I got a \$500 discount on the couple of subjects I did have to take at TAFE, thanks to Skilling Solutions Queensland. The

thing was, though, that if I hadn't fronted up to TAFE because of not being able to get a job, I would never have known that RPL existed. And if Dave hadn't taken such a personal interest in my application and worked with me over such a period of time, I probably wouldn't have got the qualification either.

I have to say that, at my age, I wouldn't have done the course if I had to do the full period of time. Without RPL, I wouldn't have the qualification and I wouldn't have the great restaurant job I now have. I gave it my best shot, and it came off.

One thing that was a problem was the delay in getting the qualification after I finished the course. It's sort of cancelling RPL out to some extent if you get time off your course through RPL and then have to wait months at the end to get your qualification!

RPL was nice for my own satisfaction. It's good to feel that you've actually achieved something. That you've got something to show for your efforts. The point is I guess that you're never too old to learn and never too old to improve yourself. I'm 57, and still learning.

Oh one last thing. The best people to learn about RPL from are people who have been through RPL. I reckon the system should be making more use of them as advertisers and advisors.

## Joe

I have been in Australia for almost 7 years now. My friends and I try very hard to get a job, but it is not easy. We came from a country where things are not so good now. Much fighting. People stealing all you own. Much of what we remember is no longer like that. My parents are still there but hide because they are afraid. It is not good. You are so lucky in this country.

I do what work I can get, but all the time they say 'where is your qualification?'. I say 'I can do this work' but they say 'show me the qualification.'

I am working three days each week for a man who owns a fruit shop. He says to me 'my son went to technical college and got certificate' but I say to him 'how can I afford to go to college? It takes so long to get qualification.' Then he says to me 'they have this thing called RPL. My son tells me. It means you do not have to do so many subjects at college. You can do the course faster. You go and ask.'

So I go to TAFE college and they say to me 'here is information. You go away and read. Fill out form and then come back.' I try to read, but it does not make sense to me. I do not know the words very much, and I do not understand what they say. I show my boss, but it does not make sense to him all that much as well. My friend Siri has degree from university, and he help translate for me so I can fill out documents, but even Siri not sure what they want in some parts.

So I go back to TAFE, and they say to me 'if you want this processed, you must pay \$30 for administration fee and you must pay \$500 because you must pay the same cost as the first unit of your course.' Then they say to me if I don't get the RPL done within four days, I will also have to pay a late fee, because they have a RPL deadline for the semester. This is more money than I have. I have to borrow from my friends.

Then I am sent to a man in the business section at TAFE to help me. He is very nice and tries to help me, but says 'You realize that you will not end up with a proper qualification. You will not be as good as those who do all subjects.' He says 'what you want to do this for? You should be doing the whole course if you want to get on. It will be much better for you if you do the whole course.' But I say to him 'I have done much of this before. I already know much of what is in the course. I have been doing this for many years. Why should I have to do this again?'. So he says that is my decision, and tells me what I have to do.

Siri and I have made a list of all I think I have done, and man at TAFE says ‘Where is your proof? Where are your school certificates? Where are the references from your employers?’. I explain that in my old country, it is not easy to get those papers, and that when I came to Australia, most of what I had was left there. He says ‘contact people in your country and get the documents sent’ and I say ‘I cannot do that. My country is very dangerous, and I can not contact my parents without putting them in danger’ and he says ‘then that will make your recognition much harder.’ He also tell me that what I did in my old country may not be counted because we did not do some things properly in that country.

I decide this is all too hard, and go away, back to my job at fruit shop. My boss says to me ‘what you give up for. Go to another College.’ He says this over and over until I decide to go to another college because I can not stand him saying this all the time. Now I am very glad because the next college was excellent.

Some of my friends had been to the Ken Blanchard Business College and were very happy at the way they were treated, so I give it a try. I explain what I am trying to do, and I am straight away given a ‘mentor’ called Kate. Kate explains everything about RPL to me in very easy language that I understand. I tell Kate about my problems, and she says ‘don’t you worry. I am here to help you. We will solve all your problems. You are a bright man, and you will do very well.’ I feel very happy, and try very hard to answer all of Kate’s questions.

