

# Improving RPL

A workplace perspective

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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 training providers 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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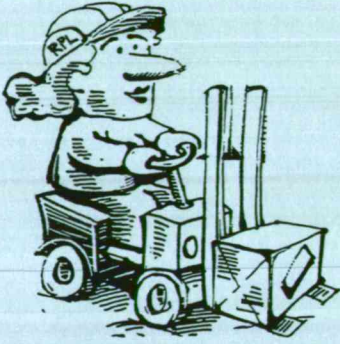
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RPL in Australia today





# What is driving RPL?

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## Reasons and driving forces

There are at least five good reasons why RPL is becoming more and more accepted.

- Improving the efficiency of training programs linked to work organisation and work practices.
- Providing recognition related to new qualifications.
- Providing social justice by recognising the abilities of individuals who have had limited opportunity for formal training.
- Meeting the desire of individuals for recognition.
- Supporting the major national agreement for training in Australia.

These are all good *reasons* for implementing RPL and in most cases some combination of all of them operates. From a workplace perspective it is perhaps more useful to discover what actually *drives* the process—the outcomes that those involved expect to achieve by supporting or seeking RPL. (See also 'Why recognise prior learning?' in the toolkit.)

## Simple economics

Many workplaces are involved in RPL because the benefits seem obvious. They have not undertaken any sort of complex cost analysis, but recognise there are benefits in applying RPL for individuals, organisations, industries, training providers and, indeed, the broader community

Many who have considered the cost justify it simply on the basis that it is less expensive than repeating the training which would ultimately lead to the same result. There are two types of costs to be considered, those occurring for each RPL assessment and those which are once-off costs. It is important that they are separated. Costs related to each RPL assessment which are typically taken into account are summarised in the following table.

It can be seen that many of them also apply when training takes place.

RPL assessment costs	Comparative costs of training
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• applicant's time in preparing for RPL assessment</li> <li>• assessor's time (for a full panel if more than one assessor is used)</li> <li>• advisor's time (where one is used)</li> <li>• the time of those who contribute evidence to the assessment</li> <li>• material used in the course of assessment (where not converted to useful product)</li> <li>• lost equipment time (where not producing useful results)</li> <li>• cost of recording</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• trainee's time for the full duration of the program</li> <li>• trainer's or trainers' time for the full duration of the program</li> <li>• the time of those who contribute evidence to the assessment</li> <li>• material used in the course of training (where not converted to useful product)</li> <li>• lost equipment time (where not producing useful results)</li> <li>• course enrolment costs (where applicable)</li> <li>• cost of recording</li> </ul>

Once-off costs relate to establishing an RPL program such as training RPL assessors. Some workplaces have considered including the cost of other items such as setting up a recording system but, in reality, the system does not need to be different from that used for recording training.

Using the above factors as a basis for costing, RPL will usually be cost-effective.

There are two common exceptions.

- When the training used as a comparison involves a large group of trainees undergoing some form of group instruction so that the trainer's time is divided amongst a number of trainees.
- When the cost of setting up an RPL process has to be offset against a small number of RPL activities.

### How long should RPL take?

If RPL is to be cost-effective, how much time should be spent on each RPL assessment? Although this depends on how much learning the applicant wants recognised, an RPL assessment should only take between one and ten per cent of the time the equivalent training course should take. (See 'Setting up for RPL' in the toolkit for more details; p.35.)

## RPL and the value of qualifications

### Security of employment

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 less valuable 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, today's rapid pace of change is making people think more about the nature of their work, their skills and their knowledge. This helps them to map their experience to competency standards or training modules and therefore to recognise and apply for RPL.

### **A greater range of qualifications**

Unions and other industry groups support training and assessment because they want to introduce formal recognition or qualifications for many skilled, experienced people in the workforce who have never had this opportunity. Nationally recognised qualifications which have been introduced at levels lower than the traditional trade qualifications, mean that now there is an even broader range of people who can apply for RPL. There is also an increased focus on school-to-work transition, which is resulting in formal qualifications for young people and causing experienced people to think about whether they can gain recognition for their skills.

### **The qualification as the end result**

Acquiring recognised qualifications is one major attraction of RPL, and qualifications are becoming increasingly important to a wider range of people.

Organisations and individuals are seeking mainstream qualifications and entry into traditional training to a surprising extent according to the benchmarks used for assessing RPL applicants. In more than 80 per cent of cases, these benchmarks are learning outcomes from training modules.

## **Developing the organisation**

RPL, and assessment generally, will become an integral part of the day-to-day activities of many organisations. Initially, RPL can create a short burst of intense activity for an organisation but this usually tapers off as those involved achieve the recognition they are entitled to.

