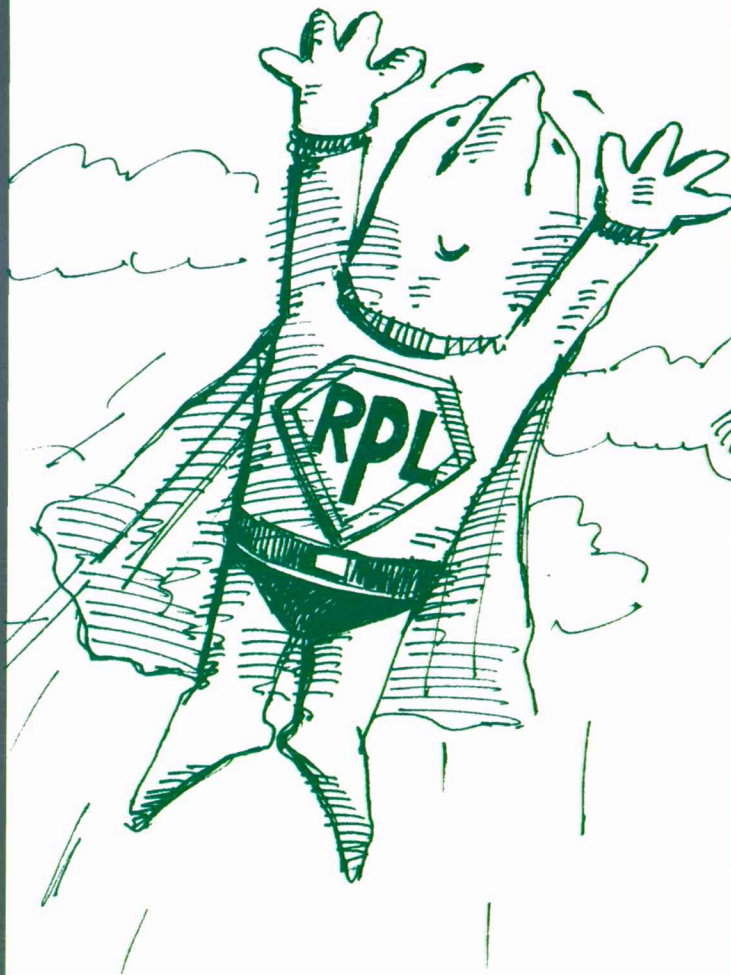


# Improving RPL

A training providers'  
perspective

RICHARD KENYON  
JOHN SAUNDERS  
JENNIFER GIBB



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Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs  
Commonwealth of Australia

 NCVER

Adelaide 1996

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# Preface

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This book is designed to improve the quality and use of recognition of prior learning (RPL).

- It looks at RPL practices around Australia and identifies the best aspects of the activities.
- It identifies the barriers which are preventing many people from using RPL opportunities and recommends ways to deal with those barriers.

'Improving RPL' is compiled from discussions with a wide range of organisations including training recognition authorities, training providers, enterprises, community organisations, industry training advisory bodies and industry organisations.

A companion volume focusses on the workplace and an easy-to-read magazine, designed to inform a more general audience, has also been published.

This book is for those people in the workplace who are designing an RPL process or who want to improve an existing RPL process.

It represents a distillation of many examples of RPL and is in two parts. The first part gives a snapshot of what is happening and analyses why. The second part is a 'how to' toolkit that highlights some of the best practical approaches, solutions to common barriers and quality principles.

If you want to know why you need RPL, the first part offers convincing evidence. If you want to know how to apply the best methods, the toolkit will give you the means.





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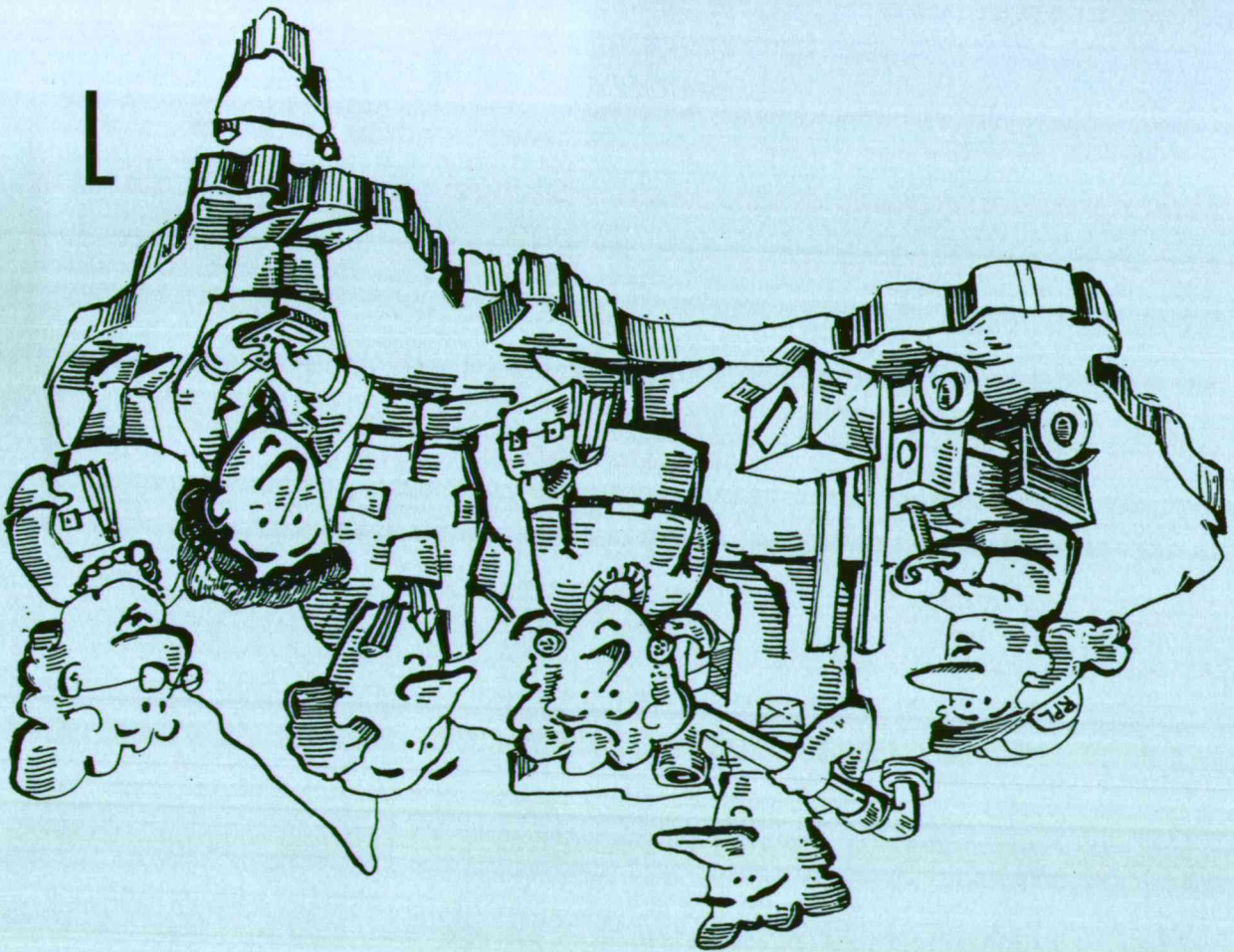
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# RPL in Australia today







# RPL in context

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## The changing nature of training in Australia

### Training reform

The training reform processes in Australia, as agreed by the federal, State and Territory ministers of vocational education and training in 1992, place considerable emphasis on the recognition of prior learning. The broadly agreed National Framework for the Recognition of Training (NFROT), which sets out relevant policy, includes RPL as part of assessment. One of the five assessment principles states that *Provision must be made for the recognition of prior learning*. RPL was seen by the ministers as potentially beneficial to people in the workforce who had gained skills informally and to disadvantaged groups including women, who had had less access to formal training.

The NFROT statements on RPL make no distinction between assessment and RPL for the purposes of recognising workplace competency or for the purpose of awarding a qualification. Before the current national drive to put greater emphasis on training to meet industry needs and to better recognise the on-job and off-job components of learning, there were clear distinctions between the processes of 'recognition' in workplaces and those in training institutions. Not all of the distinctions have yet been broken down.

The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) is based on the attainment of learning outcomes specified in accredited curriculum documents, as were the more traditional vocational qualifications, and not on industry competency standards.

### The link between competency standards and curriculum

As the elements and performance criteria of the standards and the learning outcomes of the curriculum become more closely aligned, the distinction between which is assessed is becoming less important. One problem with this has its roots in the different perceptions people have of the quality of the endorsed industry competency standards. Industry standards have been criticised for having too little regard for values, attitudes and underpinning knowledge, and as being too task-specific and compartmentalised to assist integrated and holistic development of competence and expertise. Some developers of vocational education and training curriculum have not seen the competency standards as satisfactory curriculum descriptors.

## Successful use of standards for new curricula

What is happening in industries that have no history of formal training or those which are looking at programs for employment levels which were previously not serviced? Here standards development is being completed before the development of curriculum and is largely independent of existing training material. The problems described above appear to be non-existent in these cases.

Competency standards, by providing a focus on workplace outcomes and performance appear to facilitate the use of RPL.

## Industry's view

For those in the workplace and those in industry training advisory bodies, there are concerns about training providers retaining the sole power to offer qualifications. Some industry representatives believe that, because they know the requirements of their industry better than an organisation which is solely a training provider, they should control the industry's credentials. However, in several cases, a provider is an integral component of the industry training arrangements and receives full industry support for the issue of qualifications.

The policy of the federal coalition government states: 'Accreditation of providers, programmes and certification will be in the hands of industry, subject to broad government supervision', a statement which suggests that industry will be in a strong position to see changes introduced which address the criticisms raised.

## Defining recognition of prior learning

RPL in the workplace is simply comparing the skills, knowledge and attitudes that individuals have with those they need to perform effectively at work.

### A working definition

*The acknowledgement of skills and knowledge obtained through formal training, work experience and/or life experience.*

VEETAC Working Party on Recognition of Training, November 1991

*In this definition 'skills' are seen as embracing both manual (psychomotor) and attitudinal skills, and 'acknowledgement' as involving some judgement or assessment process.*

Many people and organisations think RPL is a term which only applies to processes used by training providers, or with accredited institutional training. There is strong support in the workplace for using the term 'recognition of current competency', RCC. This reflects the growing awareness and use of competency standards which define what people are required to know and do in terms of the outcomes they achieve. The word 'current' is important because this focusses on things that a person knows and can do *at the time* rather than things they knew or could do in the past, but have forgotten or lost touch with. But the notion of currency is also important for training

providers. It is both sensible and logical to recognise only current skills and knowledge, for example, so that those granted recognition can cope with further training. Many training providers are happy to apply the term RCC to the work they do.

The differences in terminology and definitions are not really important. Many of those involved with RPL know what they are doing and what they want to achieve and are getting on with the job with a fair degree of success. Others, especially those who are just getting started, do not need definitions as much as they need guidance on how to begin, what is involved, what the rules are, whom they can talk to and how to get some help.

The term RPL is used in this book because it is more widely recognised than RCC.

## Assessment and other common factors

It is a common belief amongst those involved with RPL that granting *recognition* to a person is an assessment process. In other words there is a benchmark against which the person is assessed, and there is a process of gathering evidence which results in someone making a judgement. Typical benchmarks are:

- elements or performance criteria from units of competency in industry or enterprise standards
- learning outcomes and associated assessment criteria from training modules

Consider another definition of RPL.

*Recognition of prior learning or experience is a form of assessment used to determine whether a person has achieved, through informal and formal learning and experience, the required competence for entry and/or credit in a recognised course or training program.*

Rumsey, D 1994, *Assessment: Practical guide*, DEET

This definition emphasises assessment, but it also assumes that benchmarks are always to be found in recognised training programs. This may not be true in all cases. However, it does state that RPL may be used for entry into further training or to enable accreditation against defined learning requirements, so it picks up the major outcomes.

Another common view is that RPL must result in an outcome that has broad recognition. It may result in a qualification or it may merely result in an updated employee record, but the recognition must extend *beyond* the RPL applicant and the assessor.

The following are other common factors.

- RPL is always an individual process. It is applied to one person at a time and takes proper account of the individual's background and their current skills and knowledge.
- RPL most often relates to learning which has occurred in an informal way, in other words, skills and knowledge that were not learned in a structured training program

although short, formal training courses can often contribute to this more complete learning process.

- RPL generally relates to learning which has occurred over a relatively long time.

## What is and what is not RPL

For training providers definitions of RPL and related terms become even more important when reporting and documenting their activities. How accurately and comprehensively they are described can affect the level of funding that public institutions receive and the level of funding between the federal government and State or Territory governments. It is most important to distinguish between RPL and credit transfer. The following definitions have been proposed for the 1995 and 1996 data collection of national vocational education and training statistics:

*RPL—The client has been granted exemption for the module on the grounds of training or other experience that corresponds to the learning outcomes of the module and which do not come under existing credit transfer protocols. This scenario could involve considerable resources in assessing these studies or life experience.*

*Credit transfer—The client has been granted exemption for the module after having previously studied another module with the same learning outcomes on the grounds of formal pre-determined credit transfer arrangements.*

Credit transfer is not normally an individual process but the application of an established rule. It ought to be quicker and easier for all involved. Another distinction that helps to make the difference clear is to identify who does the assessment. With RPL the training provider is responsible for assessing the applicant, but with credit transfer the provider relies on the assessment made by someone else and recorded in some form of credential.

## Integrating on- and off-job training and assessment

### **The nature of training and assessment**

The strong distinction which used to exist between traditional assessment at the end of the delivery of a course of training and the process of assessment for RPL is becoming less well-defined.

The drive for more flexibility and on-job content of training and assessment is resulting in more open systems, a greater variety of learning resources, more self-paced approaches, the acknowledgement of experiential learning and less reliance on classroom delivery. For example, if a trainee in a remote location undertakes a training program via open learning, the assessment process he or she undergoes may include the unsupervised completion of written tests and assignments, over an extended period of time, with statements from the employer or supervisor responsible about related work performance. There is a similarity in this form of assessment to RPL and many people are now becoming less concerned about RPL as they accept these sorts of changes.

Increasing use of RPL, which focusses on an individual's capabilities and thereby provides an individual training needs analysis, is increasing the demand for training flexibility. This means that individuals will need a variety of starting points and a variety of training content. One identified barrier to RPL provision is its potential to disrupt planned training programs and to reduce class numbers to uneconomical levels.

### **Where do the best assessments occur?**

It can be argued that extra demands and extra evidence available in the workplace make assessment in this context both more valid and more reliable. In industry's view, greater demands are placed on assuring the quality of assessment and RPL in the workplace than were ever required for training providers. Industry personnel recognise that workplaces demand:

- consistently high performance of particular skills over time
- performance of tasks within strict timelines to specified quality standards
- high levels of interpersonal skills with customers and/or fellow workers
- punctuality, initiative and hard work

All these characteristics can be observed and assessed as a part of workplace assessment generally, including RPL.

It is often very difficult for the training college to duplicate the complexities of the workplace environment. People face tough problems at work, many of which do not lend themselves to single solutions. Rather the workplace allows a range of responses, some more appropriate than others, but not simply right or wrong. In many cases it would seem that the most reasonable solution to the complexities of the training provider/workplace divide is an *integrated* form of assessment.

### **RPL to the rescue?**

Wilson and Lilly (1996) suggest that RPL assessment has the potential to eliminate the divisions between the workplace and training institution. They note that the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) is seeking to develop alternative workplace-based pathways to the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) using RPL. The 1995 ANTA report to the Ministerial Council states:

*Recognition of prior learning processes and partnership arrangements between enterprises and registered providers should be developed to assist individuals gain national recognition of their competencies under the AQF.*

ANTA, 1995, *The national agenda for vocational education and training*, report from the ANTA Board to the Ministerial Council, Canberra

Bridging the divide between workplaces and training institutions, by integrating assessment, is a major challenge for all involved in training and education. This includes workplace personnel and training providers, federal government and State and Territory governments, as well as those responsible for policy and those who implement it.

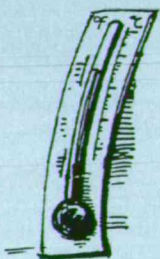
RPL can assist because, often, experience gained in the workplace is used to satisfy the demands of the training institution. This is also what is required for integrated forms

of on- and off-job assessment and those involved may well learn from the RPL experience.

Training providers with strong connections to the workplace, such as those enterprises which have become registered training providers, take workplace evidence into account both for RPL and for the assessment of on-going training. More traditional providers may well become increasingly disadvantaged if they do not extend the processes learned through RPL to assessment in general.

#### **RPL as the central component**

The Pharmacy Guild of Australia, operating from its national office in Canberra, developed a training delivery and assessment system which included RPL and flexible training delivery. In fact, RPL is the central component of the system, which is built around the requirements of an experienced, working pharmacy assistant. Those who enter the system begin with an RPL assessment interview which is adapted to any of the four levels of the qualification. The assessment establishes a record of their current competencies and identifies their training needs. State branches of the Guild are registered as private training providers in their own States and are delivering the resultant training in Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia and Tasmania.





# Central RPL policy

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## State and Territory policies

In February 1996 six of the eight State and Territory authorities (all but South Australia and Western Australia) were either in the process of reviewing their RPL policies and provisions or were about to do so. Devolution of responsibility for RPL from central office to the institutions means that the central authorities, in some instances, are not able to provide detailed information on RPL policies and practices in the field.

### South Australia

The South Australian Department for Technical and Further Education has a well-established departmental RPL policy. This policy conforms with the RPL principles set out in the National Framework for Recognition of Training agreement.

A series of departmental RPL publications has been produced including a guide to providing RPL service, an RPL procedural guide, an RPL awareness package, an RPL guide for students, RPL roles and responsibilities, the concept and practice of risk management in RPL, the collection of assessment evidence of prior learning for RPL, and improving productivity in relation to RPL. The departmental RPL training package, which includes a video, can be used for self-paced training. The department also produces a newsletter *RPL Matters* for all staff concerned with RPL.

Institutes also develop their own institution- and program-specific RPL procedures and information materials. The department endeavours to ensure these closely match the departmental guidelines.

RPL assessor training is based on the ACTRAC (Australian Committee for Training Curriculum) assessor training program. Training is conducted by the Department, by individual program areas, and by outside agencies. RPL assessors are ideally subject experts, familiar with the course standards, skilled in RPL assessment methods and procedures, and skilled communicators.

Staff who act as RPL co-ordinators are relieved of some of their other duties to allow them to undertake their co-ordination duties. For other staff, RPL duties are seen as part of their normal roles.

The minimum amount of RPL obtainable is one module of learning, the maximum is a whole award.

Fees for RPL should not ... cost applicants more than if they completed the module of learning and in fact should be significantly less. Fees and charges are defined by departmental bulletin. RPL may also be conducted for corporate bodies on a fee-for-service basis.

## **Western Australia**

The Western Australian Department of Training has published the guide, *Framework for recognition of prior learning* covering the delivery of RPL across the vocational education and training sector for the whole of the State. Based on this, individual colleges produce their own documents covering RPL policy, RPL procedures, RPL guidance for students and quality control in RPL. The framework states that RPL may be provided by public providers, private providers, community-based providers, enterprise-based providers, industry, and approved organisations identified as skills recognition agencies. The department intends to publish a list of approved RPL providers to improve the market advantage experienced by providers of RPL services.

RPL assessors are expected to have technical competencies in the area being assessed—at least to the level at which assessment is occurring. They should have assessment knowledge and skills to national assessor competency standards and specific knowledge and skills relating to RPL to allow them to conduct bias-free RPL assessments.

The minimum amount of RPL obtainable is one unit of competence or one module; however, there is provision for partial credit in some circumstances. The maximum amount of recognition is 100% of the competencies or learning outcomes needed for an award.

A quality assurance system is currently being developed and implemented by the department. This process will involve an initial approval process as well as periodic auditing of the quality of service provision and the outcomes achieved. The quality assurance system will be based on the RPL principles in the NFROT agreement and will be in accordance with the departmental framework for RPL.

Fees and charges are determined within the guidelines of the RPL framework and are expected to be related to the cost of providing the service. Where training is subsidised by public funds, RPL services should be subsidised to the same extent. RPL fee support for disadvantaged groups should match that available for formal training.

## **New South Wales**

Early in 1996 the Curriculum Strategy Unit of the NSW TAFE Educational Services Division released their *Recognition manual* which is a compilation of various documents relating to RPL. The department includes RPL under the general term *recognition* which also covers credit transfer, advanced standing, standard exemption and non-standard exemption. It includes RPL policy and resources, the provision of recognition advice, enrolment processes associated with recognition and trade tests in NSW TAFE. The manual also contains various sections covering RPL practices for particular circumstances (for example, for schools to TAFE, for adult community education to TAFE and for private course providers or industry to TAFE). This is the first issue of the manual and further development is to continue—some sections were incomplete at the time of publication.

All RPL policy and procedures are designed to be consistent with NFROT principles.

The minimum amount of RPL obtainable is one module of learning. The maximum amount of recognition is normally 75% of a course; however, up to 100% can be awarded in special circumstances. For a credential to be awarded the applicant must have completed at least 25% of a relevant TAFE NSW course.

The *Recognition manual* also contains a section dealing with recognition of prior learning by means of trade tests which the department conducts on behalf of:

- licensing authorities (such as the Building Services Corporation)
- TAFE Personnel Policies Division (assessment of applicants for full-time teaching positions)
- government agencies responsible by legislation for trade recognition

## **Queensland**

TAFE Queensland is currently revising their guidelines and procedures handbook. The new handbook will be a lot more 'user friendly'.

TAFE Queensland RPL policy conforms with all NFROT principles.

RPL assessment is normally undertaken by teachers or tutors of the relevant program (that is, subject specialists) who have been trained in RPL assessment. Training in RPL assessment is done locally—the ACTRAC assessor training program is not normally used.

RPL assessment is recognised as part of the teachers' duties. Teachers are therefore either partially relieved of other duties to allow them to perform this function or paid extra if the RPL work is in addition to their normal duties.

The minimum amount of RPL obtainable is one module of learning. The maximum amount of RPL obtainable is a full credential.

Fees charged for RPL are in accordance with department policy. It is estimated that fees collected for RPL meet approximately 5% of the actual cost of providing the service. Fee relief is available to persons with health cards. Cost of a formal review (appeal) is paid by an applicant but is refunded if the appeal is successful.

## **Tasmania**

The Department of Vocational Education and Training (DVET) in Tasmania is also undertaking a review of RPL policy and practices.

DVET RPL policy conforms with all NFROT principles. The department has published concise but comprehensive documents outlining RPL policy, implementation procedures and guidelines for assessors. Material used in the guidelines for assessors was largely drawn from publications produced by Broadmeadows College of TAFE (now Kangan Institute).