Kate tells me that RPL is a very good process, and many people who use it do even better than those who simply do the course. She tells me that what she needs to do is work with me to identify what I already know and can do, and to make sure I can show that. She asks me lots of questions, but they all make sense to me, and we make a long list. She also comes to my work and watches what I do, not just the technical things, but working with customers and stuff.

Eventually, I got 30% of my certificate with Ken Blanchard Business College as RPL. I was very happy. Further, I did not have to pay any administration fee or late fee or \$500 for the first unit. I have now finished my qualification and have been able to get a full time job. I am very grateful to my boss and my friends and to Kate at Ken Blanchard Business College. Without them, I would not be so very happy and in lots of trouble.

## Comments by the researchers

A critical aspect of autobiographic case study methodology (Creswell 2005) is that the ‘stories’ are presented in the words actually used by the respondents without subsequent analysis by the researchers. In this way, each reader can interpret what they read in relation to their own context and purpose, without any introduced bias by the researcher(s).

While the researchers wish to comply with the basic principles of the autobiographic case study methodology, there are nevertheless at least three important issues to emerge from the stories that do need to be highlighted, so that they can be integrated into the conclusions to be drawn from this research study.

First, the studies confirm the view of the great majority of those interviewed that TAFE institutes in particular primarily view recognition of prior learning as a process of examining documentary evidence. Jenny, Annette and Joe all refer to the emphasis on collecting and presenting documentary evidence to their TAFE college. Jenny, for example, refers to the dilemma of ensuring that she had the ‘right’ information; Annette comments on the time she spent demonstrating how comprehensive her documentation was; and Joe was required to provide a plethora of documentary ‘proof’, including school certificates and references. A related issue here is that all three candidates talk about collecting information and documentation—not about assembling evidence. This suggests that the candidates are not strongly aware that they are actually assembling a case for advanced standing and, in turn, see the exercise as one centred around quantity of information rather than quality of

evidence. It would seem that this may suggest, in part at least, that the quantity rather than quality message is being disseminated, albeit unintentionally, by the training institution.

Second, Jenny, Annette and Joe all refer to significant difficulties in reading and interpreting the documentation. In all three cases, they needed assistance to help them understand what was required and in filling out the documentation. The complexity and lack of 'user-friendliness' of the documentation is a significant concern, particularly as this message has been consistently highlighted by research studies for more than 15 years. Alternatively, the criticality of a good institution-based mentor to assist with the identification and presentation of evidence and the completion of necessary documentation would appear an important message from all three case studies.

Third, the stories provide strong evidence that candidates' initial experiences with recognition of prior learning are frequently less than satisfactory, and that they may need to move to an alternative institution to get the level of support and outcome they desire. Jenny, for example, found it necessary to move from the XYZ Training Company to TAFE, while Joe found it necessary to move from TAFE to Ken Blanchard Business College. On the other hand, Annette initially went to Skilling Solutions Queensland, which was able to recommend an appropriate provider, who clearly satisfied her needs. This issue may not so much reflect on the approach and support from particular training institutions as on the initial lack of confidence and trepidation possessed by those seeking recognition of prior learning for the first time.

# Conclusions

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This study provided information and insights in relation to six research questions:

*How do people not currently in education and training become aware of their options and opportunities regarding recognition of non-formal and informal learning?*

The very clear message from those interviewed for this study is that ‘word of mouth’ is by far the most effective way of raising awareness about recognition of prior learning process and the opportunities it has to offer. In particular, information provided by peers and co-workers—particularly if those people have had a positive experience themselves—appears to be most highly valued. Information about recognition of prior learning conveyed verbally by employers to their employees also appears to be a very effective conduit for raising awareness of recognition of prior learning.

The reality would appear to be, however, that a significant number of people know little if anything about recognition of prior learning prior to seeking enrolment at a training institution, when information is usually conveyed as part of the enrolment process. It is reasonable to assert, therefore, that many people who could benefit significantly from recognition of prior learning are not accessing it, not because they aren’t motivated to do so, but because they don’t know about it. When questioned about their awareness of paper-based information about recognition of prior learning (brochures, posters and the like) distributed to workplaces, social clubs and so forth, more than half of those interviewed said they had never seen such material or, if they had, they had failed to read it. This strongly suggests that paper-based information on recognition of prior learning may not be a cost-effective process for distributing this information to potential candidates.