### **The vehicle industry**

When the vehicle industry certificate was introduced several years ago, a number of organisations in the industry conducted major programs to introduce the certificate to a large part of their existing workforces. An RPL process was used to ensure that workers were given credit for their experience and that they started new training at an appropriate level. The employment of new staff and movement of workers between the different companies within the industry means that RPL now most often occurs in conjunction with employment. The skills and experience in RPL gained through the initial period of intense activity have not been lost but contribute to its ongoing use.

There are similar examples in other industries. Some industries and organisations are also recognising the importance of skills in training and assessment for their supervisors and managers. In these cases, as new training and qualifications are established, training and assessment competencies are included as part of the professional development needs of supervisory and management personnel.

## **The role of key personnel—a passion for RPL**

In almost all successful RPL programs there is a central personality behind the process who is passionate about RPL and who devotes enormous energy to its success. A driving force for RPL which is often overlooked, these people may be located in central education authorities, industry training advisory boards, industry associations, unions, enterprises and training providers. Their enthusiasm and commitment to RPL ensure its take-up and wider support.

This is not to say that organisations or industries with keen advocates for RPL are not committed to the provision or use of RPL services. It simply means that in successful projects which have become, or are becoming, self-sustaining there is a person whom others recognise and respect as the engine of the RPL of the process.

While there are logical arguments for the use of RPL, dedicated advocates can provide the communication and impetus necessary to overcome complacency. At least in the early stages of any RPL program, an enthusiastic co-ordinator is a significant key to success.

## **A commitment to training**

Industries, enterprises and individuals are rarely committed to RPL if they are not committed to training. Even the use of RPL to place employees in an industrial pay structure based on competency or skills or qualifications shows an understanding that people's value to an organisation is dependent on the training they have received.

To support an RPL process, an industry or enterprise needs to acknowledge formally the skills and knowledge people need to perform satisfactorily in the workplace. Even if an enterprise does not support training in-house, this acknowledgement will show that training is necessary. Consider the consequences of 'failed' RPL assessments. If a

person is not competent in the area in which they are working, then a business that wants to remain competitive and successful, has no choice but to train the individual to meet the requirements of the job or to replace them. The human resource and industrial relations aspects of the latter make this a less attractive option.

An RPL assessment requires the support, time and therefore cost of at least two people; an applicant and an assessor. It also demands the recording of (at least) successful results and therefore has an impact on the resources, including the financial resources, of the organisation or organisations involved.

Today's highly competitive business world would expect some benefits to balance the RPL costs. These benefits are linked to the benefits of training—such as increasing the productivity and self-esteem of the employees involved. The great benefit of RPL is that it improves the *efficiency* of training by formalising the entry point to training, reducing the amount of training necessary to reach a predetermined goal or even eliminating the need for any training to achieve that goal.

Some organisations may want to develop their own particular employee skill profiles without apparent reference to any training process. In such cases the term RPL may not be used although creating employee skill profiles can be a classic RPL process.

#### **Skill profiles for forced employment change**

One of the State governments has recently outsourced the management and operation of its water industry to private industry. In order to give the employees a better chance of gaining a job in the private sector, the company decided to create skill profiles for its trade and non-trade workforce, and to base these profiles on national competency standards. A process of RPL assessment was developed and 400 employees were assessed during the year before the outsourcing.

Examples such as that above allow the workforce to achieve recognition from the organisation's long-term commitment to training even if that commitment was informal and unrecognised at the time.

## The only driving force

It seems that the only real driving force for RPL is the underlying drive to use training resources more efficiently.

However, several aspects of RPL supplement this primary driving force.

- the cost savings that can be made
- the value of qualifications
- the development of organisations
- the role of key personnel



# 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. While there is a drive to remove those distinctions the process is far from complete.

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 result 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.

## 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 makes 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 a private training providers in their own States and are delivering the resultant training in Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia and Tasmania.



# Putting RPL into practice

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## Why go it alone?

The most successful RPL activity in Australia is often a result of successful partnerships between two or more organisations.

Forming partnerships to provide RPL and other training activities 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.

Such partnerships offer two advantages. First, they can provide a way for small businesses or small organisations to develop and maintain systems for training and assessment which they could not afford individually. Second, they make it possible to match the needs, expertise and resources of industry with those of a training provider. In this way they actively encourage 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.