RPL assessors are required to be qualified in accordance with endorsed trainer and assessor standards and have appropriate technical competence in the area assessed. Assessors are registered for a period not exceeding five years. Formerly the department maintained a central register of all RPL assessors both from within and outside the department, however this is no longer done.

Training of RPL assessors is provided by the department and by private providers of assessor training. A Hobart Institute training program is used for training of TAFE RPL assessors. All TAFE academic staff receive general training in RPL.

Under the TAFE award, staff who conduct RPL assessments are allocated two weeks per year for this purpose. RPL assessments may be done during 'duties other than teaching' (DOT) time. If done in addition to normal working time extra hours are paid.

The minimum amount of RPL obtainable is normally one module of learning but can be as little as one or more learning outcomes for a very large module. The maximum amount of RPL obtainable is a full credential.

A system of fees exists for RPL. The system distinguishes between charges for review of documentation, interview, testing, and materials. The maximum duration of testing should not exceed 10% of the relevant module. There are provisions for discounts or fee exemption where warranted.

## **Victoria**

The Office of Training and Further Education in Victoria is currently conducting a major review to determine the current state of RPL practice in the TAFE institutes. RPL assessments have been conducted for more than five years in Victoria and during this time responsibility for RPL has been devolved almost entirely to the institutes which are largely autonomous in their activities.

It is interesting to note that some industry criticism concerning variations in RPL results obtainable by applying to different training providers originated in Victoria. It is likely that such inconsistency is a consequence of increasing individual institute autonomy.

The principal model for RPL assessment has been one developed by the (now) Kangan Institute at Broadmeadows in association with Ford Motor Company and the Gordon Technical College. This model has been endorsed by the State Training Board and the principles underpinning it contributed to development of the RPL principles in the National Framework for Recognition of Training (NFROT).

Because of the devolution of responsibility for RPL to the institutes and their high degree of autonomy, departmental activity in regard to RPL is minimal.

## **Australian Capital Territory**

The ACT Vocational Education and Training Authority (VTA) has recently appointed a working party to review some of the RPL procedures. Prior to the last review, which was conducted in 1994, RPL was assessed by VTA tripartite panels which met once or twice a year. Following the review, the VTA decided this was not accessible enough. The facility now exists for people to come in 'off the street' for assessment by a single assessor or by a two-person panel rather than a tripartite panel—less person-hours, less cost.

ACT makes a distinction between *RPL*—for higher level training, and *skills recognition*—for trades. Most of the skills recognition work is done by Canberra

Institute of Technology or, in the case of building and construction trades—the Building and Construction Industry Training Council.

### **Northern Territory**

The Northern Territory Employment and Training Authority states that RPL is generally conducted by registered training providers. Although presently there is no RPL policy document, providers are expected to conform to NFROT principles in administering RPL assessments. A review is being undertaken to determine the RPL currently being conducted by training providers.

Training programs for RPL assessors are based on materials produced by the Recognition and Assessment Centre at Broadmeadows College of TAFE (now Kangan Institute).

### **The value of State and Territory policy**

There is evidence that the better policy documents provided by central State and Territory authorities are valued and have had a positive impact on individual institutions. In contrast, in those States and Territories where a framework has not been provided or the framework offers little detail, training institutions are less certain of their responsibilities and less consistent in their activities. In those States and Territories the important issue of funding also appears to be less well-understood.

It is recommended that central policy documents are provided and that each State or Territory review the document of the others as a starting point for development or revision. While the States and Territories may want to maintain individual aspects within their own policies such reviews will lead to more cost-effective development and greater clarity in consistent and divergent features.

## **Funding policy**

### **Clarifying funding for training providers**

The most constructive support which could be offered to RPL by both State/Territory and federal governments would be the resolution and clarification of the way that institutions are funded for students who complete part or all of a course through RPL. Even where this seems to be understood by central State and Territory authorities there is evidence that clarifying information has not been disseminated to training institutions and therefore has not become a part of the planning process at this level.

### **Funding models**

The most common funding model operates as follows but the provision of funding for students granted RPL is not universally adopted across all States and Territories.

- 1 The student enrolls (and may be expected to pay course fees).
- 2 The training institution qualifies to receive funding from the central authority on the basis of the program for which the student enrolls—whether or not the student applies for or is granted RPL.
- 3 The student applies for RPL, pays applicable fees and is assessed in relevant modules.

- 4 Where applicable, the student receives a refund for the modules in which he or she is granted RPL.

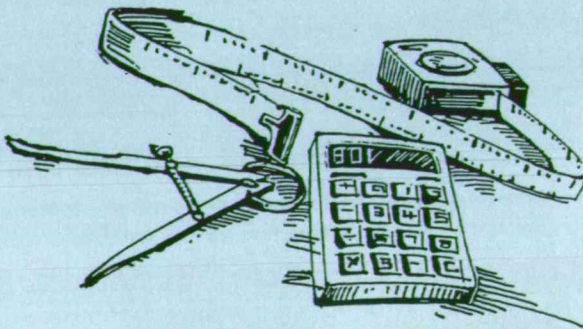
Many training institutions modify this basic model, for example to minimise the overheads associated with handling fees and refunds.

On the basis of the basic model a lecturer should be able to spend as much time on the RPL activities as he or she would spend in teaching the student, say five per cent of the nominal allocation to the course if there are twenty students. If the institution then fills the class with students, replacing those granted RPL, it has a corresponding increase in training activity (and funding received) and needs to consider the appropriate increase in resources to meet it.

Whether this or some other funding model is adopted it needs to be stated explicitly and broadly understood in order for training institutions and authorities to plan appropriately and avoid the confusion evident in the following box.

### **Clarifying the impact on students**

In addition to clarifying the training providers' position, there is a need to clarify student entitlements to study support payments. Loss of AUSTUDY and ABSTUDY payments is currently a disincentive to some potential RPL applicants. The situation becomes more complex in higher education where there does not seem to be a clear understanding of what Higher Education Contribution Scheme debts may be incurred by students who are granted RPL in relevant subjects or courses.



### **Allocation of staff time for RPL duties—an important issue**

This is one of the most difficult issues confronting institutions.

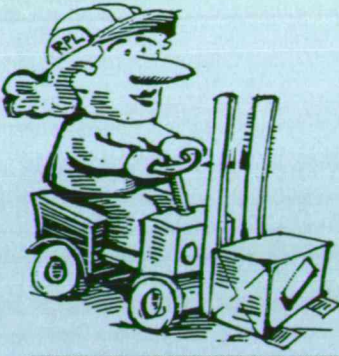
In most cases staff are expected to add RPL work to the other duties they normally perform. In the case of lecturers for example, RPL is usually expected to be fitted in with lesson preparation and other duties normally performed in non-contact time. Where extra time is specifically allocated for RPL work, the staff concerned generally say that it is never enough.

Staff involved with RPL are usually enthusiastic about the RPL work they do, despite the considerable extra work involved. Their criticism of the lack of allocated time is almost always based on genuine concern that they are unable to provide the level of service the RPL scheme and its clients deserved.

One lecturer-RPL assessor describes a scheme in which he was to perform an allocated number of hours of RPL assessment in his non-contact time and any time spent on RPL in excess of this (that is, over and above his normal week's work) would entitle him to additional payment. The scheme never worked because applicants tended to drop in at any time he was in his office, or would catch him on the run—sometimes for a few minutes, sometimes for a quarter of an hour. He found it impossible to keep an accurate record of this time. (Nevertheless he continues to devote many extra hours each week to assisting RPL applicants.)

Because of the limited time allocated for RPL provision, staff tend to spend only a minimal amount of time on an assessment, or assess several modules in one interview. In one institution as many as ten modules are assessed in a single interview of one hour. Some applicants feel this is too many and applications cannot be adequately assessed in such circumstances. On the other hand, an institution representative sees the single interview as advantageous for applicants because it reduces the time spent in interview preparation.

In some institutions, a relatively large number of staff is trained in RPL assessment. This actually has three advantages: it provides greater flexibility in conducting the RPL program, it allows the RPL load to be shared more equitably, and it helps raise staff awareness of RPL and keep them up to date with RPL policies and developments.



# Marketing and RPL

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## To promote or not to promote?

RPL in some form or other is available from every registered training provider, public or private, in Australia. The provision of recognition of prior learning is required by all State and Territory agencies who register training providers under the guidelines of the National Framework for the Recognition of Training. But the way in which RPL is promoted varies from strategies of active marketing to an attitude of just 'be seen to be doing it'.

There are numerous factors influencing the decisions on promotion and marketing including:

- funding arrangements operating at federal to State/Territory level
- funding arrangements operating at State/Territory to training institution level
- the socio-economic status of the predominant student group
- the personal commitment to RPL of those within the training provider
- the influence of the higher education sector on the vocational education and training sector
- the industries with which the institution works

The dominant factor is the issue of funding. The education and training market is becoming increasingly competitive and training providers cannot afford to operate any service at a loss. However, there is a demand for RPL, so any training provider who offers this service will have an advantage over one that does not. Linked to this is the notion that those who are seeking an RPL service are likely to be in the market for further training and therefore it makes good economic sense not to turn them away.

### Promote to whom?

If RPL is to be marketed then the promotion can be aimed at:

- organisations, such as enterprises, industry training bodies or other industry groups
- individuals who might be entering the training market for the first time, wanting to continue training or seeking opportunities for career change or promotion

These two markets need different approaches and, indeed, many institutions, especially the TAFE providers, rely on their core resources to deal with individuals but work with industry using a consulting arm.

## Promoting to industry

Some concerns about RPL services expressed by industry representatives include:

- providing assessor and RPL assessor training which was inappropriate or was delivered from the perspective of a training provider rather than for the clients who were workplace assessors
- not being sufficiently responsive to industry needs
- charging excessive costs to undertake RPL assessments for the industry, especially where a small number of individuals was concerned
- suffering conflict of interest in the provision of both training and RPL, in some circumstances more RPL might mean less subsequent training activity and fees
- being inconsistent in the amount of RPL given from one provider to another

Current policy applying throughout Australia allows organisations to become registered as private training providers and many organisations see this as an opportunity to overcome dissatisfaction with existing providers. However, the requirements and processes for undertaking such registrations are not simple and there is a strong tendency for enterprises to concentrate on their core business.

Training providers need to review their services, including RPL, in the light of this criticism and ensure that they do not give industry justification to work around them in this way.

### **What can training providers offer to industry?**

Training providers offer a range of RPL advantages and services beneficial to industry. These include:

- the option of providing a qualification to those for whom relevant prior learning has been recognised
- systems for maintaining long-term records
- experience with assessment in general, and often with RPL
- the ability to design, develop and monitor RPL processes to be provided by enterprises or industry bodies
- the ability to deliver general assessor and RPL assessor training
- the ability to undertake RPL assessments either alone or in conjunction with other partners
- the ability to use RPL assessments to establish the entry point for individuals who may want to take on further off-the-job training which they can deliver
- the ability to integrate on- and off-the-job training and assessment
- the ability to contribute to quality assurance processes which are essential if RPL is to lead to qualifications which are not seen as second-rate

But this is a two-way process and in return the training provider can achieve:

- better links with industry
- promotion of the institution
- survival

It is critical that personnel within training institutions who have contact with industry are aware of and able to promote these advantages (see also 'Partnerships with industry' on p.58).

## Promoting qualifications

### Security of employment

The rapid pace of change in today's world and its impact on jobs and job security is changing the way people think about their skills and knowledge. People are no longer confident of working in the same career for a lifetime. Even when they do, the nature of the work is likely to undergo substantial changes.

Some people react to this change by looking for formal recognition of their competence through qualifications which provide a degree of portability. If people no longer expect to work in the same location, in the same industry, or for the same employer for a long period it is not surprising that they find traditional references from previous employers to be of less value than qualifications from an independent source. A reference from an employer where you worked five years ago is not much value if no-one working there now knows your name.

In a more subtle way, this type of change is making people think more about the nature of their work, their skills and their knowledge. This helps them to understand how to map their experience to competency standards or training modules and therefore to recognise and apply for RPL.

### More qualifications

The general support for training and assessment by unions and other groups in Australia has been, in part, based on the desire to introduce formal recognition or qualifications for many skilled, experienced people in the workforce who have not previously had this opportunity. The introduction of nationally recognised qualifications, especially at levels lower than the traditional trade qualifications, means that there is an even broader range of people to whom this applies. The increased focus on school to work transition, which is resulting in formal qualifications for young people, is causing more experienced people to think about recognition for their skills.

Organisations and individuals are seeking mainstream qualifications and entry into traditional training to a considerable extent. In more than 80 per cent of cases benchmarks for assessing RPL applicants are learning outcomes from training modules, even when an acknowledged strong correlation between these learning outcomes and related competency-standards already exists.

Acquisition of recognised qualifications is the major attraction of RPL for many people and qualifications are becoming increasingly important for a wider range of people. They are perhaps the most significant advantage offered by training providers and ought to be used as a major selling point in the promotion of RPL.

Some industries are seeking to wrest control of credentials or qualifications away from traditional providers because they feel that they know their own industry's requirements and standards better than anyone else. This may well be possible in the future. However, it may be that the recipients of qualifications will prefer their being awarded by a more traditional training provider.

#### **What qualifications?**

Many people in Australia's workforce have had little opportunity to gain any formal training or educational qualification. In the next few years an increasing number will get that chance through RPL. It is vital to ensure that the sort of qualification they acquire is valued—by themselves, by their chosen industry and by society in general.

## Promoting to individuals

Promoting RPL to individual students relies on having staff who know and understand the available RPL services as well as having effective resources available for those students or potential students who wish to apply.

There are wide variations in the practices encountered. Some institutions provide no information on RPL at the time of enrolment and those potential RPL applicants who overcome this hurdle are asked to visit the campus library to find the learning outcomes related to the course and modules that they are interested in. By contrast the Institute for Aboriginal Development in Alice Springs is very much committed to RPL and provides RPL assessor training to most of its staff. They recognise that the best promotion occurs when everybody understands what is involved and can give practical assistance to their students.

It is most important that those staff who have early contact with potential RPL applicants can either offer immediate help to them or can direct them to others who will help.

### **RPL networks**

Promotion can also occur through networks—particularly in smaller communities. This is an effective and efficient way of spreading information. When the message has been spread throughout a network of people, training institutions find that clients expect and seek out RPL.

Students who have themselves been through an RPL process play an important role in promoting RPL to other students. They are also ideal mentors and can provide valuable support and advice to those who decide to go through the RPL process.



# RPL operations

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## How long should RPL assessments take?

If RPL is to be a cost-effective approach the question of how much time should be spent on each RPL assessment should be asked. Although this depends on how much learning needs to be recognised. There are many other variables, for example:

- the nature of the competency involved—how much evidence is required and how easy it is to collect
- the range of environments in which the competency needs to be demonstrated
- how much assessment has been previously completed and documented, for example in certificates
- the availability of evidence of successful performance

The most reliable method of judging RPL requirements is to compare the time taken with the notional training time required to achieve the learning which is being recognised. On this basis we have seen examples of RPL which range from around one per cent to around ten per cent of the notional training time. These figures provide good guidance but it is worth considering these two extremes.

### Up to ten per cent

Testing should not exceed ten per cent of the notional duration of a module and is expected to be less, according to the RPL fee guidelines of the Training Authority of Tasmania. For review of documentation there may be no charge but testing is charged at an hourly rate in addition to materials used.

These recommendations appear to be based on logical argument. Consider how much of the time in a structured training program is spent assessing the trainees either formally, for example with tests, or informally, for example by observation of training activities. Ten per cent is quite a reasonable maximum. Furthermore, if RPL activity takes too long, training providers will not promote it, but will prefer to put applicants through the related training program. On this basis the ten per cent rule translates to a class of ten and this is a typical minimum class size. In the workplace, where training is often delivered on a one-to-one basis, there is an opportunity for more extensive RPL activity to be even more cost-effective. But evidence of competence is often readily available in this situation and so the ten per cent guide remains a good benchmark.

## More than one per cent

One training provider assesses a group of modules together, using a portfolio of evidence assembled by the RPL applicant and assessed in an interview. The interview takes around one per cent of the notional training time and, with the time taken by the applicant to assemble the portfolio, the figure would be increased to several per cent. At this level some applicants express disappointment, even when they are successful, because they feel as though the process is dismissive of the skills and knowledge that they possess. Considering that few people like being assessed this is strong criticism.

Experienced trainers and assessors also start to question the quality of assessment at such low levels of activity. Is it possible, they ask, to assess forty hours of learning in less than half an hour?

## Summary

The figures above give some guidelines about the length of time taken to conduct an RPL assessment. However, because they reflect a training provider perspective they tend to focus on off-job assessment. It should be remembered that, in the workplace especially, assessment does not have to be a discrete event but can involve a less structured collection of evidence over a longer period of time.

# Who is doing the RPL work?

## Assessors

The list of who is assessing RPL today is an extensive one. Those who are involved in judging the assessment evidence include:

- competent workplace assessors employed within the workplaces involved
- specialist industry assessors, often employed by industry organisations such as training advisory bodies
- specialists in RPL from public and private training providers
- lecturers, teachers and course co-ordinators from public and private training providers
- academic boards within training providers

But the assessment process is broader than just judging the evidence and should include those who are gathering evidence:

- RPL applicants
- applicants' supervisors, peers and managers

What makes an RPL assessor different from other assessors is an ability to deal with evidence of prior learning. Two of the most important skills of the RPL assessor are the ability to judge what evidence of prior learning is relevant, and knowing how to decide if the evidence is authentic. Knowing whether a certificate obtained some years ago is still relevant today is an example of the first skill. Using appropriate observations of performance or tests is an example of the second—authenticating the evidence.

There can be little argument about which is more important to an RPL assessor—understanding *what* is being assessed or understanding *how* to assess. The former is critical, the latter valuable. Assessors must know in some detail how the qualification or recognition translates into practice otherwise they cannot be expected to know whether or not the RPL evidence is relevant.

The question of who assesses was recently addressed in a paper by Barbara Bloch, Berwyn Clayton and Jill Favero (1995) in the context of competency-based assessment in Australia. Not surprisingly their answer can be summed up as—it depends. The conclusions they draw about assessors in general apply equally to RPL assessors.

*There is no straightforward answer to the question of who assesses as the purposes, methods and people involved vary according to context. Through the sharing of assessment information, resources and assessment decisions TAFE, private providers and industry may come closer to achieving an integrated, equitable and cost-effective training system. The challenge is to ensure that assessments are carried out by knowledgeable, suitably skilled and experienced assessors. The potential for valid and consistent assessment decisions will then exist.*

Hall, W editor, 1995, *Key aspects of competency-based assessment*, DEET

A great variety of arrangements are in place, from individuals with little expertise or training through to highly professional groups chosen because each member of the group brought along a specialisation which contributed to the decision-making process. There is a noticeable trend towards the use of RPL assessment teams or committees in the workplaces of the larger employers, a practice consistent with the need for the assessor to have expertise in the work area being assessed. In many workplaces this leads to the expensive option of a broad range of trained assessors or a more cost-effective option of teaming those with work expertise to those with assessment expertise.

Bloch, Clayton and Favero also drew distinctions not only between the work of assessors in training colleges and workplaces but also between those in the workplaces of large and small employers. Large employers will often have individuals with a specified assessor role. In the case of the small employer it often becomes the task of the employer himself or herself to fill the role. Furthermore, assessor training is not seen as a priority. Many managers in small enterprises consider they already have the necessary skills and experience to assess their employees' performance.

Characteristics seen as desirable in an RPL assessor make an illuminating list. A knowledge about assessment and expertise in the subject or job and good communication skills are included, but so are many attitudinal qualities such as fair, flexible, firm, trustworthy, tolerant, unbiased and caring. This perception of the RPL assessor as a person who 'can leap tall buildings in a single bound' has the potential to create problems in that it might deter people from taking on the task.

## **Advisors**

One reason that so much is expected of our assessors is that many are undertaking a role much wider than that of assessor. This role might better be described as an advisor.

Some aspects of the advice they provide are relatively straightforward—telling potential applicants how to apply, explaining what they will have to do, explaining to

others the kinds of evidence required and explaining their role to those on an assessment team. But the aspect of helping the RPL applicant to produce relevant evidence is more complex.

One of the most difficult areas to grasp for those involved in RPL is the mapping of their experience against the requirements of the learning outcomes or competency standards used as benchmarks. This is especially so when the applicant is asked to prepare a portfolio of evidence to support their RPL application and when there are no detailed assessment criteria to provide guidance. Most people appear to need a skilled advisor, who may also be an assessor, to help draw out the necessary evidence. This role needs a combination of well-structured thought processes, an inquisitive mind, broad work and life experience and strong people skills. It means that some of the best people need to be given the role and the necessary time to carry it out.

Some training providers and community support groups have developed short training programs for RPL applicants to maximise time with suitable RPL advisors. In this type of program an advisor can work with a number of potential applicants at one time and allow applicants faced with a common challenge to learn from each other's experiences.

### **Co-ordinators**

Another role which assessors are sometimes asked to take on is better described as an RPL co-ordinator. A co-ordinator does not necessarily have to be an assessor but they must at least understand what RPL is and what it is being used for. It is generally true that in organisations, either workplaces or training institutions where RPL is being successfully used, there is someone who knows everything that is going on and is in a position to provide a wide range of advice to others.

While RPL programs are in their early stages or at a point where a high level of activity is taking place there appears to be a demand for co-ordination. As the process becomes more widely used and recognised, or integrated into the day-to-day activities of organisation the role may become less significant.

When a co-ordinator is enthusiastic about RPL he or she can become a driving force which makes the difference between a successful or an unsuccessful program.

### **Training**

Most people involved in providing RPL assessment are undertaking workplace assessor training designed to meet the requirements of the endorsed cross-industry competency standards prepared by the Assessors and Workplace Trainers Competency Standards Body. The exceptions are those who already have more general assessment experience.

Such training is critical because RPL assessment must be based on sound assessment practice and competent RPL assessors must first be competent assessors.

There are now many training courses available for would-be assessors. Those who specialise in RPL believe that additional training, specifically directed towards RPL, is necessary and several courses have been developed to provide RPL training. However, the competency standards body has not addressed RPL as a separate issue

and, perhaps the best advice before embarking on assessor training, is to choose a course which gives a thorough treatment of RPL assessment.

Under the heading 'RPL to the rescue?' (see p.5) this book questions what role RPL has to play in integrating workplace and training provider—on-job and off-job—assessment. It may well be that when assessment practice is more commonly integrated, the distinction between general assessment and RPL may be far less significant than it now appears.

## Quality assurance

### **Is there a problem?**

In the early months of 1996 a snapshot of the RPL activity in Australia was generated by means of a survey of State and Territory training authorities and three RPL forums in South Australia, New South Wales and Victoria. The picture showed that, with few exceptions, maintenance of quality is not a major issue. In part, this is because many of the programs studied were at a fairly early stage of development. As the extent of RPL activity increases we may need to establish better quality control systems which prevent unacceptable practices becoming established. Poor quality practices could allow the setting-up of a distinction between achievements based on traditional training and educational activity and those based on recognition of prior learning. This would be disastrous for RPL and for the benefits that it offers. At the moment, however, most people do not perceive results recognised through an RPL process as second class.