*What factors encourage people to document and use their non-formal and informal learning for access to formal learning?*

The information collected through this study strongly suggests that information and encouragement provided by friends, work colleagues and employers is the single most powerful trigger for people making the decision to document and use their non-formal and informal learning experiences for recognition of prior learning. Further, the ongoing support of friends, work colleagues and employers appears critical to maintaining the level of commitment necessary to complete what is often a long and complex process.

Clear, concise, and readily accessible documentation and processes for providing and validating evidence also emerged as critical factors for encouraging people to pursue the recognition pathway, as did easy access to an institution-based mentor with significant experience and industry credibility in the intended field of study.

*What factors inhibit people from accessing the non-formal and informal learning pathway to formal learning?*

The study identified seven major factors that reportedly inhibit people from accessing the recognition of prior learning pathway to formal learning: inadequate skills in relation to the literacy requirements for completing the process; excessively complex and time-consuming documentation; the lack of an appropriate institution-based mentor; a negative attitude to the use of recognition of

prior learning conveyed by assessors and mentors (and by the nature of much of the associated documentation); the high cost of obtaining recognition at most institutions, both in terms of fees and travel expenses, and in terms of time; an inability to provide all of the evidence demanded by some assessors; and the perception that many recognition of prior learning assessors are not well versed in the industry area they are assessing.

*What support do people report as being necessary or useful if they are to transform their non-formal and informal learning successfully into a formal learning pathway?*

The people interviewed for this study were very clear about what they consider vital in the way of support during the recognition process. They need information and documentation in plain English and that is easy to follow; they want competent institution-based mentors; they need the ongoing encouragement and overt support of their employer; and, above all, they need support and encouragement from friends and work colleagues who have themselves successfully used the recognition pathway.

*What do people who have used the non-formal and informal learning pathway consider to have been the major benefits for them of the experience?*

The people interviewed for this study identified four overriding benefits from having accessed recognition of prior learning processes. First, it provides older workers or people who had been out of the workforce for some time with a lever for effecting life and/or career path changes. Second, as they progressed through the recognition process, almost all of those interviewed stated that they had gained much more confidence in themselves as learners, and much more confidence in their capacity to resolve educational issues on their own. Third, every person interviewed indicated that perhaps the major benefit of having engaged in the process related to the significant increase in self-esteem they experienced. Recognition of prior learning allowed them to realise just how much they had already achieved, how much they already knew, and how much they felt they were now capable of doing. It had made them feel much more worthwhile as a person. Finally, several of those interviewed stated that recognition of prior learning had taught them to use the process of critical reflection as a learning and problem-solving tool, which they considered had directly and positively influenced their subsequent learning and workplace effectiveness.

*What suggestions do people have for improving current processes and expanding access?*

The following suggestions for improving current recognition of prior learning processes and expanding access were made by the people interviewed for the study:

- ✧ Directly involve students from a range of social and cultural backgrounds in writing the recognition of prior learning rules and developing the associated documentation and processes.
- ✧ Simplify the requirements for attaining recognition of prior learning and, in particular, focus on quality rather than quantity of evidence.
- ✧ Rationalise documentation, thereby cutting down how much is needed.
- ✧ Expand the use of voice recognition software as a way of addressing the significant literacy barrier for many students.
- ✧ Use multiple-choice rather than short-answer questions wherever possible, again as a way of addressing literacy and cultural issues.
- ✧ Provide as many online examples as possible for filling out the forms and providing documentation.
- ✧ Make interpreter assistance readily available for migrants.

- ✧ Ensure that appropriately trained mentors are available for all recognition of prior learning candidates, and particularly for those with literacy and learning difficulties.
- ✧ Provide information about the benefits of recognition of prior learning and how to access it to students before they leave school.

It is important to note that the findings from this study have revealed little that is not already known or assumed about recognition of prior learning, at least in part, except perhaps the issue of reflective practice as an aid to subsequent learning and workplace performance. The question must be asked, therefore, is why the same issues keep arising. Why, for example, do recognition processes remain essentially bureaucratic and aligned to formal lock-step education procedures when the focus is on non-formal and informal experiences and ways of learning? Why is it that there has been little change in the recognition of prior learning model that has consistently been identified as inadequate, when the recognition process itself is so strongly and overtly supported by governments and industry?