## The option of registering as a private provider

A number of enterprises have concerns about some training providers' services and attitudes towards industry. These concerns include:

- providing assessor and RPL assessor training which was inappropriate, delivered from the perspective of a training provider, rather than for the clients who were workplace assessors
- being unresponsive to industry needs
- charging excessive costs to undertake RPL assessments for the industry, especially where the number of individuals was small
- 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 registration are not simple, and for any but the largest organisations it is not a practical option. Even for larger companies, with significant resources in the training area, a question to be asked is whether providing their own training is sensible for their business.

Industries which comprise many small businesses have the most to gain by accessing training through industry organisations. The Australian National Training Authority has held the view that industry training advisory boards or training councils, which they fund, should not be registered as training providers. But in other areas of industry, such as pharmacy and real estate, organisations like the Pharmacy Guild of Australia have seen advantages in registering as providers and have become active in the delivery of a highly integrated RPL, training and assessment.

### **What do training providers offer?**

Training providers offer a range of other advantages and services relating to RPL for partnerships. These include:

- the option of providing a qualification for those who have relevant prior learning recognised
- 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
- the ability to maintain comprehensive records of results

### **Integrating on-job and off-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.

## Qualifications and records

One very significant advantage of RPL is provision of qualifications. Organisations and individuals who become interested in RPL do not always see the need to provide a recognised qualification 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 but some will allow one hundred per cent of the program.

A critical feature of offering a qualification is the maintenance of records, over long periods of time, which allow the qualification to be traced. Nobody wants to find that their certificate cannot be checked as authentic, in ten years time, when they submit it as part of a job application. The records that the organisation keeps and the certification given to people who complete an RPL assessment depend on the purpose of the RPL assessment and the amount of recognition given.

Businesses are generally not set up to provide broad public access to employees' records and industry-based organisations frequently do not have the resources to allow them to establish the necessary record-keeping systems. Training providers, particularly public sector ones, on the other hand have well-established recording systems. If the RPL assessment contributes to gaining a qualification, then the modules achieved will be recorded and this information will be passed to the accrediting body.

For registered private providers of training and industry bodies which confer any form of certification, one challenge is to develop an efficient way of maintaining a secure, confidential and accurate record-keeping system which can be up-dated and which can be kept long-term. There is a strong case for having a single organisation responsible for maintaining records of all credentials issued.

The public system (TAFE) has such a system in place. However, as more providers of training are registered, there is now also a need for them to develop sophisticated systems for keeping records and providing statistical data to those responsible for the planning of future training provision.

At present the only requirement listed in the guidelines for registration of private providers of training is to:

*... describe your system for keeping records of student's learning achievements and your arrangements for archiving the record, if required.*

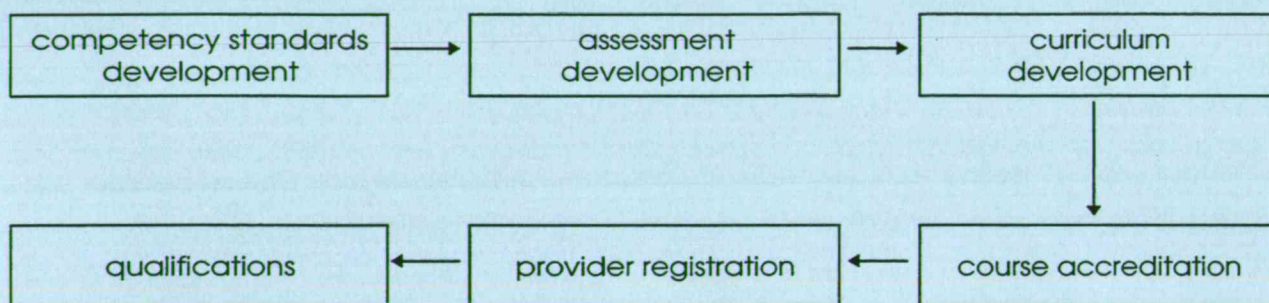
Record-keeping is also listed in the code of practice for providers of vocational education and training:

*Providers will keep adequate records of the achievement of students, as well as students' financial records that reflect all payments and charges and the balance due.*

# Integrating RPL with the design and development of training

Many well-developed RPL processes and programs are emerging hand-in-hand with new training programs. Often these programs have been designed for industries which do not have a history of formal training or for industries which are looking at programs for employment levels which were previously not serviced.

Considering the process of developing training from the ground up, rather than modifying existing training, it is not surprising that this occurs. Generally the training development process moves through these steps:



The process makes it easy to develop assessment systems in conjunction with competency standards and training curriculum development.