However, care is needed to prevent the drive to ensure quality from providing too great a barrier to implementing RPL. The rigour with which some of the systems are currently being applied is an example of this. The drive for trained assessors, the insistence on high standards of verification of workplace evidence and the cautious and protective attitude being taken by many academic institutions are the most obvious examples. There is no suggestion of radical change in the approach being taken, only the feeling that the few mistakes which might come from relaxing a little would not be disastrous.

Many training providers regard workplace RPL assessment, even when using trained workplace assessors, with a degree of concern, especially for its reliability. In comparison, many industries regard institutional RPL assessment with an equal degree of concern, especially for its validity. Both training provider and workplace approaches offer important strengths and each will benefit by recognising and incorporating them into their own systems.

### **Monitoring assessments**

One of the more rigorous quality assurance processes is used by the Building and Construction ITAB in Western Australia. The ITAB conducts RPL assessments and then makes a recommendation to the state training authority that the individual be awarded RPL and that a certificate of training be issued.

Ten per cent of all assessments conducted by the ITAB's assessors are monitored by other assessors. The skills recognition manager determines which assessments to

monitor, maintains the records and periodically provides feedback to the assessor group. This process is described more fully in 'Assuring quality in RPL' (see p.88).

This is a sound quality assurance approach, but it comes at a cost, and is one of the reasons that the industry recognises its RPL costs as being higher than it would like. Similar approaches have been tried in other industries but have not received sufficient support to remain viable.

One important consideration is that the quality assurance process, and the associated cost, should be weighed up against the risk of invalid or unreliable RPL assessments. Where RPL may result in the issue of relevant licences and therefore has an impact on public or personal safety, higher quality assurance costs may well be justified.

### **Why aren't there more appeals?**

Appeals are a security measure which most assessment and RPL frameworks already include. If RPL is to gain the respect and acceptance in the workforce and the general community, the process of assessment for RPL must be seen as thorough and fair. In order to ensure fairness it is essential that there be an effective and accessible appeals process to which an applicant can turn if dissatisfied with an RPL decision.

#### **Few appeals**

Despite the fact that in many institutions an RPL process has been in operation for at least a year, appeals are extremely rare. This may be because the RPL process is working so well that few applicants have cause to complain, or it may be that the advice to applicants prior to formal application was so conservative that few risky applicants actually applied. Perhaps unsuccessful applicants were unaware they could appeal.

It is also possible that the RPL process itself acts as a screening mechanism—as one program manager involved in RPL puts it: 'The way RPL is set up you have to be determined to go through with it . . . it's a certain type of person who succeeds . . . in a way it is a screening process which can cut out a lot of people who could be successful.' If he is right there is cause for concern—RPL processes should not be doing that. Whatever the reason(s), as the number of RPL applications increases there is potential for a corresponding increase in dissatisfied applicants and it would therefore seem prudent to ensure that an effective appeals process is in place.

This situation also applies to workplaces—there are very few appeals recorded. It is right to be cautious of the process as RPL activity increases, but it could well be that the lack of appeals means that the processes in place are extremely effective and efficient.

Until some of the RPL programs are allowed to mature and the results are comprehensively evaluated, quality assurance processes should not be too restrictive. At this stage there is scant evidence for concern.

## Cost control

Training providers will only offer good RPL services if it is worth their while to do so. For private training providers this is largely an economic decision and will be based on demand. It is pleasing to see that in one State/Territory the education and training authority is offering a financial incentive to providers who offer an acceptable RPL service for some short-term programs.

For public providers the issue is not as simple and there are signs that many are struggling to provide adequate services and the resources to support applicants or prospective applicants as they feel they should. The provision of RPL should be seen as a part of the role of lecturers or course co-ordinators and real time should be provided in their work loads to allow for this.

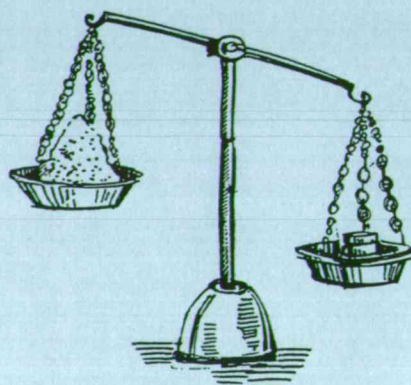
### Using other resources

One method of keeping the costs down is to use resources outside of those normally considered as part of the training institution.

Students, or potential students, who have little idea about their aptitudes and preferences stretch the available resources alarmingly. Rather than providing extensive support it may well be worthwhile introducing the applicant to one of the community support organisations set up to help individuals clarify and document their life experiences. (for guidance on using such groups, see also 'RPL resources' p.55.)

An even greater resource can be the RPL applicants themselves. Since they are the ones who will gain most from the RPL process it is not unreasonable to expect them to contribute significantly to the process. Of course applicants do need help and advice and it should be provided, but it is important to ensure that this advice is aimed at explaining and clarifying what they need to do rather than doing it for them. Many involved in assessing RPL applications make the point that those which take the least time to assess are also the best prepared.

While the time and cost involved in preparing simple, clear information for applicants is significant it has the potential to save far more time in later RPL applications. Some training providers have also prepared training modules and short training courses for new RPL applicants.



### **RPL modules**

Some institutions conduct an 'RPL module' which applicants can undertake as a means of assisting them to work through the process of assessing their chances and developing their RPL application. In some institutions it forms an integral part of certain courses and is compulsory, in others it is an option. Typically, these modules range from 6 to 10 hours in length. Assessors report that an RPL module seems to be of greatest interest and benefit to mature-age applicants, who have a more extensive history of prior learning and more experience to call on than do young applicants fresh from secondary school. Where the module was compulsory, young applicants were often reduced to working through a hypothetical case and saw it as a waste of time.

On the positive side, assessors saw an RPL module as providing two cost-saving benefits: the first being that most of the information on the RPL process could be imparted to students as a group rather than individually, and the second being that the quantity and quality of information provided in RPL applications was markedly better, reducing the time spent on each application. In one institution where an RPL module was optional, assessors felt quite strongly that it was so effective it should be made compulsory—applications from those who had completed the module were processed in as little as 10 to 15 minutes—a considerable time saving.

### **Risk management**

Many training providers are using the risk management approach to RPL assessment to ensure that costs are minimised. (See also 'Procedures for RPL', p.67.) In its simplest form the approach proposes that if the granting of RPL gives only partial course completion and there will be an opportunity to provide further training and assessment then it is quite justifiable to reduce the time and cost spent on RPL. In other words—try not to over-assess.

### **Continuous improvement**

It is important to take the same quality-focussed approach to RPL—as a good organisation takes to all significant areas. By evaluating existing RPL services, making carefully planned changes and analysing the results it is possible to make steady improvement. There is evidence that those training providers who have been providing RPL services for long periods have less costing problems than those for whom it is relatively new.



# 1994 statistics

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## Data collection

Every year the States and Territories in Australia provide data on vocational education and training activity to a central collection site. The data specifications have been provided by the Australian Committee on Vocational Education and Training Statistics under the Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard. For each module they record nominal course hours and for each enrolment in each module they record the outcome that the student achieves such as 'pass', 'withdrew' and so on. Two of the possible results are 'RPL' and 'credit transfer'.

At the time of data collection for 1994 the following definitions applied for these two results.

*RPL—status (or credit) granted through Recognition of Prior Learning*

*Credit transfer—status (or credit) granted through Credit Transfer Arrangements (i.e. agreements between education authorities)*

The distinction between the two was not well understood or applied in 1994 and in the data the differences in the relative proportion of the two results between States/Territories confirms the uncertainty surrounding the meanings of the two terms. For the 1995 and 1996 data collection periods more precise definitions have been recommended and it is expected that this will result in more accurate statistics (see 'RPL in context', p.1).

## State and Territory variation

Table 1 shows the total hours for all results, percentage RPL and percentage credit transfer for all persons by State/Territory and discipline. The discipline codes are defined below the table. There is considerable variation between States/Territories and discipline in the amount of RPL and credit transfer granted. Queensland, for example, reported no RPL or credit transfer results. This is a consequence of recording and reporting inconsistencies and should not be taken to mean that there is, in fact, no RPL activity. The Queensland policy outlined earlier (see 'Central RPL policy', p.7) makes it clear that this is not the case.

The ratio between RPL and credit transfer totalled across all disciplines varies from—all RPL in the Australian Capital Territory (a total of 14%) to—more than 30 times as

much credit transfer as RPL in Tasmania (a total of 7%). The high ACT figure results, in part, from nested awards—the practice of giving RPL in a lower award (such as a trade certificate) when recognising a higher award (such as a trade technician/supervisory certificate). Revised interpretations are expected to shift the balance from RPL to credit transfer in the 1995 data.

Nationally, the discipline reporting the highest level of RPL was 'engineering, processing' (07) at 2.4%, but when combined with credit transfer the discipline with the highest level was 'social studies' (02) at 7.3%. The lowest level was in 'education' (03) at 0.2%.

The results clearly demonstrate that the nation saved 9.6 million hours of training by granting RPL and credit transfer. It is likely that this is a conservative figure but it represents only 3.5 per cent of the overall course hours for which students enrolled.

Table 2 shows similar information to that shown in table 1 but with the results now broken down by stream instead of discipline. The stream codes are defined below the table. Variation between streams is also very high. The predominant areas for RPL and credit transfer results are 'trade technician/supervisory' (stream 3300) at 6.4%, 'para-professional higher technician' (stream 3500) at 6.7% and 'para-prof technician post initial' (stream 4400) at 22.6%. Very high pockets of RPL activity were recorded in both ACT and NT.

### **Caution in interpretation**

There has been steady progress in improving the data specifications, their consistency of interpretation and accuracy of reporting over the last few years. Nevertheless it is likely to be a further two or three years before RPL data is consistent and stable enough to make valid State/Territory comparisons and to analyse trends. The data reported here should not be used in this way.

## **Gender balance**

Detailed analysis of national data was not completed because the extreme variation between States and Territories may distort the results obtained. Data has instead been analysed for a number of individual States including New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. The New South Wales data shows the most uniform levels of RPL and credit transfer across both disciplines and streams and is likely to provide the most accurate gender comparison. This data is shown in table 3.

The differences between the overall percentage of RPL and credit transfer results granted to males and females is not significant given the large variation in RPL and credit transfer between disciplines. In New South Wales for discipline 07, 'engineering & processing', not only are 84% of the enrolled hours taken up by males, but those males are more likely to be granted RPL or credit transfer results. In South Australia however, while there is an even higher proportion of males in this discipline, females are more likely to be granted RPL or credit transfer. For discipline 03, 'education', 78% of the enrolled hours in New South Wales are for females and those females are more likely to be granted RPL or credit transfer results.

## Age distribution

Again data for an individual State is analysed to avoid distortions caused by variation between States and Territories. Data for New South Wales, shown in table 4, presents an age profile for RPL and credit transfer. It was expected that those in the lower age groups would be less equipped to apply for RPL and credit transfer because of their lack of time to access training and develop competency. Similarly it was expected that those in the highest age groups would be less likely to be seeking promotion or change in their careers and would also be less likely to pursue RPL or credit transfer. The amount of RPL and credit transfer recorded reflects this expected pattern. It is low in the under 14 and 15–19 age groups, increasing in the 20–24 age group and peaking in the 25–29 age group. Little variation up to the age of 49 is shown before it decreases. This pattern is relatively consistent for all disciplines with minor variations occurring in the age ranges in which peaks occur.

Table 1 Total hours ('000) for all results, % RPL and % credit transfer for all persons by State/Territory and discipline

Discipline	National			NSW			Vic			Qld			WA			SA			Tas			NT			ACT		
	All hrs ('000)	RPL %	Credit %	All hrs ('000)	RPL %	Credit %	All hrs ('000)	RPL %	Credit %	All hrs ('000)	RPL %	Credit %	All hrs ('000)	RPL %	Credit %	All hrs ('000)	RPL %	Credit %	All hrs ('000)	RPL %	Credit %	All hrs ('000)	RPL %	Credit %	All hrs ('000)	RPL %	Credit %
01	18,744	2.30	0.84	4,835	4.94	1.49	6,263	2.03	0.81	4,172	0.00	0.00	1,548	0.06	0.00	1,070	1.59	1.03	189	0.00	11.64	402	3.48	0.00	265	12.83	0.00
02	5,940	1.38	5.89	2,996	1.30	10.71	1,666	1.50	0.96	467	0.00	0.00	366	0.00	0.00	175	0.57	0.57	116	0.00	9.48	50	6.00	0.00	103	14.56	0.00
03	4,599	0.09	0.15	109	1.83	5.50	1,346	0.07	0.00	3,059	0.00	0.00	51	0.00	0.00	10	0.00	0.00	14	0.00	7.14	7	0.00	0.00	2	0.00	0.00
04	8,334	2.15	1.86	3,906	3.02	3.20	2,333	1.63	0.51	751	0.00	0.00	607	0.16	0.00	255	0.78	1.18	184	0.54	8.15	42	7.14	0.00	256	6.25	0.00
05	29,242	2.32	1.60	10,830	3.67	3.18	8,038	1.84	0.86	5,290	0.00	0.00	2,298	0.04	0.04	1,433	1.26	1.26	458	0.22	8.30	266	4.14	0.00	629	15.90	0.00
06	12,920	0.73	1.21	5,132	1.23	2.01	3,345	0.30	0.60	1,327	0.00	0.00	1,908	0.00	0.00	737	0.27	0.41	255	0.00	11.76	81	0.00	0.00	135	13.33	0.00
07	43,300	2.38	2.08	18,101	2.84	3.86	11,845	2.73	0.78	5,514	0.00	0.00	3,307	0.27	0.15	2,372	0.63	1.05	1,130	0.53	7.08	348	4.31	0.00	683	21.52	0.00
08	14,910	1.79	1.37	5,500	2.55	2.13	4,069	1.52	1.01	2,388	0.00	0.00	1,151	0.00	0.00	1,132	1.59	1.33	268	0.00	11.57	141	3.55	0.00	260	15.77	0.00
09	50,653	1.76	2.72	22,055	1.91	5.26	12,850	2.11	1.12	7,164	0.00	0.00	3,834	0.03	0.03	2,578	1.36	0.89	764	0.00	6.54	592	3.21	0.17	816	18.14	0.00
10	17,720	1.37	1.34	7,246	1.99	2.82	4,461	0.85	0.22	2,885	0.00	0.00	1,567	0.00	0.00	768	0.91	0.13	300	0.00	7.67	108	6.48	0.00	385	11.95	0.00
11	10,611	0.76	1.61	3,936	1.22	3.63	2,899	0.28	0.48	1,335	0.00	0.00	975	0.00	0.00	794	0.38	0.25	254	0.39	4.72	171	0.58	0.00	247	8.10	0.00
12	17,538	1.61	1.22	6,023	2.62	3.15	3,846	0.31	0.29	3,757	0.00	0.00	1,332	0.75	0.00	1,327	0.45	0.53	448	0.00	1.34	163	1.84	0.61	642	14.49	0.00
13	38,279	1.44	0.91	16,904	2.31	1.88	6,882	0.36	0.09	8,417	0.00	0.00	2,299	0.04	0.00	1,946	0.67	0.62	453	0.00	2.65	278	1.08	0.00	1,100	10.73	0.00
Total	274,146	1.76	1.73	108,794	2.46	3.49	69,843	1.56	0.69	46,528	0.00	0.00	21,243	0.11	0.04	14,597	0.94	0.82	4,834	0.21	6.85	2,648	3.17	0.11	5,658	14.07	0.00
RPL + credit transfer		3.49			5.96			2.25			0.00			0.15			1.76			7.05			3.29			14.07	

Note

Percentages represent the fraction of total hours for each discipline which results in RPL and credit transfer

Discipline

01 Humanities  
 02 Social studies  
 03 Education  
 04 Sciences  
 05 Mathematics, computing

06 Visual/performing arts  
 07 Engineering, processing  
 08 Health sciences  
 09 Administration, business, economics, law  
 10 Built environment

11 Agriculture, renewable resources  
 12 Hospitality, tourism and personal services  
 13 Social, educational and employment skills

**Table 2 Total hours ('000) for all results, % RPL and % credit transfer for all persons by State/Territory and stream**

Stream	National			NSW			Vic			Qld			WA			SA			Tas			NT			ACT		
	All hrs ('000)	RPL %	Credit %	All hrs ('000)	RPL %	Credit %	All hrs ('000)	RPL %	Credit %	All hrs ('000)	RPL %	Credit %	All hrs ('000)	RPL %	Credit %	All hrs ('000)	RPL %	Credit %	All hrs ('000)	RPL %	Credit %	All hrs ('000)	RPL %	Credit %	All hrs ('000)	RPL %	Credit %
1000	591	0.00	0.00	14	0.00	0.00	346	0.00	0.00	156	0.00	0.00	75	0.00	0.00	0			0			0	0.00	0.00	0		
2100	32,401	0.77	0.27	15,220	1.55	0.57	7,846	0.09	0.00	4,511	0.00	0.00	2,168	0.00	0.00	1,659	0.16	0.07	113	0.00	0.04	260	0.02	0.00	624	0.52	0.00
2200	23,407	1.57	0.29	12,676	2.85	0.53	4,095	0.02	0.00	4,253	0.00	0.00	1,482	0.00	0.02	215	0.12	0.03	42	0.00	0.00	221	0.14	0.00	424	1.52	0.00
3100	29,852	0.72	1.95	20,676	0.80	2.76	2,770	0.75	0.05	2,825	0.00	0.00	1,252	0.00	0.00	485	0.11	0.47	843	0.61	1.01	425	0.08	0.00	577	3.71	0.00
3211	10,204	0.13	0.29	1,817	0.27	1.01	1,200	0.55	0.10	4,992	0.00	0.00	901	0.00	0.00	818	0.14	0.54	405	0.00	1.32	48	0.37	0.00	23	0.82	0.00
3212	30,965	0.95	2.06	12,767	1.47	3.91	7,772	0.44	0.59	4,413	0.00	0.00	2,391	0.71	0.25	2,028	0.79	0.67	747	0.00	9.69	282	6.22	0.00	566	4.19	0.00
3221	13,254	0.35	0.31	170	0.26	3.54	2,870	0.18	0.15	5,634	0.00	0.00	1,000	0.00	0.00	3,505	1.10	0.89	16	0.00	0.60	48	2.50	0.00	11	4.39	0.00
3222	21,192	1.19	0.83	4,022	2.07	1.86	6,021	1.19	0.44	3,910	0.00	0.00	3,360	0.15	0.02	2,010	1.90	1.91	687	0.01	4.87	671	2.39	0.35	511	7.29	0.00
3300	35,105	2.74	3.64	17,169	2.84	6.27	13,629	2.18	1.26	961	0.00	0.00	1,629	0.00	0.06	864	1.53	0.64	316	0.00	7.65	41	2.08	0.15	497	32.59	0.00
3400	5,239	0.20	0.01	0			60	1.63	0.30	206	0.00	0.00	4,717	0.02	0.00	0			20	2.06	0.00	236	3.51	0.02	1	0.00	0.00
3500	59,619	3.76	2.92	20,453	5.44	6.43	20,516	3.09	1.13	11,986	0.00	0.00	652	0.00	0.00	2,125	1.14	0.90	1,433	0.00	12.28	403	9.50	0.12	2,051	20.98	0.00
3600	3,070	2.17	1.45	784	2.15	4.53	222	0.93	0.33	241	0.00	0.00	1,002	0.00	0.00	574	0.22	0.57	32	0.00	15.33	0			215	21.57	0.00
4100	2,530	0.48	1.12	1,092	0.65	2.58	144	0.00	0.00	1,200	0.00	0.00	57	0.00	0.00	2	0.00	4.59	0			5	20.51	1.56	30	13.36	0.00
4200	4,264	0.27	0.32	1,099	0.27	0.66	2,068	0.33	0.01	858	0.00	0.00	132	0.00	0.03	5	0.00	0.00	69	0.00	9.06	4	0.00	0.00	29	5.96	0.00
4300	1,326	0.45	0.24	312	1.17	0.82	239	0.45	0.05	314	0.00	0.00	421	0.00	0.12	13	0.71	0.29	22	4.26	0.00	0			5	5.22	0.00
4400	266	22.53	0.03	50	0.00	0.18	19	0.00	0.00	61	0.00	0.00	2	0.00	0.00	1	0.00	0.00	35	4.03	0.00	3	6.56	0.00	94	61.94	0.00
4500	565	1.65	2.27	475	1.55	2.67	27	0.00	0.58	7	0.00	0.00	2	0.00	0.00	0			55	3.68	0.00	0			0	0.00	0.00
9999	1	0.00	0.00	0			0			0			0			0			0			1	0.00	0.00	0		
blank	295	0.39	0.13	0			0			0			0			295	0.39	0.13	0			0			0		
<b>Total</b>	<b>274,146</b>	<b>1.76</b>	<b>1.73</b>	<b>108,794</b>	<b>2.46</b>	<b>3.49</b>	<b>69,843</b>	<b>1.56</b>	<b>0.69</b>	<b>46,528</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>21,243</b>	<b>0.11</b>	<b>0.04</b>	<b>14,597</b>	<b>0.94</b>	<b>0.82</b>	<b>4,834</b>	<b>0.21</b>	<b>6.85</b>	<b>2,648</b>	<b>3.18</b>	<b>0.11</b>	<b>5,658</b>	<b>14.06</b>	<b>0.00</b>
<b>RPL + credit transfer</b>		<b>3.49</b>		<b>5.95</b>			<b>2.25</b>			<b>0.00</b>			<b>0.15</b>			<b>1.76</b>			<b>7.06</b>			<b>3.30</b>			<b>14.06</b>		

**Note**

Percentages represent the fraction of total hours for each stream which results in RPL and credit transfer

**Stream**

1000 Recreational, leisure & personal enrichment  
 2100 Basic employment skills  
 2200 Educational preparation  
 3100 Operatives: initial  
 3211 Recognised trades: part exemption  
 3212 Recognised trades: complete

3221 Other skills: part exempt  
 3222 Other skills: complete  
 3300 Trade technician/supervisory  
 3400 Para-professional technician  
 3500 Para-prof higher technician  
 3600 Professional

4100 Operatives: post initial  
 4200 Trades/other skills: post initial  
 4300 Trade tech\super: post initial  
 4400 Para-prof tech: post initial  
 4500 Para-prof high tech: post initial  
 9999 Not stated