The answer may, in part, lie in the lack of any rigorous longitudinal research that has established the longer-term educational impact and industry-based benefits of recognition of prior learning. Arguably, recognition is currently viewed by most VET practitioners and decision-makers as a mechanism for enhancing access to formal qualifications. There is an emerging body of anecdotal evidence, however, to suggest that participation in the recognition process may have a marked impact on both educational and workplace performance, because it appears to enhance reflective capacity for the learner and better facilitate the contextualisation of vocational learning in authentic workplace experiences. The longitudinal research required to confirm such beneficial outcomes from recognition would need to be of at least three to five years duration, and funding would need to be made available for that entire period. Nevertheless, if recognition of prior learning could be shown to significantly improve educational and workplace performance, as well as enhance access to formal qualifications, then perhaps much greater priority might be focused at all levels of the VET system on addressing this current inadequacy.

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# Appendix 1: Methodology

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The study was designed around a series of semi-structured interviews (Borg & Gall 1989) with learners who had used recognition of prior learning as a pathway to their formal learning.

Participants from a range of social, cultural and employment backgrounds were identified with the assistance of personnel directly involved with recognition processes in public and private training institutions in New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Victoria, and the Australian Capital Territory. Participants included both present and past students. All participants were informed that their participation in the project was voluntary and could be terminated at any time. They also were informed that they would not be identifiable in the final report. The project methodology received approval through the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of New England.

Interviews were generally of 45 minutes duration, although some lasted more than an hour. Wherever possible, interviews were conducted face to face; however, because of work commitments, travel concerns or privacy issues identified by the participants, 29 of the 72 interviews were conducted via telephone. Where the participant provided permission, the interviews were recorded on a digital voice recorder for later transcription. In all other cases, the researchers maintained structured notes of the interviews. The following 12 open-ended questions were used for the interviews:

- Q1 Can you just chat to me a little about your background—where you have lived, what you have done, your education, hobbies, perhaps some key achievements or highlights—basically, your story prior to you deciding to seek entry to your current program of education or training?
- Q2 Can you tell me a little about what was going through your mind when you made the decision to seek further education or training? What prompted you to think about this course of action? What did you see as the potential benefits? What did you see as the potential negatives? Why did you finally make the decision to proceed?
- Q3 How did you become aware of the possibility of gaining RPL (recognition of prior learning) for your life experiences, achievements, and the things you had learned through any other informal means?
- Q4 Tell me a little about the processes you went through to get RPL credit for your program of education or training? What did you have to do? Who helped you? What information did you receive, and from whom or where? What were you feeling along the way?
- Q5 Thinking back, what were the things that helped you most in gaining RPL credit?
- Q6 Thinking back, what were the things that made it hard for you to gain RPL credit—the things that got in the way or that maybe made you think about giving up?
- Q7 Honestly—would you have undertaken your current program if you had not been able to get RPL?
- Q8 How are you going with your current education or training? Do you feel you are progressing as well and as quickly as you hoped or expected? Do you think that your prior learning experiences—the things for which you were given RPL—have helped you with your study? If so, in what particular ways? If not, in what ways have they proved inadequate preparation?

- Q9 If a friend came to talk to you about the possibility of seeking RPL into an education or training program, what would you tell her/him were the three major advantages? What would you say were the three major disadvantages?
- Q10 What would you tell the friend were the most important things for him/her to do to ensure the process not only worked but worked smoothly?
- Q11 If I gave you a magic wand that allowed you to do three things to make the RPL process better, what would they be?
- Q12 Are there any other issues to do with your experience with RPL that you would like to mention?

The information collected through the interviews was analysed using a thematic approach (Leedy 1997). Essentially, this involved identifying the common 'themes' (sets of related issues, suggestions, perspectives) that emerged from an holistic analysis of the set of interview notes, rather than a collation of ideas and issues based on an analysis of each individual respondent.

Based on the capacity to illustrate important findings, six of the people interviewed were subsequently asked to work with the researchers to construct autobiographic case studies (Creswell 2005). Three of these case studies have been reproduced in this report. Autobiographic case studies are written in the first person, and make a particular contribution to knowledge in that they highlight the feelings and thought processes of the person at critical stages of their story.