## Using the experts

Good standards and efficient development processes rely on the input of work experts who can articulate what they do and who have the ability to step back from their day-to-day activities and be analytical about them. Since these people can already achieve the required outcomes, it is obvious that they should be consulted about the evidence to be used for assessment. Furthermore they are ideally placed to comment on how their personal learning and development experiences relate to the requirements of both the competency standards and the learning outcomes of the curriculum. Many of those involved in RPL report that it is this process of mapping life and career experiences to the demands of performance criteria (in units of competency) and learning outcomes (in training modules) which is the hardest thing for people to come to grips with.

What appears to work well is when the work experts continue from the standards and curriculum development phases and help to develop the detail of an RPL assessment process. There are many advantages to this.

- These people, who are often role models for others in the industry, become the first RPL applicants to apply and are very successful.
- Outstanding workers can be encouraged to contribute to development processes and thereby gain personal reward and recognition for their contribution rather than see the process of documenting their experience as a threat to their continued employment.

- Getting people to think more deeply about what contributes to successful performance and how to recognise that performance contributes significantly to the depth of understanding which is often missing in standards and curriculum. It will therefore strengthen the development processes and ensure that they are better linked.
- Course assessment procedures can be influenced at an early stage by already established RPL procedures and are therefore likely to be more consistent with workplace performance requirements.
- The overall development process is both less expensive and less time-consuming.

#### **Integrated RPL for local government officers**

In Darwin the Local Government Industry Training Advisory Board began, in 1993, to investigate a new program for council inspectors. After some false starts with competency standards which were not resolved until the end of 1994, they started working seriously on the curriculum in 1995 with the assistance of several very experienced people from the local councils. RPL was an issue very early in the exercise because those assisting with the development expected that it would be available to them. At this time the work was also aligned with new national local government competency standards and this strengthened the desire to see RPL offered. Many officers were keen to hold credentials which would be valued in other States. The program eventually encompassed training for municipal officers at three levels. The task of developing the RPL process was therefore quite time-consuming. By accessing DEET funding, the ITAB and its development group were able to build up an RPL process and accompanying material which are most successful in helping people to map their experience and draw them into the formal training and recognition process.

## Who is doing the RPL work?

### **Assessors**

The list of who is assessing RPL today is extensive. 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 if those who are gathering evidence are included, so also should be:

- 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 held by 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

Many different arrangements exist, from individuals with little expertise or training through to highly professional groups chosen because each member of the group brings 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 cost-effective option of teaming those with work expertise and those with assessment expertise rather than the more expensive option of a large number of trained assessors with a broad range of skills and knowledge.

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.

What characteristics are desirable in an RPL assessor? A listing of these characteristics is most illuminating. A knowledge of assessment and expertise in the subject or job are mentioned, as are good communication skills, but the majority of the items in the list are attitudinal qualities such as fairness, flexibility, firmness, trustworthiness, tolerance, lack of bias and being 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 so much is expected of our RPL 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 for those involved in RPL to grasp 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?' this book questions what role RPL has to play in the 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.

## RPL charges

### Who charges fees for RPL assessment?

Most organisations providing RPL assessment to their workforce do not charge a fee because the RPL assessment is seen as part of the restructure of jobs, career progression, or employee skill profiling. Community support organisations also tend not to charge a fee.

Industry bodies which are responsible for industry training policy and recognition, and which may also be registered private providers of training, do offer a fee-paying RPL service. The following table lists some typical examples of RPL fees.

This table does not include training providers in the publicly funded system who all charge fees, usually per module, for the RPL service provided to those who enrol.

## Examples

Organisation	Target group	Fees/charge for RPL assessment
Building and Construction Industry Training Council	Building workers with no formal qualifications.	\$60 on-job \$90 off-job \$20 concession rate e.g. for unemployed
ACCESS (Tourism Training Australia)	Basic and advanced operatives in the hospitality industry with no formal qualifications.  Areas: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• food and beverage</li> <li>• kitchen attending</li> <li>• housekeeping</li> <li>• front office</li> <li>• commercial cookery</li> <li>• gaming</li> </ul>	Line staff level \$40/hour  Supervisor/ manager level \$70/hour to \$100/hour
Trades Recognition Australia	Clients: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Those who have gained trade skills formally or informally overseas or interstate.</li> <li>• Those who gained trades skills through the Australian Defence Forces.</li> </ul> Areas: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• engineering</li> <li>• boilermaking</li> <li>• sheet metal</li> <li>• blacksmithing</li> <li>• electrical</li> </ul>	\$100 to lodge application  \$185 trade test
Pharmacy Guild in Victoria	Employees and trainees seeking new pharmacy qualification.	\$285 total RPL service  \$45 to lodge application
ACT Skills Recognition Service	People with proven work experience in a relevant occupation but who have no credentials. (Fees shown are for skills recognition service.)	\$ 55 to lodge application  \$175 for trade test

## The value of the government funding

Over the last few years many organisations have benefited from government funds to 'get the RPL ball rolling'. Funding has been provided to develop and write national

industry competency standards, to train industry assessors, to promote RPL and competency-based training, to link career paths and qualifications and to help organisations become registered providers of training. While not all of these initiatives are specifically aimed at RPL they are all important in establishing the new training environment in Australia.