**Table 3 Total hours ('000) for all results, % RPL and % credit transfer by gender and discipline for selected States**

Discipline	NSW							Vic							SA								
	All hrs ('000)	Male		Female		RPL %	Credit %	All hrs ('000)	Male		Female		RPL %	Credit %	All hrs ('000)	Male		Female					
		(1) %	%	(2) %	%				%	%	%	%				%	%	%	%	%			
01	4,835	42	58	4.62	1.29	5.21	1.63	6,263	47	53	2.32	0.82	1.77	0.81	1,070	48	52	1.57	0.79	1.61	1.25		
02	2,996	29	71	1.52	8.63	1.22	11.59	1,666	27	73	1.11	0.67	1.73	1.07	175	28	72	0.00	0.00	0.79	0.00		
03	109	22	78	0.00	4.17	2.35	5.88	1,346	47	53	0.00	0.00	0.14	0.00	10	50	50	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00		
04	3,906	52	48	3.67	3.77	2.31	2.58	2,333	58	42	2.13	0.59	0.92	0.41	255	67	33	0.58	1.17	0.00	1.19		
05	10,830	51	49	4.04	3.75	3.30	2.58	8,038	57	43	2.08	0.79	1.53	0.95	1,433	56	44	1.24	1.36	1.28	1.12		
06	5,132	29	71	1.06	1.66	1.30	2.13	3,345	40	60	0.30	0.53	0.35	0.64	737	39	61	0.34	0.34	0.45	0.45		
07	18,101	84	16	3.22	4.09	0.83	2.66	11,845	90	10	2.93	0.81	0.92	0.50	2,372	91	9	0.65	0.93	0.90	2.26		
08	5,500	19	81	2.65	3.03	2.52	1.91	4,069	23	77	2.13	1.28	1.34	0.93	1,132	24	76	1.11	1.11	1.74	1.39		
09	22,055	37	63	2.45	5.27	1.59	5.26	12,850	39	61	1.88	1.08	2.25	1.13	2,578	44	56	1.31	0.61	1.32	1.05		
10	7,246	90	10	2.06	2.99	1.30	1.16	4,461	90	10	0.75	0.18	1.71	0.64	768	89	11	1.03	0.00	0.00	0.00		
11	3,936	67	33	1.02	3.85	1.63	3.18	2,899	68	32	0.30	0.51	0.33	0.44	794	72	28	0.35	0.18	0.00	0.45		
12	6,023	39	61	2.62	2.79	2.62	3.41	3,846	40	60	0.39	0.26	0.31	0.26	1,327	34	65	0.44	0.66	0.46	0.46		
13	16,904	42	58	2.65	1.57	2.07	2.10	6,882	47	53	0.25	0.06	0.46	0.08	1,946	46	54	0.45	0.34	0.85	0.85		
<b>Total</b>	<b>108,794</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>2.81</b>	<b>3.58</b>	<b>2.15</b>	<b>3.49</b>	<b>69,843</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>1.75</b>	<b>0.66</b>	<b>1.32</b>	<b>0.73</b>	<b>14,597</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>0.84</b>	<b>0.70</b>	<b>1.06</b>	<b>0.96</b>		
RPL + credit transfer				6.39		5.64						2.41		2.06						1.54		2.02	

**Notes**

The following definitions are provided to clarify how these and similar columns should be interpreted—

- (1) Male % represents total enrolment hours for males as a proportion of total enrolment hours for males and females
- (2) Male RPL % represents enrolment hours resulting in RPL for males as a proportion of total enrolment hours for males

**Discipline**

- 01 Humanities
- 02 Social studies
- 03 Education
- 04 Sciences
- 05 Mathematics, computing

- 06 Visual/performing arts
- 07 Engineering, processing
- 08 Health sciences
- 09 Administration, business, economics, law
- 10 Built environment

- 11 Agriculture, renewable resources
- 12 Hospitality, tourism and personal services
- 13 Social, educational and employment skills

**Table 4 Total hours ('000) for all results, % RPL and % credit transfer for all persons by age group and discipline for NSW only**

Discipline	Age 14 or under			Age 15-19			Age 20-24			Age 25-29			Age 30-39			Age 40-49			Age 50 or over			Age unknown			All ages		
	All	RPL	Credit	All	RPL	Credit	All	RPL	Credit	All	RPL	Credit	All	RPL	Credit	All	RPL	Credit	All	RPL	Credit	All	RPL	Credit	All	RPL	Credit
	hrs ('000)	%	%	hrs ('000)	%	%	hrs ('000)	%	%	hrs ('000)	%	%	hrs ('000)	%	%	hrs ('000)	%	%	hrs ('000)	%	%	hrs ('000)	%	%	hrs ('000)	%	%
01	6	6.24	0.00	1,451	5.27	0.33	1,238	3.64	0.86	623	4.57	1.72	866	6.24	2.69	429	5.93	3.58	196	4.14	3.57	26	5.39	1.94	4,835	4.95	1.50
02	0	0.00	0.00	632	0.18	2.68	649	1.46	8.34	376	2.08	10.27	720	1.66	14.72	483	1.38	16.52	123	1.25	19.52	13	1.89	15.69	2,996	1.30	10.73
03	-	-	-	3	0.00	0.00	15	1.46	2.07	12	2.49	4.36	31	2.03	7.67	29	3.84	8.89	19	1.16	1.35	1	0.00	4.25	109	2.26	5.56
04	1	0.00	0.00	1,201	0.93	1.59	1,190	2.69	3.36	507	4.68	5.31	643	5.64	3.85	268	4.37	4.09	83	3.38	3.21	15	3.48	3.21	3,906	3.02	3.20
05	15	10.37	0.00	2,973	3.05	1.61	2,589	4.01	3.57	1,343	4.39	4.48	2,270	4.10	3.84	1,195	3.42	3.66	394	2.00	2.82	50	2.74	1.88	10,830	3.68	3.17
06	4	0.00	0.00	1,331	0.05	0.18	1,280	1.40	1.75	554	2.31	2.11	915	1.71	2.68	596	1.82	3.47	421	1.26	4.97	31	0.00	0.12	5,132	1.23	2.00
07	16	0.00	0.00	6,551	0.71	2.18	4,828	3.17	4.43	1,903	5.35	6.16	2,773	5.59	5.45	1,302	3.52	4.41	636	1.43	2.51	91	2.60	1.05	18,101	2.84	3.86
08	3	0.00	0.00	1,508	0.47	1.81	1,484	2.34	2.00	605	6.42	2.53	1,077	3.65	2.07	641	2.31	2.71	158	2.62	2.68	23	2.54	1.56	5,500	2.54	2.12
09	10	0.00	0.00	7,304	0.51	2.53	5,966	1.96	5.59	2,659	2.54	7.00	3,696	3.21	7.85	1,904	3.42	7.32	439	3.21	5.80	77	2.55	1.71	22,055	1.91	5.26
10	3	0.00	0.00	2,924	0.26	3.48	2,192	1.97	2.17	760	3.69	2.86	864	4.22	2.60	361	6.99	2.56	111	3.11	1.11	34	0.59	0.64	7,246	1.99	2.82
11	6	0.00	1.69	1,331	0.77	1.71	840	0.98	4.38	459	1.50	6.08	723	1.90	4.72	390	1.75	4.22	164	1.18	2.79	23	0.48	1.40	3,936	1.22	3.64
12	4	0.00	0.00	2,915	0.88	2.25	1,584	5.13	3.75	479	3.90	4.82	609	3.38	4.32	313	2.90	3.69	89	2.69	4.63	29	1.33	1.69	6,023	2.63	3.16
13	52	0.01	0.00	3,606	0.40	1.19	2,736	2.33	3.03	2,010	3.48	2.14	4,440	3.45	1.90	2,558	2.59	1.90	1,357	1.52	1.02	145	1.92	0.66	16,904	2.31	1.87
blank	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1,221	0.00	0.00	1,221	0.00	0.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>121</b>	<b>1.61</b>	<b>0.09</b>	<b>33,729</b>	<b>0.98</b>	<b>2.01</b>	<b>26,591</b>	<b>2.67</b>	<b>3.85</b>	<b>12,290</b>	<b>3.77</b>	<b>4.74</b>	<b>19,626</b>	<b>3.81</b>	<b>4.58</b>	<b>10,470</b>	<b>3.15</b>	<b>4.52</b>	<b>4,189</b>	<b>1.95</b>	<b>3.23</b>	<b>1,778</b>	<b>0.67</b>	<b>0.49</b>	<b>108,794</b>	<b>2.46</b>	<b>3.49</b>
<b>RPL + credit transfer</b>	<b>1.70</b>			<b>2.99</b>			<b>6.52</b>			<b>8.52</b>			<b>8.39</b>			<b>7.67</b>			<b>5.18</b>			<b>1.16</b>			<b>5.95</b>		

**Note**

Percentages represent the fraction of total hours for each discipline which results in RPL and credit transfer

**Discipline**

- 01 Humanities
- 02 Social studies
- 03 Education
- 04 Sciences
- 05 Mathematics, computing

- 06 Visual/performing arts
- 07 Engineering, processing
- 08 Health sciences
- 09 Administration, business, economics, law
- 10 Built environment

- 11 Agriculture, renewable resources
- 12 Hospitality, tourism and personal services
- 13 Social, educational and employment skills



2

# An RPL assessment toolkit





# What is RPL?

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## What does RPL mean?

One definition of RPL states:

*Recognition of prior learning or experience is a form of assessment used to determine whether a person has achieved, through informal and formal learning and experience, the required competence for entry and/or credit in a recognised course or training program.*

Rumsey, D 1994, *Assessment: Practical guide*, DEET

In this definition the primary purpose of RPL is described as gaining entry or credit in a recognised course or training program. This is not the only reason for going through a process of recognition. Away from the training institution the purpose of RPL may be:

- to get some form of certification
- to improve a person's position at work
- to gain self-esteem and self worth
- to clarify training or career plans

## Recognition of current competency

Some people use the term *recognition of current competency* and this is the term often preferred in an employment setting because it focusses on what a person knows and is able to do now, rather than things they knew or could do in the past but which they may have forgotten or lost touch with. Another alternative is simply to use the term *recognition*.

For ease of expression, the term RPL has been used throughout this document to refer to *recognition of prior learning* and *recognition of current competency*.

## What can be recognised?

RPL therefore is a process of assessment which seeks to identify the skills, knowledge and attitudes which a person currently possesses. These skills and knowledge may cover the requirements of one module in a course, a number of modules in a course or can even cover all the modules in a course.

RPL assessment recognises that there are many situations in which learning takes place and competence develops. A person can develop skills and acquire knowledge as a result of:

- formal training the person has undertaken in the past but never completed or gained a qualification or certificate for

*For example a woman may have started training in hairdressing many years earlier but never completed because she had a family. Now that her children are at school, she may decide to return to college to gain her hairdressing qualification. She will want the skills and knowledge she already has and is still able to use recognised .*

- industry-based training programs

*For example, a person who was originally hired as a labourer, may, because the requirements of the job changed, have been sent on a training program to learn welding. This person may want to have the new competencies developed during the training program listed in an employee profile.*

- learning resulting from work experience

*For example, people may have administration, clerical, and financial management skills as a result of helping to run a family business, yet have no formal business management qualifications. They may want these skills recognised by a formal qualification in order to expand their career options.*

- learning resulting from life experience

*For example, a person may have experience in caring for older people as a result of looking after an elderly relative—these competencies can be recognised as part of a qualification in care work.*

- a qualification gained overseas

*For example, there are many tradespersons who gained their qualifications overseas and who wish to have their competencies recognised here in Australia so they can gain a licence to practise their trade.*

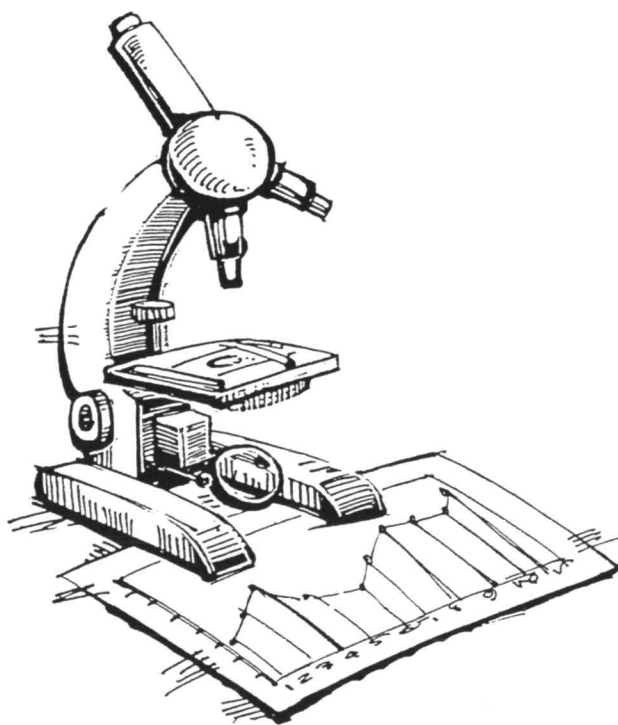
The skills and knowledge that a person has as a result of work and life experience may lead to their gaining credit or entry into a training program. It can also lead to their gaining a qualification without even having to enter a training program.

## Approach to assessment

Since the definition states that RPL is a process of assessment, it is important to make clear what is meant by assessment. Assessment of competency requires that there is a pre-determined set of performance requirements drawn up and these become the benchmarks against which a person's competencies are assessed.

The benchmarks are, typically, industry or enterprise competency standards. These standards reflect the outcomes and levels of performance which people in the workforce must achieve. The benchmarks may also be learning outcomes and associated criteria in a training module.

Assessment is the process of collecting evidence of a person's competency and making judgements about whether they have met the benchmarks.





# Why recognise prior learning?

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In recent years the concept of RPL has been increasingly accepted and implemented both in the workplace and the training environment. For this to have happened there must be identifiable benefits flowing from RPL which have promoted it. Some of the benefits are explained below.

## Benefits to training providers

There are many benefits to training providers in offering RPL. Prominent among them are the following:

- A commitment to RPL leads to better public relations for the training provider because it improves its customer focus.
- RPL provides a positive first experience of study for those who have not undertaken formal study before—this leads to greater motivation and confidence.
- RPL has the potential to free up spaces unnecessarily occupied by students and allow more people to enrol in a module or course.
- RPL provides an opportunity for the training provider to develop closer links with industry which helps to keep lecturers up to date with current industry practice.
- Because RPL enables people to commence studies at a realistic level it encourages them to apply.
- RPL can widen the range of students applying for admission to TAFE programs—leading to greater numbers of mature age, workplace-experienced students in classes, particularly senior classes, with consequent benefit to the teaching programs.
- RPL can improve the basis for selection of students into high demand courses with limited places, thus increasing the validity and hence quality of the selection process.
- RPL can contribute to an improvement in the quality of assessment procedures.

Offering RPL also throws up two important challenges which ought to be mentioned.

- It may be necessary to find ways to make smaller classes viable. Where demand is low, the granting of RPL to one or more potential students may result in enrolments

which are currently considered insufficient to run the class. (While it can be argued that the funding received for student hours lost through RPL should cover the cost of running the class with missing students, the fact is that in most cases this funding only covers the cost of providing the RPL service.)

- There can be a loss of students from classes in early stages of courses who, because of their experience of life and work could make valuable contributions to the classes. This loss can occur when students, whose experience is recognised, skip the earlier stages of a course and commence in a later part.

## Benefits to applicants

The benefits to the RPL applicants (who, of course, are the students or clients of the training provider) include:

- improved self-esteem and confidence resulting from the realisation that the knowledge and skills they have to offer is valued
- better motivation and incentive to train because the recognition places them closer to their goal
- increased access to training for people who have no formal qualifications and no prior experience of training or vocational education
- gaining a nationally recognised, and therefore portable, qualification
- increased career development opportunities resulting from formal qualifications gained
- improved income
- improved access to further learning
- saved time by reducing number of hours to be spent on training—this also means having more time to devote to studies
- identifying what further training is needed—RPL should be seen as a developmental tool to help people decide on career directions and identify goals
- observation of social justice principles in that it gives individuals who did not have the opportunity earlier in life to pursue their education a second chance

While there are many benefits to students, we should also be aware of the fact that some students will choose not to apply for RPL because:

- they want to satisfy all the requirements of the course
- they want to meet other students and learn with them
- they want to formally learn what they have already learnt informally
- they want to recommence study with something familiar and therefore relatively easy
- they feel more comfortable repeating a topic or subject to make sure their skills and knowledge are up to date
- they are dependent on AUSTUDY or ABSTUDY payments to enable them to study and RPL would reduce the total number of their enrolled course hours below that

required to qualify for the entitlement—the additional money is of more value to them than the time spent in training

## National interest

Australia needs to train workers effectively and efficiently if it is to gain a competitive edge in world markets. RPL helps increase effectiveness and efficiency of training in two ways:

- by enabling experienced people to obtain qualifications to which they are entitled in a minimum time
- by preventing wastage of valuable class places and teaching effort on students who already know the work

## Social justice

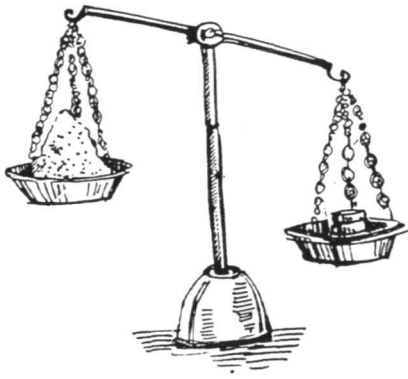
The desire for equality of opportunity has long been a strong driving force in education and training. In years past, because of various constraints placed on the availability of training for employment, it was very difficult, if not impossible, for people without formal training to gain entry to courses at a level which was appropriate to their existing skills and knowledge.

The use of RPL has provided a system with the potential to offer everyone an equal chance to have their existing skills and knowledge recognised and to build on these assets with further training. It is not surprising therefore to find that many providers of training, with their long-standing concern for social justice, have become enthusiastic proponents of RPL.

## National Framework for the Recognition of Training (NFROT)

The training reform processes in Australia, as agreed by the federal, State and Territory ministers of vocational education and training in 1992, place considerable emphasis on the recognition of prior learning. One of the five assessment principles in the National Framework for the Recognition of Training states that *Provision must be made for the recognition of prior learning.*

By making provision for RPL, training providers are supporting the training reforms set out in the NFROT agreement.



# RPL principles

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The process for recognising prior learning must be based on and guided by a set of principles. The RPL principles set out in the National Framework for the Recognition of Training are the ones best known and widely accepted in Australia. They relate to five concepts:

- competence
- commitment
- access
- fairness
- support

The NFROT principles associated with these concepts are stated and guidelines are given on how to apply them.

## Competence

*The recognition of prior learning shall focus on the competencies held as a result of formal and informal training not how, when or where the learning occurred.*

RPL assessment is an assessment of a person's competence—that is, what the person is able to do at work. This covers the range of relevant work skills the person possesses, the level at which the person is able to perform them, and the extent of the person's relevant knowledge.

The implications of focussing on competence are that:

- benchmarks of what is expected at work must be identified
- the assessment process must focus on what people can do and whether this is relevant to current work expectations
- those who play an assessment role are expected to be competent in the field in which they are assessing as well as being competent assessors

## Benchmarks

The most widely used and accepted benchmarks against which to judge a person's performance and knowledge are:

- learning outcomes and assessment criteria from competency-based curriculums

- industry competency standards and/or enterprise standards

The minimum amount of RPL that is generally given is one module or one unit of competence while the maximum given can be a whole course or even an entire set of units of competence for a particular level of the Australian Standards Framework.

### **Assessment process**

Evidence is the information and observations which provide proof of a person's competence. The assessment methods used to gather evidence of competency must reflect the competency itself. When assessing competence, the most appropriate forms of assessment are practical, based on expectations in the workplace rather than relying only on pen and paper tests or oral questioning.

There are three types of evidence:

- direct sources of evidence which include observation of performance and the products a person has produced
- indirect evidence from a third person such as a team member
- supplementary sources of evidence such as answers to questions and documented information about past and current achievements

An RPL assessment is based on the understanding that a person gains skills and knowledge from a variety of sources—where or how these competencies were gained is not important. What is important, is to acknowledge by a formal process of recognition, that the person has the competencies that are expected of work at a particular level, or that they match the competencies expected in a training program.

Although the principle related to competence states that RPL will focus on competence, no matter *when*, where or how learning occurred, the indisputable fact remains that whether or not the person is still competent is important in an industry context particularly where technology is concerned.

For example, a person's competence in using computer software can become outdated in twelve months, therefore how recently the person acquired the relevant skills and knowledge is important.

### **The competence of the assessors**

Assessment should be undertaken by competent assessors with particular reference to the following areas:

- knowledge and skills in applying assessment procedures
- knowledge and understanding of the principles of and processes of assessing for RPL
- expertise in the subject area being assessed

Where one of these three factors is lacking, another person who possesses them should also be involved.

Those who gather evidence of competence for an RPL applicant can include:

- the individual who is applying for RPL, provided the requirements of the standards or curriculum are explained first
- the workplace supervisor, team leader, line manager or employer
- fellow workers (depending on the size of the organisation and the management structure)
- those who provided training on and off the job (for example, TAFE lecturers or private training providers)
- an industry-based RPL assessor

Those who judge the evidence and make the final RPL assessment decision may include:

- those who provide training
- the workplace supervisor, team leader, line manager or employer
- an industry expert with specialist knowledge of the area being assessed
- an employee representative who acts as advocate for the employee
- a panel comprising any or all of the above-listed people

## Commitment

*The recognition of prior learning underpins a system of competency based training. It is essential that training providers have a demonstrable commitment to recognising the prior learning of individuals.*

The training provider's commitment to RPL is linked to

- the perceived benefits of RPL to itself and to those individuals who apply for RPL
- the extent of training and support provided by the training provider to those who play an assessment role
- time and resources the training provider commits to RPL assessments

### **Benefits to the individual**

The immediate benefit to the individual is that RPL helps individuals get closer to the goal they are pursuing—whether it is a qualification or progression within a job or career.

The less visible, but extremely important personal benefits are, typically, increased confidence, self-esteem and personal development as a result of the RPL process.

### **Benefits to the training provider**

RPL can lead to spaces being freed up in the training institution, an advantage if there are more enrolments than places available. From a broader perspective, the fact that a training provider offers RPL means that:

- some students who are undertaking study for the first time in years are helped to get over their fear of starting to study
- the training provider is seen as more flexible and user-friendly and this contributes to good public relations
- there is an improved focus on customers which is important in a client-focussed culture of training and development
- there are closer links with industry and sharing of ideas and information between workplace assessors and lecturers in a training institution

### **Benefits to the workplace and employer**

From the point of view of the organisation, RPL is seen as leading to greater efficiency—less time spent off the job at a training course. It also has the potential to improve job performance and job aspirations. RPL also is a way of defining further training needed and therefore a crucial mechanism for targeting training effort. Furthermore, RPL is of benefit to workplace supervisors since it assists them to fulfil their responsibilities for developing the people they supervise and enables them to plan and provide work activities to support development in further modules of training.

### **Committing time and money to RPL**

Commitment to RPL means giving adequate information and training about the RPL process to:

- whoever gives information and advice about RPL in a training institution (for example, the RPL advisor, administration staff, staff in resource centre, student counsellors, career counsellors, student information services)
- whoever is conducting the RPL assessment (for example, the lecturers, both full-time and part-time and any industry experts brought in to be a member of an assessment panel)
- the applicants who will be assessed

Commitment also means providing the people who conduct assessments with:

- an incentive to take on the role of RPL assessors; and
- enough time off from other duties to provide information and support to those doing the assessment as well as time for conducting the assessment.

#### **Benefits of adequate time provision to staff**

For example in one college in the business studies area there is an RPL advisor employed half-time. It is her responsibility to provide RPL workshops to new and existing staff and to conduct six-hour RPL workshops for students who are applying for RPL in a number of modules in a course. Those students who do the workshops gather good quality evidence and generally are able to prepare comprehensive and thorough applications for RPL which lecturers find easy and quick to assess.

Lecturers generally are encouraged to do an assessor training course. The courses meet national assessor training standards and usually focus on assessment of RPL. The courses range up to five days in length with follow-up sessions and requirements for participants to conduct several RPL assessments before accreditation is granted. The origin of many of these courses can be traced back to the 'Broadmeadows model' developed by the Broadmeadows College of TAFE (now Kangan Institute).

It is necessary to provide information about the benefits of RPL to applicants as well as what will be expected of them. This can be done through information sessions at institutions, leaflets, notices, information in course handbooks and through special RPL workshops.

## Access

*The recognition of prior learning shall be available to all potential applicants.*

The principle of access involves taking into account:

- many people applying for RPL have no previous experience of formal training and assessment in order to gain a qualification
- the special needs of people from disadvantaged groups
- the level of fees and whether they pose a barrier

### **People with no previous formal qualifications**

RPL applicants who have no previous formal vocational qualifications will often underestimate the range and depth of skills and knowledge they have. Therefore considerable information and assistance must be available if the RPL procedure is to be accessible.

### **The needs of disadvantaged groups**

The RPL process must be sensitive to the needs of people from disadvantaged groups, particularly those whose experience may have been gained in work with low pay and low status.

*For example, a special RPL confidence-building program via a local community support group is one way of preparing people from such groups for an RPL process.*

In an area in which there is a large number of people from non-English-speaking backgrounds, information needs to be printed in languages other than English. Interpreters may also be necessary.

### **Fee policy**

The fees for RPL should not be a barrier to people applying for RPL. The fees need to be no more than fees for the module or course and should match the time the assessment takes or the amount of RPL given.

## Fairness

*The recognition of prior learning shall involve processes that are fair to all parties involved.*

The RPL process is a positive and developmental exercise. In order to be fair the process should:

- be based on trust
- not pose any barriers
- provide an appeal process

### Trust

The RPL process must be built on trust and the assumption that most people who request RPL will go about the task of applying for RPL with integrity and will seek to do the 'right thing'. The RPL process should not intimidate applicants or be adversarial.

### No barriers

It is important to consider that the method of RPL assessment may be a barrier to some applicants and therefore the choice of method must consider the following factors.

- The level of language and literacy skills of the applicant and the language and literacy skills required to present evidence. Asking applicants to prepare a portfolio would not be suitable if the language and literacy skills needed to prepare the portfolio were higher than the language and literacy skills needed to perform the task described in the learning outcome or competency standard.
- If tests are to be used as part of the RPL assessment, people who have little experience of tests are daunted by them and may not demonstrate their true ability because they are in a test situation.

### An appeal process

There should be an appeal process available to those applicants who are not satisfied with the outcomes of the RPL assessment. Applicants should be told before the RPL assessment about how the appeals process works.

## Support

*The recognition of prior learning shall involve the provision of adequate support to potential applicants.*

The primary types of support needed by people who plan to apply for RPL are:

- on-going encouragement
- information
- advice

## Encouragement

People applying for RPL may not have the confidence to undertake an RPL process immediately. RPL applicants should be shown that they play an important role in the RPL assessment and that, unlike traditional school tests over which they have no control, they are equal partners in the assessment process. It is a process requiring active participation by the person being assessed: this participation will include self-assessment, discussions, explanations and 'show and tell' sessions. It is an exercise in self-discovery and self-development—many people do not realise the extent and range of their knowledge and ability and this realisation can open new doors for them.

## Information

People in the workplace need to know:

- the benefits of the recognition they may achieve
- what the outcome will be (for example, a skill profile, or a module of training completed and therefore fast tracking of the training they are doing)
- what the RPL assessment will involve (interviews, gathering evidence of competent performance at work, testing, observation of work)
- who will be the RPL assessor(s)
- how long it will take
- the benchmarks against which their performance will be judged

## Advice

Applicants also need advice on where to find evidence—what sort of workplace documents, products and testimonials are acceptable to prove they have the competencies expected of them.

For some people—particularly those who may feel hesitant about the process, effective support may be provided by someone who has successfully completed an RPL assessment.

In some subject areas the support is formalised through a workshop. Applicants are given information about the RPL process, copies of relevant learning outcomes and advice about suitable evidence to support their claim.

Preparation for assessment may require additional meetings and advice between applicants and advisors.

Advisors and assessors need training if they are to provide support to RPL applicants. In training institutions it may be advisable for all lecturing staff to be trained as RPL assessors so that all staff are able to conduct RPL assessment in their subject area.

Furthermore, if students are given enough information and support, they can take on the role of gathering evidence and thereby reduce the time required by the assessor to carry out the assessment.

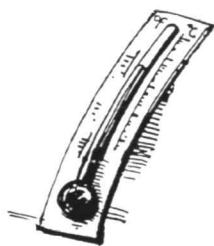


## Checklist

In order to check that your organisation meets the five principles for RPL, these are some important questions you will need to address:

	Yes	No
<b>Competence</b>		
• Have you determined the purpose of the RPL assessment? (e.g. to gain recognition for specific knowledge and skills, gain a qualification, be slotted into a pay point, progress from one level of work to another, develop an employee skill profile)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Have you selected the benchmarks which best suit this purpose?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Have you identified the types of evidence needed?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Are the persons who are going to assess for RPL trained in assessment techniques?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Do the RPL assessors have adequate expertise in the area in which they are assessing?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Commitment</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
• Does everyone involved with RPL in the training institution understand the benefits of RPL?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Have you organised for information about RPL to be given to people who are likely to benefit?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Have you provided incentives for people to apply for RPL?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Have you provided incentives for people to be RPL assessors?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Have you committed adequate time to allow RPL assessors to do their training and conduct assessments?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Access</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
• Have you considered the special needs any particular groups of potential applicants may have?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Fairness</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
• Have you considered any potential barriers to people wanting RPL and taken steps to remove them?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Have you set up an appeal process?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Support</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
• Have you taken steps to encourage the active participation of the person being assessed in the RPL process?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Have you provided comprehensive information about the process to the people who will be applying for RPL?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Have you organised for some system of support for people going through the RPL process?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>





# RPL policy

## Need for a policy

An RPL policy provides valuable support for the successful implementation of a system of RPL in any institution or organisation providing vocational education or training. The policy provides the framework upon which principles are based and procedures are developed. To be effective, an RPL policy must be systematically set out, clearly explained, well publicised and readily accessible.

It should also be remembered that, once written, policies are not unalterable. In the initial stages, even a well-designed policy is most likely to require modification as experience is gained. Even after it has become well established, a policy is still likely to require modification for a variety of reasons: changes in government policies, community needs and organisation structure, to name just a few. As with all policies, it is good practice to review it regularly to ensure that it continues to match the corporate goals of the organisation and needs of its clients.

### **Institution policies vary**

In all States and Territories the responsibility for RPL has, to varying degrees, been devolved from the central authority to individual institutions. As a result of this, each institution has developed its own policy to suit the needs of its programs and clientele.

In some States (e.g. WA and SA) some parts of the RPL policy, such as fees are still centrally determined, in others (e.g. Victoria) almost every component of policy is decided by the institution.

## Outline of an RPL policy

The following is an outline of the suggested structure and content of a well-designed RPL policy. It is based on information gathered from training providers and vocational education institutions which already have well-established and highly regarded RPL policies.

## Introduction

There should be an introduction which explains the background to the policy including why it was needed and how it was developed.

## Definitions

To enable readers to have a clear understanding of the policy it should include clear definitions of RPL and other related concepts such as credit transfer, non-standard recognition, standard recognition and advanced standing.

## Scope

This section should explain the extent of the RPL policy, particularly:

who it covers:

- profiles of RPL providers covered (for example, registered providers outside the institution may be included)
- profiles of clients covered

what it covers, which may include:

- learning programs for which recognition is available (for example, only competency-based programs may be included)
- occupational areas for which recognition is available
- RPL on a fee-for-service basis
- recognition for employment or licensing purposes
- recognition of overseas qualifications
- types of recognition available (for example, recognition for entry, recognition for credit or advanced standing)

### Types of recognition

Most institutions recognise three categories of prior learning (although they are not always defined in this way in their policies):

- recognition for entry to a course—in which the RPL is only for knowledge and skills necessary for entry to a course, not for credit in the course (e.g. if Year 11 maths was a pre-requisite, an applicant could apply for RPL in Year 11 maths),
- recognition for credit in a course (in which the applicant is given credit for knowledge and skills forming part of a course)
- recognition for certification (in which credit is given for all modules and a credential is awarded)

The distinction between these three categories is useful because it helps clarify the degree of rigour with which prior learning should be assessed. The degree of rigour should increase progressively from the first mentioned to the last.

## Goals

This section should outline the purpose of the policy—what it hopes to achieve, for example:

- to promote RPL
- to ensure RPL is implemented in accordance with the National Framework for the Recognition of Training
- to ensure efficient and equitable RPL processes

## Principles

In this section the principles which must be observed in implementation of the RPL policy are stated. These should almost certainly include those defined in NFROT and it may also be useful to include others covering additional aspects of RPL such as quality assurance.

### Access and fairness

It is important that training should address any special needs of the community and cultures served by the institution. In the Northern Territory, for example, an assessor training workshop has been especially developed by the Aboriginal Development Unit of the Northern Territory Department of Education to cover appropriate assessment concepts and strategies for people from Aboriginal and other cultures commonly found in the north of Australia. RPL offers particularly important opportunities for many Aboriginal people because of the nature of their prior learning. The content of this excellent training program would be valuable to all assessors who need to assess Aboriginal people.

## Procedures

This section should cover the policy applying to the RPL procedures including those leading to and subsequent to formal assessment. For example:

- when RPL is to be offered (for example, will it be available during vacation?)
- what information and advice should be available
- where information and advice should be available
- what the application procedure must include (for example, forms used, provisional enrolment and payment of course fees before assessment)
- what support is provided
- what post-assessment support and guidance will be provided

### **Appropriate provision of support**

A large proportion of students in TAFE are only able to attend classes in the evenings because they are employed during the day. Unless appropriate provisions are made these students may be restricted in their access to RPL services because RPL staff and subject specialists are not available during the evening.

Applicants who need help in preparing and applying for RPL and then being assessed at the start of the year may also be disadvantaged if the appropriate staff are not on hand to assist them in January.

### **Type and quantity of evidence required**

The work required of an applicant in preparing and submitting a case for RPL should not be disproportionate to the amount of recognition obtainable.

As one assessor pointed out, some students find that the number of hours they must spend in obtaining evidence and preparing their application equals, or even exceeds the amount of recognition they would receive. In such cases they may elect to enrol for the module rather than apply for RPL. This issue has particular relevance to short modules of six hours or so.

### **Assessment**

Assessment is so critical to RPL that it could warrant a separate section in its own right. The following are suggested areas that should be covered in a policy on assessment for RPL.

- Definition of RPL assessment. It is advisable that this be given because, to many people, assessment is synonymous with 'testing'. Assessment for RPL is much broader, involving assessment of 'evidence' in a variety of forms by a wide range of assessment methods.
- The risk management approach (as defined by the Vocational Education, Employment and Training Advisory Committee in its publication *Arrangements for the recognition of prior learning in Australia*, 1993), could be included here. Alternatively it could be included in the quality assurance section which follows. In a risk management approach, the extent of assessment rigour is determined by the possible consequences of an incorrect assessment decision.
- RPL assessor standards should be covered by the policy. The policy should state that subject expertise, general assessment knowledge and skills, and specialised RPL knowledge and skills are all utilised in the RPL assessment.

### **Training to RPL assessor standards**

If RPL assessment is to be valid and reliable it is essential that the assessor understand not only the principles of good assessment but also the philosophy, purpose and principles of RPL. Staff who are to conduct RPL assessment are required by most institutions to undertake training in RPL and appropriate assessment procedures. In many cases the training program used is modelled on an assessor training workshop developed by the Broadmeadows College of TAFE (now Kangan Institute).

Well-trained RPL assessors can also provide economic benefit to their institutions. The more highly trained and professional they are in their approach to RPL assessment, the more they can be trusted to make sound judgements. Sound judgements mean fewer people needing to be involved in monitoring assessments, hearing appeals and correcting mistakes. The result is a more efficient and therefore more economical RPL assessment service.

### **Appeals**

The appeal process is an important element of the RPL policy. Provisions for appeals can be covered in a separate section—as is the case here, or they might be dealt with in either procedures or quality.

### **Reporting and certification**

These two important parts of the RPL assessment chain should be covered in the policy. This section can include:

- What records should be kept and where.
- How the recognition granted should be recorded (including whether ‘take home’ records for applicants should show a result as being gained through RPL).
- The reporting procedure.
- The maximum time from assessment to receipt of result by the applicant (that is, promptness of reporting).
- How partial results should be recorded (for example, results in some modules while additional modules required for a credential are satisfied).
- What form of certification of recognition should be provided to applicants.

### **Quality**

In this section the quality standards applying to the RPL process should be specified, as should the quality assurance procedures to be followed.

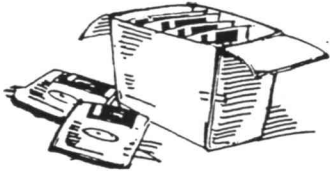
### **Implementation**

This section should deal with how the system of RPL is put into practice. In particular it should cover the responsibilities of various sections and personnel for implementing particular parts of the RPL process. Another way of dealing with the implementation aspects of RPL policy is to cover them as part of other relevant sections.

## Evaluation and monitoring

It is important that the RPL process be monitored and evaluated in order to assess how well it is meeting the needs of the institution's clients; to allow adequate forward planning to meet changes in demand; and to introduce changes for improvement. The policy should specify what evaluation and monitoring are to be done.





# RPL resources

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Within our community there is a large number of people who, for a variety of reasons are currently not working or only working in a part-time capacity, and who have not undertaken formal study for some years. Many such people possess skills and knowledge acquired through informal study or life experience which have never been formally recognised and which, if they were, could help them re-enter the workforce or undertake further study. But they need help getting started on their path towards achieving recognition.

One of the difficulties faced by many training providers, particularly those which are not confined to workplace training, is providing help to people similar to those described above. Many of these people have only a vague notion of where they are headed and what they want to achieve. These clients can tie up staff and resources for considerable time while they decide on their career and training options in the context of RPL.

There are several ways in which the time spent with these clients and hence the cost of providing RPL service can be reduced. The first is to utilise the services of a community self-help group and the second is to consider implementing an adult community education program for RPL or using one if it is already available.

## Community support groups

Community support groups are organisations which can assist these people to take the first important steps towards obtaining recognition. A network of more than nine hundred such groups has been established across Australia which can provide assistance in this way. Although known by a variety of names, such as community houses, neighbourhood houses and learning centres, one of their common aims is to help people find their way into the workforce or further study. Many of these community support organisations have access to, or can already offer, a program like *Life Experience Counts* (see box) which takes people through the initial steps in preparing to apply for RPL.

RPL co-ordinators, advisors, assessors and other training provider staff who come into contact with unemployed or partially employed people who have difficulty working through the preliminary steps towards RPL should consider contacting local self-help organisations. Partnerships and/or co-operative arrangements may be possible, and at the very least a referral service can be established.

A list of initial contacts in each State and Territory for training providers wishing to make contact with self-help organisations in their locality is provided as an appendix to this book.

## Adult community education

TAFE institutions and other training providers might consider offering a community adult education program for people contemplating RPL, as a means of reducing the workload on staff. One college is planning a program designed along the lines of existing 'Returning to study' courses but focussing on:

- helping participants to review their skills and experience
- advising on which career or study directions are their best options
- assisting with the development of their RPL applications.

Such a program would not replace the RPL modules already developed and used in some TAFE institutions which are designed for people who have already decided on their goals.



## Life Experience Counts

*Life Experience Counts* is a program which was developed by a community support organisation in Armadale, Western Australia, called Learning Centre Link. The program is of particular interest because of its focus on RPL. In it, participants learn about RPL and are guided through the development of a personal resume as part of a portfolio of their life experience which can be used in applying for recognition.

### Content of the program

The program consists of seven weekly 2½ hour sessions:

- The early sessions are designed to orient the participants toward the goals of the program, make them feel comfortable, help them understand the terms and jargon used in education and help them begin identifying their skills .
- In session 4 participants are introduced to the concept of RPL and are helped to develop some long- and short-term goals.
- In sessions 5 and 6 they develop their portfolios which describe the competencies or skills they have
- In the last session they complete their portfolios and learn how to proceed with their RPL applications, if they wish to do so.

### Example of approaches used

The methods used in *Life Experience Counts* to help people gain understanding of the concept of RPL and then to encourage and assist them in gathering evidence and developing their applications are quite creative. They are well-suited to people who lack the initial confidence needed to take up the challenge of applying for RPL.

Some of the strategies used could have worthwhile application in RPL programs used in industry. The following are descriptions of some of the interesting approaches:

### Skill banks

In session 3 the concept of skill banks is used to assist participants to identify and categorise skills they have. The skills are grouped as follows:

#### Things

- materials (including crafts)
- machinery/buildings (assembling, operating, maintaining)
- growing plants and animals

#### Ideas and information

- gathering information
- managing information
- storing/ retrieving information

#### People

- individual skills
- group skills
- leadership skills

#### Often forgotten skills

- planning and creating
- doing/ maintaining
- evaluating

### Demystifying the jargon

To explain competencies and other jargon, the Mayer key competencies and other terms relevant to their goals are rewritten in simpler language and illustrated by examples.

The RPL process is described in five steps:

- identifying skills and knowledge possessed (which they have already tackled in earlier sessions)
- matching skills and knowledge against specific competency standards, entry standards or job requirements
- illustrating prior learning
- assessing the evidence
- getting credit



# Partnerships with industry

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## A new approach?

Forming partnerships is becoming a more common approach in the provision of RPL and other training requirements. This is not new—large businesses have been involved in arrangements with vocational education and training providers, especially TAFE, for many years. However, arrangements are increasingly three-way, involving industry in the form of a number of individual businesses, a training provider and an industry training advisory body or other industry organisation. These industry-based organisations may be national groups or may be at State or Territory level.

Partnerships of this type offer two principal advantages. First, they can provide a means whereby small businesses or small organisations can develop and maintain systems for training and assessment which they could not afford individually. Second, they provide a structure for combining the needs, expertise and resources of industry with those of a training provider. In this way they offer opportunities for achieving higher levels of integration between industry or enterprise competency standards, training curriculum, on- and off-the-job training delivery, on- and off-the-job assessment, and RPL.

## What can training providers offer?

Training providers, because of their established systems and expertise in training, assessment, record-keeping and certification, and their knowledge of competency-based training and competency-based assessment and RPL are in a strong position to be of service to industry through RPL partnership arrangements. The following is a summary of some of the services which can be offered.

### **Qualifications**

Of the many features which training providers offer to other partners in the RPL relationships being suggested, perhaps the most obvious is the provision of qualifications. Organisations and individuals who become interested in RPL do not always see the need for a recognised qualification to be provided at the end of an RPL process or training program. But offering a qualification is a strong incentive. By being registered and working to accredited training programs, providers have the advantage of offering a form of portable recognition. Different providers have different rules about how much of a training program leading to a qualification they will grant as RPL. Upper limits range from fifty to one hundred per cent of the program.

## **Maintenance of records**

One critical feature of offering a qualification is the maintenance of records over long periods of time which allows the qualification to be traced. Nobody wants a certificate which cannot be checked as authentic in ten years time when they submit it as part of a job application. Businesses are generally not set up to provide broad public access to employee records like this and industry-based organisations frequently do not have the resources to allow them to set up such record-keeping systems. Training providers, particularly public sector ones, on the other hand have well-established recording systems.

## **Experience in assessment for RPL**

Assessment is an integral part of almost all programs offered by training providers for industry. In recent years training providers have devoted considerable resources to revising and developing courses and assessments into a competency-based format. This experience in competency-based training and assessment is especially applicable to RPL. Many training providers have already amassed a large amount of expertise and experience in assessing for RPL.

## **Ability to design, develop and monitor RPL processes**

Training providers have the expertise and experience to design, develop and monitor RPL processes to be conducted by enterprises and industry bodies.

## **Ability to deliver general assessor and RPL assessor training**

Training providers are well equipped to provide assessor training both for general assessment and for RPL purposes. Some enterprises and industries are seeing this sort of training as part of the professional development of their more experienced personnel.

## **Ability to undertake RPL assessments**

Where an enterprise or industry organisation does not have the resources or experience to conduct RPL assessments, training providers may do so on their behalf. In keeping with the concept of partnerships, some enterprises may opt for a co-operative arrangement in which the RPL process is shared with the training provider.

## **Application of RPL assessment to enable entry to further training**

Because of their obvious familiarity with the training programs they offer, training providers are well able to apply RPL assessments to assist employees to enter further training at an appropriate level.

## **Ability to integrate on- and off-the-job training, assessment and RPL**

With their resources and expertise, training providers are able to offer an integrated system of training, assessment and RPL to enterprises and industry bodies.

## **Contribution to quality assurance processes**

Training providers are able to offer enterprises and industry bodies assistance with quality assurance processes—which are essential if RPL is to lead to qualifications which are not seen as second-rate.

### **Integrating on- and off-the-job training**

An example of successful partnerships in RPL provision, is the case of co-operative training delivery within the disabilities services sector. As part of a TAFE certificate, the industry-specific modules in disability care are delivered and assessed by the industry, while the more generic modules are provided and assessed by TAFE, on site. Many individuals in the industry have extensive experience with patient care which they want to have recognised. The same division of responsibilities between TAFE and the industry is also planned for RPL.

## How can training providers be more involved?

Many training providers have very effective processes which allow students enrolling in their institutions to apply for and be granted RPL appropriate to their program.