Financial assistance has also been provided to industry training advisory bodies and for specific projects to support RPL. Some of those organisations listed in the table on page 19 are aware that the true cost of their RPL service is not covered by the fees they charge and it is funding support that enables them to offer the service.

## 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 there may be 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 assurance 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 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' (page 65).

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 against the risk of invalid or unreliable RPL assessments. Where RPL results 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.

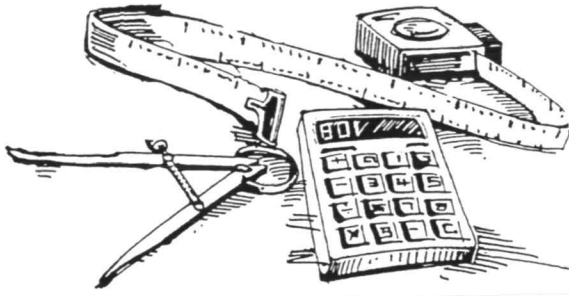




2

## An RPL assessment toolkit





# What is RPL?

## Is RPL only about training programs?

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. In the workplace, the purpose of RPL may be:

- to recognise existing skills in a formal way—perhaps to encourage employees to participate in structured training and gain a qualification

*For example, the vehicle industry, as part of its award restructuring, provided the opportunity to its non-trade workforce to enrol in the Vehicle Industry Certificate. In order to encourage take-up of the certificate, one car manufacturer arranged for RPL to be conducted on theory modules so that those who had the knowledge necessary to meet the requirements of the modules did not have to do the training and were credited with those modules.*

- to develop employee skill profiles which list all the competencies an employee has developed as a result of work within the organisation

*For example, one organisation used RPL assessment to develop skill profiles for its workforce as part of the process of outsourcing its work to the private sector. It was felt that a skill profile would help members of its workforce gain a job in the private sector as a result.*

- to create a reliable basis for analysing training needs and enabling better planning for further training

*For example, training which aims to develop skills and knowledge that trainees already have is very frustrating for them and wastes resources. However trying to develop advanced skills in trainees who are not yet competent at a basic level is also risky and ineffective.*

# 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 as a result of:

- formal training the person has undertaken in the past but never completed or gained a qualification/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.*

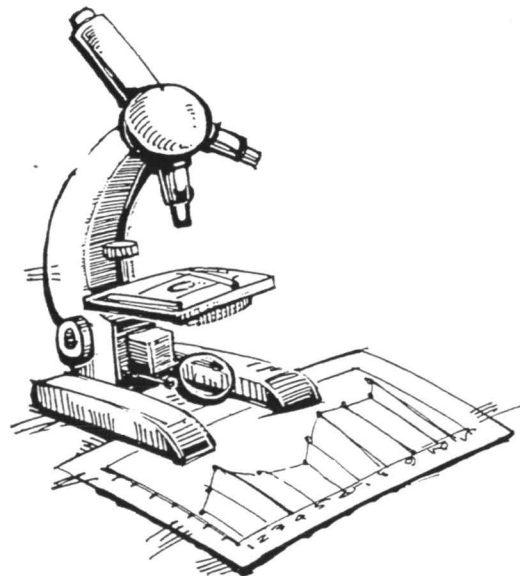
## Approach to assessment

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 as to whether they have met the benchmarks.

In the past an informal kind of RPL assessment was commonly undertaken by supervisors as a natural part of working with people to get things done. RPL does not necessarily mean an overwhelming and cumbersome system. By providing more information and making the process more structured it should be easier to make sound judgements about people in the workforce.





# Why recognise prior learning?

## Reasons for recognising prior learning

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 important reasons for recognising prior learning are:

- improving the efficiency of training programs linked to work organisation and work practices
- providing recognition related to new qualifications
- providing social justice by recognising the abilities of individuals who have had limited opportunities for formal training
- meeting the needs of individuals to be recognised for what they know and can do
- supporting the major national agreement for training reform in Australia

Some of the benefits are explained below.