While there is no suggestion that these processes should in any way be reduced, it is apparent that training reform and the freeing-up of the training market is putting more power into the hands of industry and making the provision of training far more competitive. Dissatisfaction with training providers will cause industry to abandon traditional providers and take a greater role themselves or identify existing providers who are willing to provide the services they need. In this context RPL is a key issue because it is central to the matching of industry competency standards and training curriculum.

This suggests that training providers need to:

- develop closer links with industry organisations including industry training advisory bodies in their fields of expertise
- develop co-operative arrangements with smaller-sized enterprises and their industry associations as well as more traditional partnerships with larger enterprises
- acknowledge the roles and contribution of industry in training and assessment, especially for RPL
- develop collaborative arrangements with industry for joint assessment of RPL
- continue to become more client-focussed, seeing both industry and individuals as clients in the appropriate circumstances
- ensure that they build RPL into new and revised training programs
- find ways to lower the cost of providing RPL services especially by working in co-operation with industry

## Benefits of partnerships to training providers

Training providers should not overlook the benefits from providing RPL through partnership arrangements with enterprises and industry bodies.

### **Better links with industry**

Working collaboratively with industry to provide an RPL service offers training providers an ideal opportunity to develop and strengthen links with enterprises and industry bodies. Training provider staff who conduct RPL assessments spend time in the workplace meeting with enterprise staff, meeting with RPL applicants and familiarising themselves with the work performed, all of which can contribute to their own professional development.

### **Promotion of the training provider**

Provision of RPL through partnerships with industry means the training institution becomes more widely known. If the work done by the training provider is of a high standard the reputation of the institution is also enhanced with the potential to generate further activity.

### **Continued existence of the training provider**

Businesses can now develop their own training and assessment programs and become registered as training providers in their own right. If they do, the demand for the services of traditional training providers will decrease. It is therefore in the interests of training providers to contribute high quality and cost-effective services including RPL, to enterprises and industry bodies. Development of effective partnerships can provide these opportunities.





# Promoting RPL

## Well-designed approaches

The 1993 Vocational Education, Employment and Training Advisory Committee (VEETAC) report on best practice in RPL describes promoting RPL as the first stage of the RPL process—the information stage. The aim of this stage is *to let people know the service exists, attract potential applicants and provide enough information for them to decide whether or not to seek recognition.*

This VEETAC report describes the features of a well-designed information stage as including:

- a marketing plan for selected target groups
- publicity (for example, press releases, visits, addresses to groups, work site visits, letters to employees, articles in company and industry magazines, posters in employment offices and articles in local, ethnic or trade newspapers)
- provision of clear, simple information covering
  - what is involved
  - advice and support which is available
  - qualifications or courses for which RPL may be granted
  - fees and costs
  - typical timeframe for recognition
- readily available written material which is eye-catching and free of jargon
- point-of-contact staff equipped to provide information and referrals (this includes switchboard operators, receptionists, supervisors, training staff and office staff)

Successful promotional activities must be backed up by appropriate initial support and counselling processes so that those showing initial interest are encouraged into the program.

In this phase benchmarks to be applied in the assessment are explained, applicants are helped to clarify their expectations, and a suitable course or qualification is identified.

Features of a well-designed support and counselling phase include:

- provision of an information or briefing session at a convenient time for applicants
- an inviting and comfortable environment
- opportunity for applicants to clarify their objectives and express their fears

- guidance and support from skilled members of staff with sound knowledge of training programs, courses, qualifications and competency standards or learning outcomes applying to each course
- printed statements of specific standards or learning outcomes

## Promotional information for staff

In order to promote RPL, the management and staff within the training institution should have a commitment to RPL and should have in place all the necessary systems to support the RPL process. These include:

- trained staff committed to the principles of RPL
- competency-based curriculum
- a streamlined system of applying for RPL
- valid, reliable, fair and flexible methods of assessing applicants' current levels of competence
- cost-effective structure which minimises fees
- a system for recording and certifying recognition given
- a process for giving prompt feedback to applicants on their RPL assessment
- an appeals system

Furthermore, in order to promote RPL successfully, it is important for staff to have a clear picture in their minds of the benefit of RPL to potential applicants, to the training institution and to employers.

### **Benefits to RPL applicants**

These benefits are fully covered in 'Why recognise prior learning?' (see p.36). Key promotional items include:

- increased access to training for people with no formal qualifications or prior experience of training or vocational education
- a nationally recognised and portable qualification
- increased career development and improved income opportunities
- fewer hours to be spent on training
- identification of further training and improved access

### **Benefits to training providers**

These benefits are fully covered in 'Why recognise prior learning?' (see p.36). They are useful for promoting the provision of RPL to those inside the training institution and include:

- more motivated and confident students including mature age and workplace-experienced students in classes

- more class spaces and an improved basis for selection of students into high demand courses
- opportunity for closer links with industry and better public relations
- course entry at realistic level which encourages more students to enrol

### **Benefits to employers**

Employers are primarily looking for economic benefits such as:

- reduced training time
- identification of workers' skill ranges
- identification of training gaps
- closer links with training provider leading to better and more economical training

## Procedural information for staff

The information that staff in a training institution undertaking RPL need includes:

- how to support a student in the RPL process and provide advice/feedback
- at what points throughout a course a student can apply for RPL
- where to get the curriculum/competency standards
- how to understand the requirements of the curriculum/competency standards
- what type of evidence should be gathered
- what standard and level is acceptable
- how to conduct an RPL assessment
- how to record an RPL assessment in the record-keeping system
- what type of record will be given to the student
- the costs of the RPL assessment

Much of this information can be gained by staff completing an assessor training course. Additional information relating to RPL policy within the training institution should be disseminated to all staff who are likely to provide advice about RPL to students.

## Information for applicants

Students also need information about RPL—not just introductory information, but specific information on how to understand and interpret learning outcomes, how to gather appropriate evidence and how to present the evidence.

Applicants should be *given* the learning outcomes of the course rather than be told to go to the library to find the information. A booklet containing a self-assessment

checklist of all learning outcomes and assessment criteria is an essential resource for the applicant and removes one barrier to applying for RPL.

If RPL is promoted directly and vigorously to potential clients, then these clients are more likely to demand it from their training providers. Moreover, as details about the benefits of RPL spread, potential applicants tend to enrol in courses with the expectation of being granted RPL.

### **RPL workshop**

In the business studies field one institute (*Torrens Valley Campus, SA*), encourages all those who are applying for RPL in more than two modules and especially those who are applying for the majority if not all the learning outcomes in a course, to do a six-hour RPL workshop. This workshop devotes three hours to explanations of learning outcomes, sources of evidence and rules of evidence. As an exercise the students select a module for which to apply for RPL and set about gathering the necessary evidence. The workshop participants then meet again at a later date for a three-hour practical session where they present the evidence gathered to the group. The evidence is then discussed and assessed by the group.

Lecturers in business studies find that those students who do the six-hour workshop, prepare comprehensive portfolios of evidence and are generally successful in their RPL applications. In these cases, the lecturer's time in helping the applicant prepare for assessment and in actually reviewing the evidence is significantly reduced.

## Disseminating information about RPL

In order to promote RPL, printed information about RPL may be disseminated to students and applicants:

- at enrolment through leaflets and explanations in enrolment literature and orientation packages
- in the training institution handbook
- in course information
- in learning guides

Some institutions produce an RPL handbook or guide for students which may include: general information about RPL, an explanation of the RPL process, a step-by-step procedure to be followed, an application form, advice about where and how to obtain evidence, how to present evidence, and what to do at the interview. RPL guides for specific program areas may also include lists and explanations of course learning outcomes.

### Client focussed help

Batchelor College in the Northern Territory has produced an RPL guide entitled *Recognition of prior learning—A guide for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students* which is an excellent example of a well-designed publication of this type. It is comprehensive, thoughtfully structured, easy to follow and written in plain English.

Information about RPL may also be passed on to students orally by staff with whom they come in contact before they start their studies. This may be done:

- in induction sessions
- through student counsellors
- through lecturing staff or RPL-trained administration staff
- through special RPL information sessions, workshops and orientation sessions.

Information about RPL may also be distributed directly to the workplace—through leaflets and brochures, through newsletters produced by the relevant industry training advisory board, union or employer association, through industry forums, at workplace trainer training and through word of mouth at work sites. This way of promoting RPL is more visible to industry and creates an opportunity for training providers and industry to work together to spread information to those most likely to benefit.

Word of mouth is often regarded as the most effective way to raise initial awareness of RPL. This can be achieved by site visits of training institution staff, union officials and staff from the State training/recognition council.

Those who produce RPL information and advice should also consider the requirements of special needs applicants—for instance those for whom English is a second language or who are hearing- or sight-impaired

In summary, to promote RPL successfully, lecturers, course advisors, co-ordinators, information officers, counsellors and administration staff need to be educated about RPL. As one assessor said: *'not only should we be giving RPL opportunities to people, we should also be making opportunities for them'* It is essential that people are aware that RPL can be granted on the basis of work experience and life skills.



# Procedures for RPL

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## The stages in an RPL assessment process

In outlining procedures for the assessment of RPL, the Vocational Education, Employment and Training Advisory Committee in its publication *Arrangements for the recognition of prior learning in Australia* (1993), suggested that the assessment process could be divided into six stages. These were:

- Information stage
- Initial support and counselling stage
- Application stage
- Assessment stage
- Post-assessment guidance stage
- Certification stage

Since publication, these stages have proved to be an effective way of setting out the procedures to be followed and have been used with minor variations in numerous policies developed throughout Australia over the past three years. One variation recommended is the addition of a seventh stage entitled:

- Appeals

Examples of good RPL practice characteristically use these seven stages.

## Information stage

This stage deals with introductory information, that is, information which makes potential applicants aware of the existence of RPL and enables them to determine its value to them. The introductory information also describes how to make the first contact.

### Target group

The first step is to decide on the target group, for example, unemployed persons, mature-aged persons, unqualified employees in industry, special needs groups. This, in turn, helps determine where the information should be disseminated, such as the Commonwealth Employment Service, industry training advisory boards, employer or professional associations, unions, workplaces, specific cultural or gender groups. It

also helps determine the format the information should take, for example printed information (possibly in other languages), posters, advertisements (in newspapers, trade publications or union publications), visits (to workplaces, community groups), radio or television advertising.

### **Word of mouth**

Word of mouth is often regarded as one of the most effective ways of raising initial awareness of RPL. One institution (*Torrens Valley Institute of TAFE, SA*) has found that since word began spreading about the advantages of RPL, students are actually seeking it out and go to Torrens Valley with an expectation of having their skills and knowledge recognised. As a consequence they are enrolling in courses which they would never have considered enrolling in had it not been for RPL.

### **Type of information**

The next step is to look at the nature of the information to be provided. For example should it merely be a brief outline of RPL as it applies to the particular target group with an invitation to contact the training provider or should it contain comprehensive details of what is available? It should always be free of jargon and written in plain English—but should it be pitched at an appropriate level for persons with poor reading skills perhaps with illustrations, or should it be provided in another language?

Examples of the forms in which RPL information could be provided by a training provider are: a leaflet, as part of an orientation package, in a course information booklet or in the training provider's handbook.

### **Information content**

The content given in the information stage should also be carefully considered. Should it state the qualifications, credentials or other recognition obtainable, or detail the processes involved? Should any fees and concessions be mentioned?

### **Contact information**

Lastly there is a need to provide contact information. Ideally this should include an address, a telephone number and perhaps even a fax number (even an e-mail address could be appropriate for computer, business or education related courses). It is also worth noting that most people prefer to be given the name of a contact person—it is perceived as being more 'user-friendly'.

## **Initial support and counselling stage**

In this stage applicants are assisted to clarify their expectations in seeking RPL, to identify a suitable course or qualification and to give initial consideration to what they believe they know and can do in relation to the benchmarks of the course or qualification. To do this some or all of the following items should be provided.

## Support and guidance personnel

The applicant should be provided with access to support staff who understand RPL and are skilled in providing the necessary specialist help. In most cases these people are assessors or advisors. The RPL advisor takes on the role of promoting, guiding, counselling and helping the applicant prepare the required evidence. The RPL assessor will test (if necessary), use the assessment instruments, make a judgement (in conjunction with a subject expert if necessary) and record the results. Often the assessor and advisor roles may be combined; however in some institutions the advisor's role is independent of the assessor to the extent, in some instances, that the advisor acts as an advocate for the applicant.

### 'Buddies' and mentors

In some institutions applicants have expressed a desire to be helped by another student who has already been through the RPL process and 'knows the ropes'—a form of 'buddy' system. Mentors are also a means of helping applicants. Schemes such as these can help reduce the time assessors, advisors or other staff spend with applicants and hence the cost of administering RPL.

Assessors and advisors should have a sound knowledge of the learning outcomes and competency standards applicable to the modules or training programs in which RPL may be sought.

## RPL process information

Applicants should be given the opportunity to obtain information and guidance on the RPL process including methods of collecting evidence for their RPL application. This can be accomplished through general information or briefing sessions held at times convenient to applicants or by means of small group sessions or individual interviews. It should be noted however that individual interviews are time-consuming and it is important to ensure that the necessary resources are available.

## Course of information

Guidance should also be available to applicants regarding the course information and the sources of the information they need to collect. In most cases this will be available from the institution's library or resource centre, but may be better if provided by administration staff or even directly by the RPL advisor or assessor.

The information provided should include the learning outcomes and competency standards of all relevant modules and training programs. It should be available in printed format and in plain English.

## Friendly environment

All contact between applicants and RPL staff should be in an inviting, friendly environment which engenders confidence. The applicants should feel relaxed and confident about asking questions and discussing fears or other concerns they may have about the RPL process.

## Self-assessment

Guidance should also be available for the process of self-assessment which will allow potential applicants to get a feel for the requirements they will need to meet and to decide if it is worth their while to apply for RPL.

## Application stage

To enable RPL assessors to arrive at a decision on recognition of prior learning, applicants must present appropriate evidence in support of their claim. This section deals with how applicants can be advised and assisted to determine which types of evidence to use, the amount and standard of evidence required and the format in which it should be presented. It also refers to the procedures for lodging and processing RPL applications.

## Benchmarks

In order to decide on the type and amount of evidence required to justify their claim, applicants need to know the benchmarks against which their claim will be judged. Institutions therefore must provide adequate information on the competencies, learning outcomes and performance criteria which applicants need to satisfy for RPL to be awarded. Most institutions make this information available through their library. In many institutions copies of course outlines containing learning outcomes can also be purchased.

### **Benchmark information should be inexpensive and simple**

Some assessors and applicants surveyed were critical of the cost involved in purchasing the course outlines containing the learning outcomes—in one example ten different course outlines were needed by one applicant at a cost of \$6 each. Another assessor felt that the course outlines were too complicated—they needed to be rewritten in plain English to be of maximum benefit to applicants.

## Suggested sources of evidence

Many applicants tend to think narrowly in terms of the sources and types of evidence they can use. It is therefore helpful to provide a list of suggestions to act as prompts. The following, taken from *Procedural guidelines for the implementation of recognition of prior learning*, published by the Training Authority of Tasmania in 1994, is a good example of a list of suggested sources and types of evidence.

- Copies of pay slips, resumes, performance appraisals or other employment-related documents.
- Diaries and business books.
- Samples of completed work (for example, copies of documents, reports, school newsletters, newspaper articles etc.).
- A statutory declaration outlining the types of work and experience the applicant has been involved in.

- References from current and past employers, supervisors and colleagues.
- Testimonials from persons holding relevant qualifications in the area being assessed.
- Certificates from training which is not eligible for credit transfer, including RPL assessments.
- Photographs of completed work certified by a referee or accompanied by a statutory declaration (note: photographs alone are not sufficient evidence of the applicant's competency).
- In the case of self-employed applicants, evidence they have carried on business utilising the competencies being claimed. The Tasmanian reference provides considerable extra detail on this last item.

### **RPL by statutory declaration**

Northern Territory training providers are finding that increasing use is being made of statutory declarations as a means of verifying that an applicant's stated skills and knowledge are correct without the applicant having been assessed by an accredited RPL assessor. In remote areas this approach considerably improves cost-effective access to RPL.

### **Quality of evidence**

Applicants should be advised that evidence carries greater weight if verified by a reputable and independent person (for example, a supervisor), or if similar evidence from several sources is provided (for example, evidence of word processing for an employer, for an association and for private study purposes). Provision of reliable confirmation or additional evidence diminishes the need for the assessor to check authenticity of the evidence.

Applicants should also be advised that the currency of skills and knowledge claimed can affect the strength of their application (that is, the skills and knowledge should be up to date). For example, if word processing skills have not been used for the past five years, the applicant may not be familiar with modern word processing software—the assessor may need to ask additional questions about it or see the skills demonstrated.

### **Choice of assessment method**

Where several methods of assessment are possible, applicants should, ideally, be given the opportunity to make a choice of the method themselves, or at least negotiate an appropriate method with which they feel comfortable. However, the final decision on assessment method should still rest with the assessor.

### **Choosing the assessment method**

In the interests of equity, and acceptance by applicants of RPL decisions, it is suggested that applicants should be allowed some say in the methods of assessment used. In many institutions, while a choice of assessment methods is not officially offered to applicants, a limited choice does exist. Usually this takes the form of alternative methods being offered by an assessor where special needs are apparent (e.g. where poor reading/writing skills are evident, or where an employee may not want any contact to be made with his or her employer who was unaware he or she was not qualified). However all RPL assessors questioned indicated that they would consider adopting an assessment method preferred by the applicant where it is feasible.

The feasibility of the method is primarily dependent on the cost to the institution in terms of assessor time and resources required. If, for example, the applicant chooses to be assessed in the workplace extra costs can be incurred which are not covered by the normal RPL fee charged. One suggested solution to this problem is to charge applicants a higher fee to cover the additional cost. This, of course has its own implications for equity.

### **'Topping up' skills**

If, after completion of an application, there are minor additional requirements to be met by the applicant, provision can sometimes be made for the application to be submitted, followed later by the 'top-up' of skills or knowledge lacking at the time of assessment for RPL.

### **Accessibility of assistance**

RPL advisors should be readily available to guide and assist applicants in developing their application and preparing for RPL assessment. Briefings and group sessions are a cost-effective way of doing this. Of course, well-designed and comprehensive printed information can help reduce the need for applicants to seek help from staff.

### **Keeping costs down**

Training providers know that the most expensive way of providing information on RPL to applicants is individually—face to face. If costs are to be kept down, RPL staff need to avoid as much as possible *telling* applicants what evidence is required and how it should be presented.

### **Self-assessment**

Self-assessment is a useful cost-saving tool which enables applicants to attend their first interview with a prepared package which is almost complete and therefore demands only a minimal amount of RPL staff time. Self-assessment allows applicants to carry out their own assessment of their eligibility for RPL.

For self-assessment to work effectively it is essential that applicants be provided with a clearly stated procedure for guidance. This should include instructions on how to

obtain and interpret course learning outcomes or other benchmarks applicable, the acceptable forms of evidence, how to gather the evidence, and how to match it to the benchmarks. Lists of key questions and checklists can also be helpful.

Most institutions which provide for self-assessment issue a guide or self-assessment form which takes the applicant through the assessment process. This is usually supplemented by institution staff who are available to answer queries and assist the applicants upon request—these staff members may be administration staff with knowledge of RPL or academic staff with RPL training. While administration staff can supply much of the procedural help needed and are more readily accessible, they are not generally able to help with questions related to course structure and content. Most respondents felt that such questions needed to be dealt with by RPL-trained academic staff—despite their more limited availability and the extra cost to the institution.

### **Keep self-assessment simple**

It is important that the self-assessment guide and forms on which evidence is recorded are easy to follow and fill out. One RPL assessor was dissatisfied with the forms used by the institution saying that, while the concept was good, the forms were too tedious to fill out (there could be as many as 12 forms for the 12 learning outcomes of one module). As a consequence this assessor would issue the forms with the explanation that they need only be partially filled out, the rest of the form being used 'as a guide to what will be asked at the interview'.

### **Self-assessment workshops**

Some institutions supplement the self-assessment guide with workshops designed to assist applicants as they work through the process, others use a more structured approach in the form of a course module for which the applicants enrol (see box).

### **An RPL module**

In Western Australia, the Northern Metropolitan College has produced a ten-hour module on RPL (*Preparation and application for RPL*) which all students are expected to complete. It can be completed by attendance over several weeks or in a self-paced mode. Topics covered include an overview, learning outcomes, resources, assessment and learning paths. A study schedule and check sheet is also included.

### **Application**

The application form for RPL should be easily understood and straightforward to fill out. It should be structured so that it helps applicants to set out their evidence clearly and match it against the course standards. Guidelines, in plain English, on how to complete the form should be provided in, or with the form.

## Submitting application

Applicants should be advised how to submit their application form. In particular they should be informed (and subsequently reminded wherever the opportunity arises) of any deadlines well ahead of the due date. They should also be clearly advised of the fees payable, any concessions available, and where relevant, the way in which fees will be refunded in the event of a successful RPL application.

## Support person at interview

Applicants should be advised that they can elect to be accompanied by a support person during their assessment interview.

# Assessment stage

During this stage the assessor systematically reviews the evidence to determine whether the applicant possesses the competencies claimed. To do this the assessor must verify that the evidence is authentic, that the skills and knowledge claimed are currently held and that they match those specified in the benchmarks to be applied. The following is a compilation of procedures and ideas representing good RPL assessment practice.

## Who should assess

In order to ensure quality of the RPL process it is important that RPL assessors have the required experience, expertise and other attributes that support the RPL philosophy. Selecting the right people for the job is a crucial step in building a good RPL system. The following picture is the one which emerges of a 'good' assessor.

The RPL assessor should have the following experience and qualifications.

- Subject expertise in the area being assessed to at least the level for which the assessment is being conducted. This should include relevant trade or other industry qualifications and experience in the industry.
- Training in competency-based assessment to the standard specified in the national cross-industry 'Competency Standards for Assessment'.
- Understanding of the philosophy and principles of RPL and the application of assessment techniques for the purpose of RPL.

The RPL assessor should also possess the following expertise and attributes.

- Good interviewing skills, including the ability to question the applicant effectively and paraphrase and summarise responses for confirmation by the applicant.
- Ability to communicate effectively, including clear speech, good listening skills, and good writing and reporting skills.
- Personable nature—able to make people feel at ease, to be unbiased, sensitive to different cultures, caring and empathetic.
- Flexibility—able to adapt to day-to-day demands and deal with unexpected contingencies arising in the RPL process.
- Experience in decision making.

- Commitment to RPL.

### **Collaborative assessment**

Training institutions, particularly those providing the major component of training off the job, should not lose sight of the ultimate purpose of RPL: to recognise skills and knowledge the applicant can apply in the workplace. For this reason training providers conducting RPL assessments should exercise flexibility in accepting (or indeed, actively seeking) evidence from the workplace. Not only does evidence from the workplace have more direct application to the work the applicant is expected to perform, but the greater diversity of evidence when taken from both the workplace *and* training arena adds integrity and reliability to the assessment.

With this in mind, training providers should consider collaborative arrangements with workplaces for assessment of RPL. These can range from more effective communication with workplaces for the purpose of gathering and confirming evidence, to joint assessments in which some RPL evidence is gathered and/or assessed by both workplace assessors and institution assessors. The combined evidence and assessment results can then be used to determine the recognition given.

Another useful collaborative arrangement is to organise the participation of training institution assessors in assessments conducted by industry; and, its converse, industry assessors participating in assessments conducted by training institutions. An example of the latter occurs in hairdressing where industry assessors assist in RPL assessments conducted by training institutions.

Combining the resources of both the workplace and training institution in assessment for RPL ensures that the assessment more closely reflects what industry requires of its workers (that is, the assessment is more 'industry-valid'). The successful RPL applicants also benefit because the value of their qualification is enhanced by closer matching to industry requirements, and by better maintenance of standards.

Training institutions too should not overlook the benefit of collaborative RPL assessment arrangements in strengthening linkages with industry—linkages which are essential if institutions are to continue playing a major role in training for the workforce.

### **Number of assessors for RPL**

In most institutions RPL assessments related to a specific course are conducted by one assessor, such as the course co-ordinator, who possesses all the competencies itemised above and in their specific subject area. Where the assessor lacks either the subject expertise or the assessment expertise, a second assessor who possesses complementary expertise is brought in.

Where assessment for RPL is conducted by two assessors, the assessment is effectively conducted by the assessor with the subject expertise under the guidance of the RPL-trained assessor. It is the subject expertise assessor who decides whether or not learning outcomes or competencies have been achieved—the role of the RPL-trained assessor is to ensure that the assessment is conducted in accordance with RPL assessment guidelines.

Assessment panels, consisting of three (or occasionally more) assessors are used mainly for 'high risk' assessments, that is assessments for which there is high risk attached to incorrectly awarding competence (see box: 'The risk management approach'). The use of a panel of assessors is a good quality assurance measure since it reduces the risk of mistakes, misinterpretation of the standards and bias of assessors. Unfortunately assessment panels are more costly to provide, there are administrative difficulties in setting them up and they allow less flexibility in appointment times to match the needs of applicants.

## **Format of assessment**

The RPL assessment process can be divided into three stages of progressively increasing rigour (see box: 'The risk management approach'). They are as follows:

### Stage 1: Desktop assessment

During this stage, assessment for RPL is based solely on the evidence contained in the application together with any accompanying documentation. In most cases an interview would not be necessary unless some of the evidence required clarification (which could even be accomplished by a telephone call). However many assessors consider it good practice to make contact with the applicant, even if just to provide feedback. If the evidence is sufficient to meet the criteria specified in the benchmarks then RPL is granted. If it is insufficient, the applicant may be asked to provide additional documentary evidence if it is obtainable, otherwise the assessment proceeds to Stage 2.

### Stage 2: Interview

In this stage applicants are required to attend a formal interview in which the evidence contained in their application can be discussed and they can be asked to provide additional information. In addition they can be orally assessed for the knowledge component of the competency for which recognition is being sought. Again, if the evidence is sufficient to meet the criteria specified in the benchmarks then RPL is granted. If it is insufficient and there is a likelihood that the competency requirements can be met by further assessment, then the assessment should proceed to Stage 3.

### Stage 3: Further assessment

In this last stage the applicant undergoes further assessment. This may take the form of a challenge test in which the applicant sits a knowledge test (written, oral or computer-based) or demonstrates practical skills in a performance test. Further assessment does not necessarily involve testing; for example the applicant may be asked to demonstrate competence by being observed in the workplace (or simulated workplace) or by completing project work. If the evidence obtained by further assessment is sufficient, then RPL is granted. If not, then the applicant should be informed of the reason and advised of the steps to be taken before re-applying.

### **The risk management approach**

In a risk management approach the degree of risk attached to an incorrect RPL decision determines how rigorous the assessment should be. For example, if an applicant's competence is being assessed in order to be awarded a full qualification as an electrician this would be regarded as high risk assessment—if the applicant were incorrectly assessed as competent it could lead to a serious risk of injury or death.

On the other hand, if an applicant was being assessed for recognition in the first stage of a course in keyboarding skills this would be a low risk assessment—if the applicant was incorrectly deemed competent it would subsequently be discovered when the next stage of the course was commenced.

In the case of the would-be electrician it is likely that assessment would extend all the way to include Stage 3. In the case of the keyboarding applicant Stage 1 would be quite adequate.

### **Benchmarks**

It is essential that the benchmarks against which evidence is to be judged are explicitly and clearly stated to ensure validity of the assessment decision. The more explicitly they are stated, the less they are open to misinterpretation, the more clearly they are stated (that is, in plain English) the less likely they are to be misunderstood.

Benchmarks should normally consist of either industry competency standards or course learning outcomes.

### **All courses are not equal**

Some staff within training institutions highlight a problem being encountered concerning the lack of equivalence of like-named courses outside and inside the institution. For example a person may do a half-day internally assessed business communication course offered by a private training provider and then be disillusioned when he or she unsuccessfully applied for recognition for a similarly named 34 hour communication module with statewide external assessment offered by the institution. Some private providers are addressing this problem by adopting the modules used by TAFE. However, even then, attention needs to be paid to the degree of rigour applied by the different organisations in conducting and assessing the courses.

### **Evidence standards**

In order to validly assess competence the assessor must ensure that the evidence on which competence is granted satisfies the following criteria.

- **Authenticity:** the skills and knowledge are actually possessed by the applicant. One method of checking this is to look for corroborating evidence (that is, other sources of evidence which confirm the claim).
- **Currency:** the skills and knowledge are up to date and can still be performed by the applicant. This can often be verified by questioning the applicant. Testing can be used to assess skills where doubt exists.

### **Currency and credibility**

Training institutions (and training providers in general) are expected to be awarding credentials for *up-to-date* skills and knowledge. Awarding recognition for out-of-date skills and knowledge could lower the credibility of the institution and its awards in the eyes of industry.

- **Quality:** the skills and knowledge have been learned to the level necessary for competence.
- **Relevance:** the skills and knowledge are applicable to the competency or learning outcome in which recognition is sought (that is, they are similar to those used in the competency or learning outcome).
- **Transferability:** the skills and knowledge can be applied outside of the specific context in which they were learned.

### **Assessment process**

The assessment procedure is arguably the most critical element in the whole of the RPL assessment process. The following points summarise features recurring in examples of good practice.

- In order to ensure equity, the approach to, and method of assessment should take into account any special needs of the applicant. This should include consideration of language difficulties, cultural or gender needs and socio-economic background. In particular the assessment methods should not require language, literacy or numeracy competence above that required to do the job or complete the course.

### **An example of culturally-based special needs**

RPL assessment staff in the Northern Territory also pointed out that work and life experience can be perceived and presented quite differently by Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders who don't understand the mainstream education system. It is often difficult to get them to describe what they can do. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that documented evidence is often non-existent or poorly kept at the community level. Highly formalised assessment processes do not work well for people from these groups—a factor that has important relevance to equity of the RPL process for them.

- Where beneficial, applicants should be allowed to be accompanied by a support person during their assessment interview. This support person might be the applicant's supervisor or co-worker, a family member or friend, a 'buddy' (another student who has been through the RPL experience), an advocate from the institution staff or an interpreter. The support person may take an active role in the assessment by verifying evidence or prompting the applicant to reveal particular evidence, or may take a passive role by merely being present to make the applicant feel more confident and provide encouragement.

- The assessment environment should be a relaxing one in which the applicant feels at ease.
- The assessor should introduce himself or herself to the applicant and initially engage the applicant in some general conversation about the application.
- The assessment procedure should be explained to the applicant before it is carried out.
- The assessment should be conducted in an informal and friendly but impartial manner.
- Questions should draw out the applicant's knowledge and experiences—open ended questions are usually best for this, but the applicant needs to be kept on track so that answers are relevant to the competencies or learning outcomes for which recognition is being sought.
- It should always be remembered, particularly by subject specialists, that assessment for RPL by interview is endeavouring to establish proof of relevant prior experience and knowledge not conduct an oral examination of the course subject matter.
- The assessor should:
  - summarise and reflect to the applicant what is being said to ensure that it is being correctly understood
  - return to any points which were unclear
  - at the end of the assessment invite any questions from the applicant
- Feedback should be provided to the applicant regarding whether or not the application was successful if a decision has been reached. If an immediate decision is not made the applicant should be informed of when and how the decision will be communicated to him or her.
- Immediate feedback should be invited from the applicant regarding how he or she felt about the assessment. Provide a feedback form which the applicant can return (anonymously if preferred) at a later date (perhaps after a deferred decision has been communicated to the applicant).

The following points are particularly relevant to assessment tests and assessment of practical skills.

- Wherever possible the assessment methods chosen should be those which most closely match the applicant's preferences.
- As much as possible the methods of testing should match the context in which the competencies would usually be applied.
- Ideally, testing should take place in familiar surroundings such as the applicant's workplace.

### **Assess in the workplace or institution?**

Institution staff who are involved in conducting assessment in the workplace all agreed that, when additional administration time, travelling time and on-site delays are taken into account, the cost of assessment on the job far exceeds the fee charged. Some assessors who did visit workplaces found it more cost-effective to discuss the applicant's work with the supervisor and view the equipment used and type of work done by the applicant rather than spend a longer time observing the applicant at work. Discussions with workplace supervisors were generally found to be most productive and helpful.

One of the advantages cited by employers for RPL assessment in the workplace is that whenever there is any doubt about an applicant's competence it can easily be verified on the job. Because of the time/cost factor, this valuable strategy is not as readily available to institution assessors. If ways of making on-job assessment more accessible to institutions can be devised, the demand for documented evidence could be reduced and the quality of RPL assessment enhanced.

### **Provisional RPL**

A number of RPL assessors awarded a form of 'provisional RPL' in which applicants were told their application was successful providing they fulfilled some minor outstanding requirements such as completion of one or two learning outcomes still required. Upon completion of these requirements RPL was then awarded. The benefits of such a scheme were that neither the applicant nor the institution had to spend time and money repeating the RPL process unnecessarily.

### **Assessing applicants in geographically remote areas**

In Australia there are numerous applicants for RPL who are geographically located far from centres in which assessment is normally conducted. These applicants can be greatly assisted by documentary materials which are comprehensive and easy to read. They can also be given considerable assistance by telephone and fax. An unusual method of conducting interviews being considered by one institution in Western Australia is the use of video conferencing via telephone channels. There are now numerous video conferencing facilities available in remote areas.

## **Post-assessment guidance stage**

There are two purposes to this stage.

- The first is to review the assessment result with the applicant so that feedback can be given and they can be encouraged and guided towards further development.

The feedback should be given in a friendly and positive manner, particularly in the case of unsuccessful applicants who may be in need of some additional support and encouragement at this point. The aim should be to help the applicants—in the light of their assessment result—look at their options and decide the next steps to take.

Unsuccessful applicants should be reminded of their option to appeal and advised who to contact for assistance if they wished to do so.

- The second purpose is to obtain feedback from the applicant concerning the entire RPL process. This feedback can be used to identify any unsatisfactory aspects of the process so that the appropriate improvement can be made.

## Certification stage

The purpose of this stage is to ensure that the results of RPL applications are formally recorded, that applicants are formally notified and credentials are issued.

### Complete records should be kept

Comprehensive and thorough recording of RPL results is advisable for several important reasons.

- The most obvious reason is the need for the maintenance of academic records which allows for credentials to be awarded and subsequently confirmed whenever necessary. Records of RPL decisions can also be used for statistical purposes to provide a picture of RPL demand, types of applications and success rates (which could have implications for RPL procedures).
- There is a need for complete records of evidence presented and decisions taken should appeals be made against decisions.
- Recording evidence presented and subsequent decisions can provide useful information which can act as precedents in RPL decisions. Such information, if examined statistically, can identify common patterns—where the same evidence affords the same result. Such patterns may provide the basis for subsequent applications to be treated as standard exemptions or credit transfer rather than RPL, with consequent savings in time and cost.

### Content of records

To be of maximum value to both institutions and applicants, records of assessment for RPL should contain:

- a record of the evidence presented
- a record of the evidence considered—if different from the above
- a record of the learning outcomes or competencies confirmed
- a summary of how the decision was made (e.g. which evidence was deemed sufficient and which was not)
- a summary of post-assessment advice given to the applicant (including whether the applicant was informed of an appeal process)

The summaries of how the decision was made and of post-assessment advice are valuable if an appeal occurs, or if there is a subsequent need to confirm the advice given.

### Coding of results

A standardised coding of results in records should allow statistical information to be derived without marginalising results obtained through RPL (that is, treating them as

different and perhaps of lesser value than results obtained through formal study or training).

'Take home' records and credentials should contain no indication that the qualification or credential was obtained through RPL.

### **No grades—no RPL**

Some courses, such as in the business studies area, still issue graded results (e.g. credits and distinctions). It is reported that some applicants for RPL in these courses who are keen to gain credits and distinctions (perhaps because they plan to go on to university studies) do not want RPL because RPL assessments cannot provide a graded result.

Some RPL approaches assume that, if the module is graded, so too should be the RPL result—even if it creates additional difficulty. To not do so distinguishes the RPL result from one which was normally awarded.

### **Streamlined system for prompt handling**

The reporting system should be streamlined with forms designed so that they are filled out efficiently, the chain of people handling reports kept short and the reports spending a minimum time on desks. The aim should be to provide:

- prompt completion and forwarding of documents to the records section
- prompt updating of records
- prompt notification of result to applicant

### **Why notification of decision should be prompt**

Delays in notifying applicants of their RPL assessment results not only leads to dissatisfaction with the institution, the RPL process and the people involved, but may also adversely affect the applicant's subsequent study and career paths. They may need the result quickly to decide whether to proceed with enrolment, enrol in another course—perhaps in another program area or institution, or pursue a different career path altogether. This problem can be countered to some extent within the institution awarding the RPL by allowing applicants to enrol provisionally and refunding fees if the RPL application is successful.

However even this procedure has its drawbacks. The further students progress through a course before receiving notification, the less benefit they will get from the RPL—some students therefore elect to finish the course rather than accept RPL. There is also an administrative cost (estimated at \$25 by one TAFE institution) in cancelling the enrolment and refunding the fees.

# Appeals

If RPL is to gain the respect and acceptance of students, the workforce and the general community, the process of assessment for RPL must be seen as thorough and fair. In order to ensure fairness it is essential that there be an effective and accessible appeals process to which an applicant can turn if dissatisfied with an RPL decision. It is interesting to note however that there is very little use made of the appeals processes that have been established.

## **Informal review**

Some institutions include in their appeal process a provision which allows the applicant the option of approaching the assessor or subject specialist informally for a review of the decision prior to lodging a formal appeal. This enables a decision to be revised if the assessor and/or subject specialist agree that suitable grounds for appeal exist. Alternatively the applicant may learn more about why the application was unsuccessful. If this approach does not resolve the matter to the applicant's satisfaction the applicant can proceed with a formal appeal.

## **Good documentation necessary**

One of the key factors to an effective appeal process is maintenance of detailed records relating to RPL decisions. These should include the RPL application, the decision made and the reasons for the decision. Without this evidence appeal judges have to rely on the memories and opinions of the parties involved with the risk that distortions will occur leading to dissatisfaction with the appeal process and outcomes. For example, an appeal should only take into account the evidence originally presented in support of an application. If a complete record of all supporting evidence has not been kept, additional evidence could be introduced in the appeal leading to the conclusion that the RPL assessors had erred in their decision. This in turn would unfairly tarnish the image of the assessors and the RPL process. An appeal should not be an opportunity to present additional information — any additional supportive evidence should be dealt with through a fresh RPL application.

## **Who hears appeals?**

There are notable differences between institutions in who is designated to hear RPL appeals. The following is a summary of the persons designated in various training institutions.

- An independent RPL assessor and an independent content specialist (who could be the same person).
- Another assessor.
- Another staff member (preferably RPL-trained) at a higher level, commonly two levels higher, such as an associate director.
- The senior assessor in the same subject area—unless the senior assessor conducted the assessment, in which case it is dealt with by another assessor not involved in the original assessment.
- A particular school's admissions and progressions sub-committee via the head of school.

## **A panel or an individual?**

In Western Australia for example, before responsibility for assessment was devolved to the institutions, the (now defunct) examinations board did away with appeals panels because they were too time-consuming and applicants had to wait too long for the panel to meet and hand down a decision. It is felt that the present institution-based system, in which the appeal can be judged by an appropriately qualified individual, is much more efficient.

## **Independence of appeal judges**

Although several systems refer to independent judges there are generally only vague notions of how independence should be assured. Possible solutions are to have the appeal heard by an assessor from another institution or by a person at a higher level.

## **Keeping appeal costs down**

Respondents also commented on the costs and organisational difficulties involved in establishing an independent appeals process. The University of Northern Territory charges \$75 for its services if a staff member is required to be involved in an appeal. Because hiring external consultants to judge an appeal can be very expensive, some institutions have reciprocal agreements with other institutions as a cost-effective means of obtaining suitably qualified appeals judges.





# RPL costs, funding and fees

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## Costs of providing an RPL service

The following are some of the more significant cost factors in provision of an RPL service:

- physical resources expended in promoting, providing and maintaining an RPL service
- the time spent by staff assessing the RPL evidence provided by the applicant
- development and initial implementation of the RPL service (including staff training)
- general administration costs (maintenance of records, reporting results etc.)
- curriculum-related costs (development of assessment instruments etc.)
- occasionally, the abandonment of a class due to insufficient enrolments

## Benefits of providing an RPL service

There are many benefits to a training institution providing RPL. Some of them are almost impossible to measure in direct monetary terms; nevertheless most people would agree they are important and should not be overlooked. The following are some of the benefits commonly stated:

- RPL can free up spaces in training programs allowing more people to be trained
- a greater range of study options can be offered to clients
- the institution is more easily able to respond to industry needs
- training is not unnecessarily repeated
- a wider range of people become eligible to apply, and do apply, for entry to courses
- more highly motivated students are encountered who are a step closer to their goal
- additional evidence is available for consideration in selecting students for entry to high-demand programs and so better selection decisions are made

More detailed descriptions of these benefits can be found in 'Why recognise prior learning' (see p.36).

### **Benefits to students too, but also a cost**

There are numerous benefits to the individual who is granted RPL; however, because they do not have a direct bearing on a cost-benefit analysis from the organisation's perspective they are not considered any further here.

There is however one important cost to students which can act as a disincentive to accepting RPL. This occurs when, by gaining recognition, the student's curriculum hours are reduced to the point where AUSTUDY or ABSTUDY payments are cut back. Rather than accept RPL therefore, the student elects to attend the course.

## Cost-benefit analysis

Ideally the fees charged for assessment for RPL should just cover the costs of providing the service. This seldom happens and in most cases the fees charged do not even come close to meeting the true cost.

For many courses however institutions are reimbursed for the student contact hours (also referred to as 'curriculum hours') lost when they award a student RPL. Institutions rely heavily on this source of funding to partially cover the cost of providing RPL. Many institutions believe that without this, provision of RPL would not be an economically viable proposition and institutions would be unlikely to continue to actively promote and provide RPL services.

### **Another benefit of payment for student contact hours?**

An interesting sidelight to the above issue was the assertion in some quarters that TAFE institutions were seen as having a conflict of interest where they were both RPL providers and training providers. The argument was that institutions would tend not to award RPL as a way of ensuring class sizes remained viable and funding for training was received. Although funding for 'RPL'd' hours was not mentioned in this context, it is obvious that reimbursing the institution for these lost hours serves to lessen the likelihood of such a 'conflict of interest'.

An alternative to student contact hours as a means of funding RPL is some form of 'user pays' system. However this could be perceived as introducing socio-economic inequity into the RPL system.

There are several strategies commonly used to keep costs down. One is to provide as much of the service as possible to groups of applicants rather than individuals. Another is to design the RPL process and materials so that the applicants themselves can undertake most of the evidence gathering (see box). Good design of forms and procedures ensures that applicants produce better prepared applications which assessors can process faster and therefore at less cost.

### Who gathers the evidence?—an important cost factor

The concept of who gathers the evidence is an important one in relation to the costs of RPL assessment. Where the applicant gathers the evidence, it is at virtually no cost to the institution. However where evidence needs to be gathered by the institution this can incur quite high costs. For example, where an assessor must visit a workplace and observe the applicant at work, it is the assessor who is gathering the evidence and the institution that is paying for it to be done.

Self-assessment can also contribute significantly to a cost reduction by minimising the time assessors spend assisting and advising applicants.

## RPL versus exemptions

In most cases, when an applicant is awarded RPL, funding is received in the form of payment for the student contact hours awarded as RPL. However when another form of exemption is given, for example using credit transfer arrangements, no such funding is received and applicants are not normally charged a fee. Some institutions divide exemptions into 'standard' and 'non-standard' where standard means that qualifications or certificates provided by the student can be cross-referenced to the institution's own courses or modules using predetermined alignments. Standard exemptions cost very little to complete because the process is little more than a paper-based transaction reflecting equivalence of qualifications. Non-standard exemptions on the other hand, where an alignment has not yet been established, pose more of a problem because time must be spent determining what equivalence exists.

There is a 'grey' area between RPL and non-standard exemption which allows institutions to effectively waive fees by treating what might have been RPL as a non-standard exemption, or alternatively, allows them to treat possible non-standard exemption as RPL and so collect a fee and student hours funding.

One institution has set about eliminating this grey area by treating all non-standard exemptions as RPL, and after one year, reviewing all decisions to ascertain which could be treated as standard exemptions in the future, leaving the remainder to become accepted from there on as RPL.

## Fees charged for RPL

Fees charged for RPL services are generally consistent within each State or Territory because the relevant State or Territory training authority issues fee guidelines which the institutions follow. Some institutions require applicants to enrol for a course provisionally (with payment of fees) before an application for RPL can be lodged. If the RPL application is successful, an appropriate proportion of the course fees (dependent on the amount of RPL awarded) is refunded.

A list of fees charged by typical TAFE institutions is included as an appendix in part 3.



# Assuring quality in RPL

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In an ideal system of assessment for RPL, the assessment would always produce the same result for the same evidence considered, no matter who conducted the assessment or when or where it was conducted (this is often referred to as *reliability* of the process). More importantly, the decision would be the correct one for the circumstances to which it applies (this is *validity* of the process).

While these ideals are difficult to realise in practice, if suitable quality assurance measures are developed and practised, then a greater likelihood of their being achieved exists. This section outlines some of the more important aspects of quality assurance which should be addressed.

## Monitoring and evaluation

To ensure quality in assessment for RPL the processes involved may be monitored or audited. The following are examples of the way this can be done.