## Efficiency of training

### **The changing world of work**

Most industries have experienced considerable change in work practices and how work is organised and this has had a major impact on the size of the workforce and the nature of its skill base. This restructuring may have had a number of triggers such as:

- the need to be internationally competitive
- the need to follow quality assurance procedures and requirements
- a commitment to continuous improvement
- a change in management structure and the introduction of a team-based approach to work

In many industries and organisations this restructuring has caused a major re-assessment about what people are being asked to achieve and systems are being

established which define these things in more detail than has previously been attempted. Restructuring has almost invariably been accompanied by a renewed emphasis on training as a result of:

- the new and often broader roles which individuals are required to fulfil; and
- the need to be able to assure others that individuals are properly trained to take on those roles.

### **Skill-based work classifications and career paths**

Where formal restructuring of workplaces has taken place in organisations or industries the result has frequently been the introduction of skill-based work classifications and career paths. Industrial structures are often flatter, with fewer classifications and the only way for individuals to move up in the classification structure is to acquire additional competencies. Organisations typically have:

- benchmarks describing work at different levels within the organisation
- a plan of how employees can progress from one level to the next
- a process for recognising where each employee is presently placed in this new structure
- a training plan detailing how individuals and groups will be developed to meet the changing needs of the organisation

Some organisations have chosen to develop enterprise competency standards to describe what is expected of each level of work. Some have chosen to use national industry competency standards. Others have moved directly to developing competency-based training qualifications linked to classifications.

### **Establishing a starting point in new structures**

Whenever new training and industrial structures are developed, or even simply modified, there is a need to discover where individuals fit into the new system. One possible approach is to decide what training requirements are necessary for people in the structure and to start training everyone as though they knew nothing and had no relevant skills. This is clearly undesirable for an organisation which has a business to maintain and for individuals who are competent in many or all of the aspects of work which they are required to do.

#### **Qualifications in the enterprise agreement**

Disability care workers in South Australia traditionally have not had to have qualifications in order to do their work. Now new enterprise agreements include career paths and there is no progression beyond a certain level unless the person has gained a Community Services Certificate. RPL is a very important process for these workers, most of whom already have the skills required for the Certificate as a result of work experience.

Establishing where everybody fits into a revised structure may involve:

- relying on existing certificates or qualifications which individuals have acquired
- placing people on the basis of the nature and time of the work experience they have gained (for example years of service in a job function)
- undertaking a more formal RPL assessment of individuals against established benchmarks

A formal RPL process is the most time-consuming of the three options but the only one which gives a reliable assessment of individuals' competence. It is generally more cost-effective than training everyone from scratch.

The process used to place individuals into a structure has to be determined by the organisation and individuals involved. It will depend on the extent of the changes being made, the availability of qualifications, the number of people involved and the consequences and risks of placing individuals incorrectly.

## New qualifications

In many instances work requirements are being documented for industries or parts of industries where formal education and training has not existed or has not been recognised. In these cases the opportunity for a new group of people to be recognised and to acquire a qualification can become a driving force in itself. Not only do motivated individuals respond to the new opportunity being offered but there is an enthusiasm created by seeing the achievements of others and in some cases a fear of being left behind.

### **New opportunities for youth workers**

Youth centres in the ACT, in conjunction with the Community Services and Health ITAB, have begun to offer RPL assessment to experienced youth workers so that their existing skills can be recognised against accredited training outcomes. The advent of recognised training and RPL has enabled the workers to have their experience and skills assessed, documented and valued for the first time. Such arrangements have provided greater awareness of the skills held within the industry and are paving the way for improved career paths and job mobility for individuals within the broader area of community service and health.

### **A new trade**

Roof tiling has recently been declared a trade occupation by the government of Western Australia. A system of RPL has been developed to enable people currently working in the industry as roof tilers to have their skills formally recognised and certificates of competency issued. If all of the prescribed competencies are recognised, a full trade certificate is awarded. If not, each worker is advised and assisted to undertake further training.

## Social justice

Many people have had limited opportunities for formal training or education. Often the skills they have developed are not recognised by qualifications or even by acknowledgement of an employer. The driving force for some of these people, and for organisations that represent or support them, is a sense of social justice and a desire for empowerment. Some organisations of this type provide an RPL assessment service to specific groups of people in the community, such as the unemployed and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

### **Aboriginal community access**

The Aboriginal Development Unit (ADU) in Darwin has recognised the enormous potential that RPL offers those whose educational opportunities have been very limited. Lack of even basic qualifications is a major barrier to people in remote communities becoming self-sufficient through access to jobs and contracts. The ADU has demonstrated its strong commitment to RPL by sponsoring training for RPL assessors across a broad range of industries and locations in the belief that better recognition and understanding of RPL will ultimately lead to benefits for the people it represents.

There are also employment agencies which provide RPL assessment services to individuals who are seeking a career change, for example as a result of occupational accidents, unemployment or a personal desire to change career direction. RPL enables skills and knowledge gained through previous work and life experience to be assessed against competency standards or curriculum learning outcomes needed to support the new career directions.

### Changing careers

An employee who had undertaken a range of semi-skilled outdoor work and leadership positions in community associations was given recognition for the majority of generic modules required for a certificate in public administration. The RPL activity was part of a worker compensation package which enabled this person to change career within the public sector.

Information on self-help programs offered by community support organisations is provided in 'RPL resources'. The aim of these programs is to help people to identify their skills and show them how to develop a personal resume as part of a portfolio of life experience which can be used to apply for recognition. As well as assisting people take the first steps towards having their skills and knowledge recognised, these programs build self-esteem and confidence which contribute to personal growth.

## Individual desire for recognition

In some instances individuals have their own motivation for seeking recognition. When they hear that it is possible to gain a qualification, or gain entry or credit in a formal education system, through RPL they seek out organisations that will be able to support their case. Often these individuals will approach recognised training providers with respect to courses and qualifications offered. There are some industries however which have established systems for recognising competency directly against industry standards. Examples of these are tourism and hospitality, the building and construction industry and the forest and forest products industries.

### Word of mouth

An example of individuals requesting RPL in order to gain a qualification comes from the business studies area. A TAFE college is finding that information about the benefits of RPL has spread rapidly as more people have been successful in gaining a qualification, or satisfying most of the requirements of a qualification. As a result students come to the college demanding RPL assessment.

## 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.*

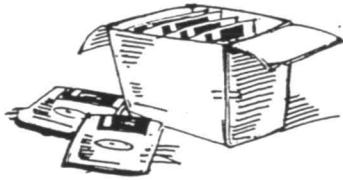
By making provision for RPL, training providers are supporting the training reforms set out in the NFROT agreement.

## Benefits of RPL assessment

There are benefits in RPL assessment for both the organisation and the employee.

<b>Immediate benefits to the individual</b>	<b>Other longer term benefits to the individual</b>	<b>Immediate benefits to the organisation</b>	<b>Other longer term benefits to the organisation</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• personal growth</li> <li>• self-esteem</li> <li>• recognition of current competency</li> <li>• gaining advanced standing in a training course</li> <li>• gaining a qualification</li> <li>• opportunity for career advancement</li> <li>• reduced time and costs of training</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• increased drive and ambition</li> <li>• gaining further qualifications</li> <li>• reduced time and costs of further training</li> <li>• confidence to pursue more training</li> <li>• identified training needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• reduction in training time</li> <li>• identification of skill range of employees</li> <li>• identification of training gaps</li> <li>• closer links with training provider</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• better utilisation of the skills base in the workforce</li> <li>• a better understanding of content and value of training credentials</li> <li>• the chance to contribute to the design of training programs</li> <li>• personal development of those who conduct assessments</li> </ul>

It needs to be understood that employees within an enterprise or industry sector, and individuals seeking to enter the workforce, have differing reasons for supporting RPL as well as different ways of accessing it. Some will apply for RPL through industry-based training arrangements, some through personal enrolment in a qualification with a training provider, some through a process of trade skills recognition and others through community organisations.



# RPL resources

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## Where resources may be helpful

Not all organisations will be in a position to provide RPL for their employees from within their own resources. This may be because the organisation does not have the appropriate people or people with the necessary expertise to conduct the RPL process, or because those who could conduct the RPL process are already working at full capacity. In such cases the option of utilising resources from outside the organisation should be considered.

## Using expert assistance

TAFE institutions and many private training providers can provide people who are highly experienced in conducting assessment and have a thorough understanding of the principles of RPL. People such as these can assist an organisation in the development and implementation of an RPL program for its employees. They may conduct the whole process in collaboration with and on behalf of the organisation, or they may merely provide assistance to enable, say, a supervisor who has the necessary job knowledge and expertise to conduct the actual assessment in accordance with accepted RPL principles and practice. More detail about the option of using expert assistance is provided in 'Partnerships' under 'Setting up for RPL' (see page 38).

## Community resources

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.

Most workplaces have neither the time nor the resources to assist these people to take the first important steps towards obtaining recognition. However a network of more than nine hundred organisations has been established across Australia which may provide help 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 page 34) which takes people through the initial steps in preparing to apply for RPL.

Representatives of workplaces who come into contact with unemployed or partially employed people who have difficulty identifying where they are heading in terms of work or study should consider contacting their local community support organisation. 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 workplaces wishing to make contact with community support organisations in their locality is provided as an appendix to this book.