- Vetting of RPL assessments by comparing the RPL decision against other information known or obtained about the applicant.
- Observing the assessor conducting the assessment.
- Conducting a second assessment by an independent assessor and comparing the results. This may be done at the same time as the original assessment (concurrent assessment) or in a separate assessment at a later date (subsequent assessment).
- In a large organisation it may be helpful to appoint a person to act as a co-ordinator of RPL activity. The monitoring role held by the co-ordinator, as well as their role in gathering and disseminating information assists in ensuring consistency and maintenance of standards.

Evaluations also provide useful information which can be used to improve or maintain the quality of RPL assessment. Examples of evaluations include the following.

- Obtaining feedback on the RPL process from the applicants after assessment for RPL has been completed. This may be done informally or more formally by asking applicants to complete and return a feedback form, anonymously if they wish. Another method is to have an independent evaluator interview applicants.
- Assessors conducting a self-evaluation upon completion of each RPL assessment. The self-evaluation can cover both the RPL assessment process and the assessor's performance.

## Training and support for assessors

Adequately trained assessors are essential if the quality of an RPL assessment system is to be maximised. RPL assessors need training, not only in general assessment techniques, but also in the adaptation and application of the techniques to assessment for the purpose of RPL. Of course, this is not possible without also having a thorough understanding of the principles of RPL.

Ideally the RPL assessor should also have expertise in the area being assessed but at the very least necessary subject expertise must be provided by a subject expert who can conduct the assessment in the presence of, or at least under the supervision of, the RPL assessor.

For quality in RPL assessment therefore, three essentials must be brought to the assessment. They are:

- knowledge and skills in applying assessment procedures
- knowledge and understanding of the principles of and processes of assessing for RPL
- expertise in the subject area being assessed

RPL assessors must also be supported in maintaining, updating and extending their skills. This can include:

- information sharing, through regular meetings of RPL assessors within a workplace or organisation, or through networks within or even across industries
- RPL training workshops and forums (for example, the ACT Training Authority provides regular forums for RPL assessors across industry sectors)
- dissemination and discussion of case studies
- newsletters and similar publications (a good example is the quarterly newsletter *RPL Matters* published by the South Australian Department for Employment, Education and Training)
- observation of other RPL assessors conducting assessments

## Established assessment and quality procedures

To ensure quality of RPL decisions it is best to use RPL assessment instruments (for example, interview techniques, sets of questions or tests) which have already been piloted and shown to work. Some industries already have national systems for RPL assessment in place, others are developing them. Special care should be taken in applying any RPL assessment instruments which have not been through a piloting process to establish their reliability and validity. Assessment instruments used in conventional training are often already tried and tested—consideration can be given to adapting them for RPL assessment.

Many organisations have implemented recognised quality systems which have been certified against ISO 9000 standards. Such systems must also cover the procedures used for RPL. Quality auditing which is part of this broader system can be used to

ensure assessors do not stray from the agreed benchmarks and procedures. The audit process can also be used to evaluate RPL information packages supplied to applicants.

The quality of RPL assessment and value of RPL decisions in relation to training will be enhanced if the benchmarks used for RPL in the workplace relate to those used in training.

## RPL—friendly and open to scrutiny

To encourage acceptance of, and confidence in the RPL process, and to foster quality in its application, RPL should be promoted and administered as a friendly process, open to public scrutiny. All details of the RPL process including benchmarks and assessment methods should be clearly stated and freely available to applicants, as well as those administering the process and conducting the assessments. By laying open the entire RPL process to public scrutiny the likelihood of poor decisions remaining unchallenged is reduced.

Applicants should be encouraged to gain an understanding of the RPL assessment process and involve themselves in it.

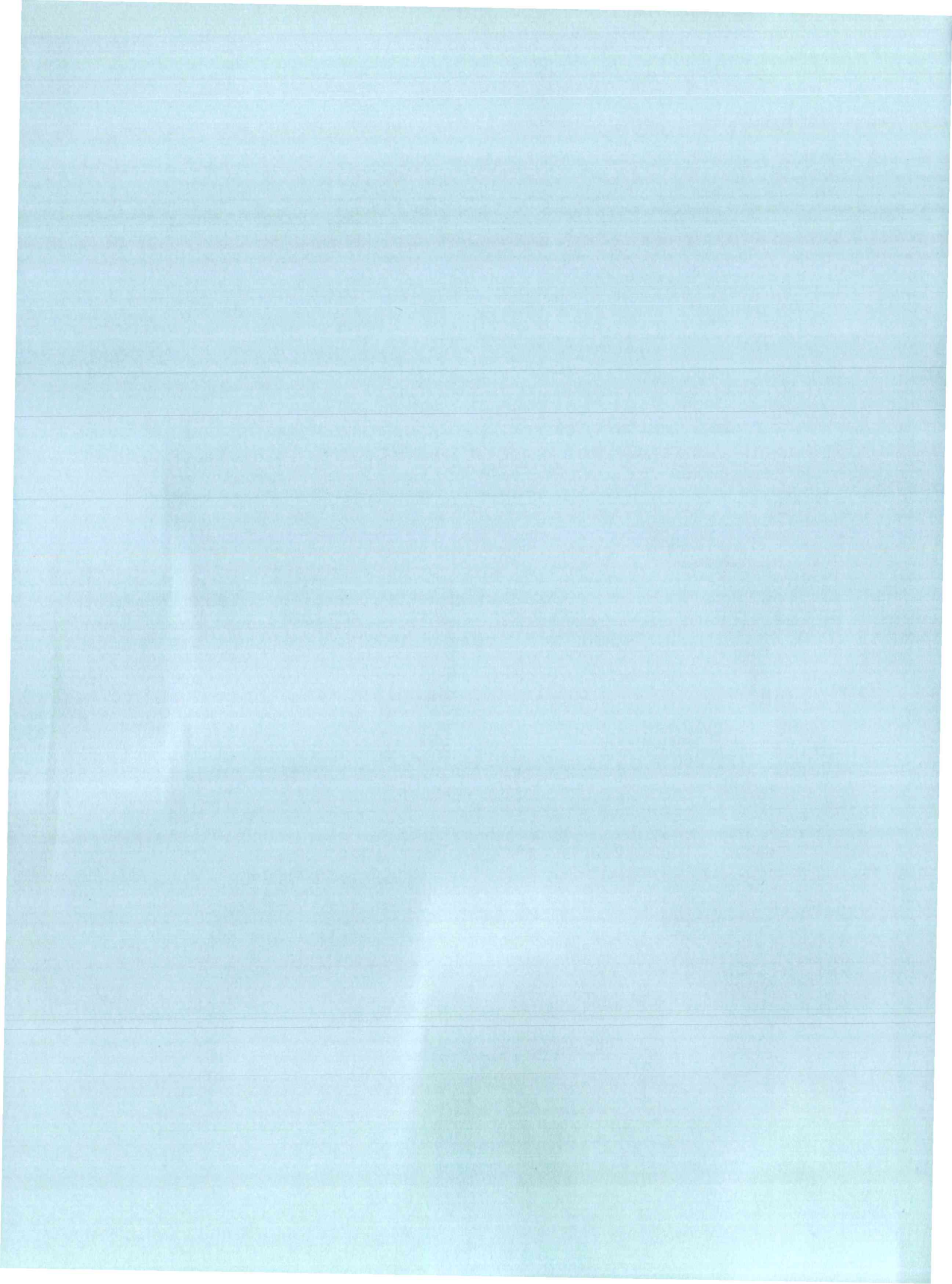
## A checklist for quality in RPL decisions

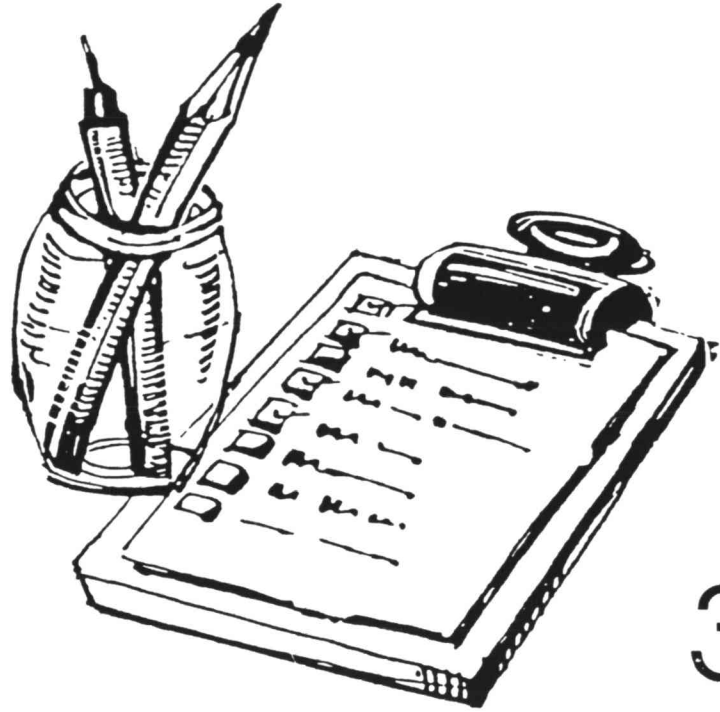
This checklist has been compiled to help training providers determine whether sufficient attention has been given to quality in the processes used for assessing RPL.

It is not expected that every factor will be incorporated into the processes used—some of them are alternatives which can be substituted for each other. However the more that are included, the better will be the prospects for quality in RPL decisions.

## RPL quality checklist

<b>Procedures</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
• Are applicants encouraged and assisted to understand the RPL process and involve themselves in it?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Is there a person appointed to act as co-ordinator of RPL activities?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Are established and proven assessment instruments used for assessing RPL?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Is competency assessed against clearly stated benchmarks?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Do the benchmarks used for RPL assessment relate to those used in training?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Are the RPL processes and benchmarks accessible to and easily understood by applicants?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Is at least one person involved in the RPL assessment a subject expert?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Is more than one assessor involved in assessment decisions—especially decisions which carry high risk if incorrect?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Are the RPL decisions cross-checked with other information known about the applicant (e.g. work history, training records)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Is evidence sought from a variety of sources (e.g. interviews, portfolio, workplace supervisor, workplace observation) as a means of confirmation, and hence validation?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Training</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
• Do RPL assessors have a full understanding of RPL principles?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Are all persons conducting assessments for RPL trained in assessment techniques?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Are RPL assessors encouraged and assisted to share information via networks, meetings, case studies or publications?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Are RPL assessors expected to keep their skills up to date via training workshops, forums and observation of each other conducting assessments?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Audit and evaluation</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
• Is feedback informally sought and recorded from each applicant as part of the interview process?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Are applicants invited to provide formal feedback upon completion of the RPL process? Can it be anonymous?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Are assessors encouraged to conduct their own evaluation upon completion of each RPL assessment?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Are assessments audited by observation by a second assessor?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Are assessments audited by an independent assessor duplicating or repeating the assessment?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>





3

# Appendices





## Some RPL fees

A number of training authorities and institutions were asked to indicate the fees charged for RPL and associated services. The following is a summary of information received:

<b>South Australia</b>		
<b>Institution</b>	<b>Standard</b>	<b>Concession</b>
Torrens Valley Institute of TAFE	*\$10/module plus \$10 for materials	
Comments	*Or no more than the administration fee if it is less than \$10. Consumables are generally charged for at cost recovery.  All institutions in SA follow centrally determined recommendations on fees issued by the SA Department for Employment Training and Further Education.	

<b>Tasmania</b>		
<b>Institution</b>	<b>Standard</b>	<b>Concession</b>
Tasmanian Department of Vocational Education and Training	Initial interview is free. Subsequent desktop audit is \$50. Testing where required is charged for at \$50 per hour.	Concession rates are available.
Comments	Institutions in Tasmania follow centrally determined recommendations on fees issued by the Tasmanian Department of Vocational Education and Training.	

Western Australia		
Institution	Standard	Concession
North Metropolitan College of TAFE	\$30/module with a ceiling of \$400	\$20/module with a ceiling of \$250
Comments	A student commented that these fees 'seemed reasonable' because RPL meant that the student did not have to pay for text books and other associated materials and because there were savings in time (and in some cases corresponding costs) for travelling, attending lectures, reading, undertaking assignments, etc.	
Central Metropolitan College of TAFE	\$30/module with a ceiling of \$400	\$20/module with a ceiling of \$250
Comments	Fee information also mentioned that the fees were 'non-refundable'	
South Metropolitan College of TAFE	\$30/module with a ceiling of \$400	\$20/module with a ceiling of \$250
Comments	<p>Fee information makes clear that the ceiling on fees does not imply any limit on the number of modules which can be applied for.</p> <p>At the time of consultation North Metropolitan College was proposing several modifications to the departmental fee policy:</p> <p>Firstly that there should be no fee for RPL for entry to courses. The rationale for this was that the current fee was a disincentive to people wishing to apply for courses and impacted most on 'disadvantaged' clients in contravention to college access and equity policies.</p> <p>Secondly that the RPL fee charged per subject or module should not exceed the cost of enrolling in the subject/module and that the total maximum fee charged for modules within a course should not exceed the total maximum fees payable for the course (which currently stands at \$272 tuition charge plus \$15 service charge per semester).</p> <p>The rationale for these changes was that under current policy some clients were required to pay more for the RPL than they would to enrol in the module/subject or course. This was a disincentive to applying for RPL and contravenes the spirit of NFROT. In some States these principles already apply.</p>	

<b>Queensland</b>		
<b>Institution</b>	<b>Standard</b>	<b>Concession</b>
All		Concession rates are available for persons presenting Health Care cards.
Comments	<p>All institutions in Queensland follow centrally-determined recommendations on fees.</p> <p>Fees charged for a formal review or appeal on an RPL decision are refunded if it is successful.</p> <p>Fees collected meet approximately 5% of the actual cost of RPL.</p>	

<b>Australian Capital Territory</b>		
<b>Institution</b>	<b>Standard</b>	<b>Concession</b>
ACT Vocational Training Authority	\$55 admin fee	
Comments	A fee of \$175 is charged for a competency test administered by a TAFE institute.	
Canberra Institute of Technology	Maximum of \$250 for enrolled students	
Metropolitan Business College	*No charge for fee paying students.	
Comments	However full course fees are paid regardless of whether RPL is awarded. Students may opt to study alternative modules in the place of the RPL'd modules if timetabling permits.	

<b>Northern Territory</b>		
<b>Institution</b>	<b>Standard</b>	<b>Concession</b>
Northern Territory University	No charge for RPL	No charge for RPL
Comments	Appeal: a fee of \$70 for the first hour and \$30 per hour thereafter is charged for challenges to RPL decisions.	



# Community support organisations

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There are hundreds of organisations which help individuals through programs such as *Life Experience Counts*. These organisations are likely to be interested in speaking with employers or training providers with a view to being of service. The following is a list of initial contacts.

## **Australian Capital Territory—15 centres**

CANHACT Conder Community House  
55 Beaumaris Crescent  
Conder ACT 2906  
Telephone: (06) 294 4927 Fax: (06) 294 4927  
Contact: Denise Blayden

## **New South Wales—342 centres**

Local Community Services Association  
66 Albion Street  
Surry Hills NSW 2010  
Telephone: (02) 9211 3644 Fax: (02) 9281 0386  
Freecall NSW 1800 646 545  
Contact: Roy Bishop

NSW CAEC Association  
'Vermont'  
Barraba NSW 2347  
Telephone: (067) 82 7253 Fax: (067) 82 7253  
Contact: Bronwyn Clinch

## **Northern Territory—1 centre**

Nhulunbuy Community Neighbourhood  
PO Box 6  
Nhulunbuy NT 0881  
Telephone: (08) 8987 2191  
Contact: Sue Chapman

### **Queensland—55 centres**

Nerang Neighbourhood Centre  
PO Box 357  
Nerang Qld 4211  
Telephone: (07) 5578 2457 Fax: (07) 5596 5628  
Contact: Carol Beavis

### **South Australia—87 centres**

Community and Neighbourhood Houses and Centres Association  
96 Rundle Street  
Kent Town SA 5067  
Telephone: (08) 8362 7094 Fax: (08) 8362 4750  
Contact: Rosemary Neal

### **Tasmania—33 centres**

Tasmanian Association of Community Houses  
c/o Maranoa Community Centre  
PO Box 255  
Kingston Tas 7050  
Telephone: (03) 6229 4066  
Contact: Nancy Woodward

### **Victoria—320 centres**

Association of Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres  
535 Swan Street  
Richmond Vic 3121  
Telephone: (03) 9427 7766 Fax: (03) 9427 7621  
Contact: Dea Morgain

### **Western Australia—78 centres**

Learning Centre Link  
Lotteries House  
3/122 Forrest Road  
Armadale WA 6112  
Telephone: (09) 497 1499 Fax: (09) 497 4918  
Contact: Wendy Shearwood



# Glossary

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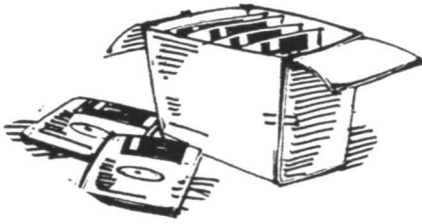
The definition of terms used in competency-based training and assessment in Australia have tended to vary over time. In this report we have attempted to use terms in a consistent way and the meanings attached to the most important of these are given below.

<b>Accredited</b>	Indication that official recognition or approval has been given to a course, a program of training, or a provider of training.
<b>Accredited course (or program)</b>	A course or program which has been approved by an accrediting authority and leads to a credential
<b>Applicant</b>	A person applying for RPL (also often referred to as a candidate).
<b>Assessment (for RPL)</b>	Assessment for RPL involves gathering and considering evidence of an individual's prior learning and experience and forming a judgement as to whether the individual can satisfy the criteria for competency specified in a benchmark. Should not be confused with <i>testing</i> which is just one of the processes which may be used in assessment.
<b>Assessor (for RPL)</b>	A subject specialist, ideally with training in assessment techniques, who conducts an assessment for RPL. Should also be trained in RPL principles and practice—if not, should conduct the assessment under the supervision of someone who is.
<b>Award</b>	<b>In training</b> —an officially recognised qualification. <b>In industry</b> —an (industrial) award defines the conditions of employment, types of work, rates of pay. May also specify required competencies and qualifications.
<b>Benchmark (for RPL)</b>	An established standard against which a person's prior learning and experience is judged.

<b>Certification</b> (for RPL)	Provision of a credential or statement recognising attainment of a defined set of competencies or learning outcomes—usually awarded by a State or Territory training authority.
<b>Community resources</b> (in RPL)	Resources outside the direct sphere of an organisation or industry and generally available to the public, which can contribute to the effectiveness of the RPL process by supplementing established procedures.
<b>Competence</b>	The quality of being competent – the ability to satisfy the requirements of a competency (see competency).
<b>Competency</b> (in RPL)	A specification of knowledge and skills, and their application, within an occupation or industry level to the standard of performance required in employment.
<b>Competency standards</b>	Standards based on the organisation of work and expressed in terms of workplace outcomes, which describe what a competent worker does in the workplace. Competency standards are normally developed and/or endorsed by the relevant industry.
<b>Competency-based-training (CBT)</b>	Training geared to a person's acquisition and demonstration of skills and knowledge, rather than their achievement relative to others.
<b>Content specialist</b>	See Subject specialist
<b>Credential</b> (in CBT)	A formal document or certificate given to a person in recognition of their attainment of a defined set of competencies or learning outcomes. Examples are: certificate, advanced certificate, associate diploma, diploma.
<b>Credit transfer</b>	Recognition by one institution or organisation, of credit earned in a program of learning in another institution or organisation.
<b>Desktop assessment</b> (for RPL)	An assessment for RPL in which the decision is based almost solely on documented evidence (brief clarifying discussion with the applicant may also occur).

<b>Evidence (for RPL)</b>	Information considered by the assessor in order to reach a decision on RPL. Evidence may be direct (e.g. observation by the assessor of work performance or inspection of work produced), or indirect (e.g. statements from employers or records of work performed).
<b>Institution (re RPL)</b>	The term institution is used in this report to identify TAFE colleges, TAFE institutes and private providers of training other than workplaces.
<b>Learning outcome</b>	Learning outcomes specify what a person should be able to demonstrate as a result of skills and knowledge gained from a module or program of training. Often used as benchmarks for assessment of RPL.
<b>Module</b>	A complete segment of learning which may consist of one or more learning outcomes of a curriculum. A module should be capable of standing alone and being separately assessed. Modules are often grouped together to form a course or program of training.
<b>National Framework for the Recognition of Training (NFROT)</b>	A report prepared by the Vocational Education Employment and Training Advisory Committee proposing a system for national consistency in the recognition of accredited courses, training programs, training providers and competencies held by individuals (see bibliography).
<b>Performance criteria</b>	Specified criteria upon which the adequacy of a person's performance of elements of competency is judged.
<b>Portfolio</b>	A collection of evidence presented by an applicant in support of a claim for recognition of competence. May contain a variety of forms of evidence, such as: documentary evidence, photographs, samples of completed work, tape or video recordings.
<b>Private providers</b>	Privately owned organisations which provide training and/or assessment for RPL (usually on a fee-paying basis)
<b>Profile</b>	<p><b>As applied to the individual</b>—a formal description of a person's skills and knowledge and/or the work tasks that the person performs.</p> <p><b>As applied to a work role</b>—a formal description of a job or task to be performed.</p> <p>The two profiles may be used together to identify changes in work role or further training needed to better match a person's work skills to the work they perform.</p>

<b>Program of training</b>	A combination of training activities which may include one or more units of competency or modules of training and may lead to a credential. <i>Recognised</i> programs of training usually contain components of an accredited course.
<b>Qualification</b>	A formal statement confirming successful completion of a course of study or program of training.
<b>Quality assurance (in RPL)</b>	A system of checks to ensure that RPL decisions are valid and reliable, that RPL processes are fair and accessible, and that specified standards of skills and knowledge are achieved.
<b>Registered training provider</b>	An organisation approved by a state or territory training authority to provide training—includes: TAFE colleges/institutes, tertiary institutions, private providers, industry-based providers and community-based providers.
<b>Reliability (as applied to RPL)</b>	The degree of consistency or repeatability in assessment results for RPL. High reliability means the same evidence will lead to the same decision regardless of which assessor conducts the assessment or when or where the assessment is conducted.
<b>RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning)</b>	Refer to chapter 1 pages 1 and 2.
<b>Self assessment (in RPL)</b>	A process in which applicants determine their own expectations of RPL by comparing their skills and knowledge against clearly defined benchmarks.
<b>Subject specialist</b>	A person who possesses the skills and knowledge contained in a module of learning or program of training and who is therefore able to assess, or assist in assessment, of RPL.
<b>Task</b>	A discrete unit of work which has a clearly defined purpose and outcome—often forming part of a unit of competency.
<b>Validity (as applied to RPL)</b>	The extent to which the result of an assessment for RPL matches an applicant's actual ability to perform the competencies assessed.



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