## Industry networks and groups

A great deal of time and effort can be spared by learning from others in industry who have undertaken an RPL process. It is important for organisations to seek out others who have the experience and discuss the issues which are of concern. Most people involved with RPL are eager to share ideas and experiences with others.

By developing good relationships with others in an industry or in a local region, a network of ongoing support can be established. This may continue to prove useful long after the expertise in RPL has been shared.

Industry training advisory bodies may be able to help find other organisations and support the networking activities. They may also provide advice and assistance in planning RPL processes or sponsoring training and information sessions for local industries.



## 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

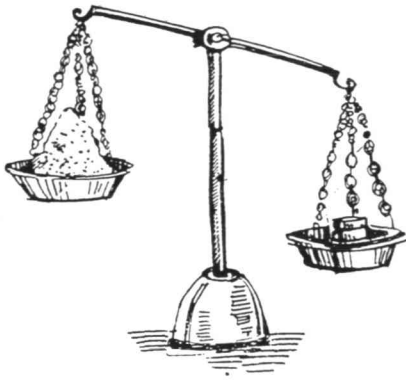
- planning and creating
- doing/ maintaining
- evaluating

### 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



# Setting up for RPL

An organisation will choose to use RPL for a number of reasons. Making the decision and making the commitment to offer RPL in the organisation is the first step. This decision will be based on an identified need and obvious benefit to the organisation and the individuals concerned.

Before the organisation can start promoting RPL to its employees or clients, it has to first prepare itself to offer RPL and design the service. These preparations might include:

- selecting suitable **benchmarks** which identify the skills, knowledge and attitudes that employees need
- **identifying and training staff** within the organisation who will be involved in the process including conducting the assessments
- identifying, from outside the organisation, a **partner who can give specialist RPL advice and support**
- working out **how to fund and resource RPL**
- finding out **how to record and certify the recognition given**, particularly if the recognition is a qualification or contributes to a qualification

## Benchmarks for assessment

The starting point of an RPL assessment is having a benchmark or some description in outcome terms against which to judge a person's skills, knowledge and relevant attributes.

The movement to competency-based training has meant that the two most readily available benchmarks are:

- national industry competency standards
- learning outcomes and assessment criteria for each module in a competency-based curriculum

Individual organisations may also develop their own enterprise competency standards often by customising relevant national industry standards to make them more usable in their own workplaces.

All of these will serve as a basis for competency-based assessment, including RPL assessment.

Ultimately, the choice of which benchmark to use is entirely up to the organisation conducting the RPL assessment and is largely determined by the purpose of RPL. An organisation using RPL assessment to develop employee skill profiles or to give formal recognition of skills, and wanting the recognition to have credibility and portability outside the organisation, will tend to use national competency standards as the benchmark. An organisation using RPL assessment to encourage employees to gain a qualification, will most probably use the curriculum outcomes as the benchmark. However it is not always as straightforward as this.

### **The link between competency standards and curriculum**

It should be noted that competency-based curriculum is itself based on competency standards although the focus of curriculum is more on training outcomes than workplace outcomes, which are the focus of standards. Hence the view, held by some, that competency to industry standards can only be achieved in the workplace and should be assessed in the workplace using workplace standards. Therefore any RPL assessment that aims to give recognition for current skill and knowledge relevant to industry should incorporate at least a component of on-job assessment wherever possible. Where the process of standards and curriculum development has been well integrated people are unconcerned about which benchmarks are used to assess experienced people.

## Typical problems faced when selecting benchmarks

Using competency standards as a benchmark for RPL assessment may not be as straightforward as it first appears. Complexities can arise:

- because the way the standards are 'packaged' or grouped together may not suit the enterprise needs
- because there are no competency standards for certain areas of work
- because the standards are not specific enough, lack detail or are difficult to understand and therefore are not a good basis for developing assessment procedures
- because an individual's range of work may not be wide enough to satisfy the competencies assessed

Further difficulties may arise when similar organisations within the same industry or sector choose to use different benchmarks.

### **What if the packaging of units of competency doesn't suit us?**

In the workplace RPL assessment will often be conducted for a particular occupation and level within that occupation. The competency standards covering that occupation may be drawn from a number of sets of industry standards.

*For example, in the water industry the work of certain individuals involved some clerical competencies, some water industry competencies and some engineering competencies.*

In a situation like this one option is to become acquainted with all the relevant sets of competency standards and select units from each that best describe the work expected within the particular occupation. In this way a profile for the occupation and level comprising this selection of competencies can be created.

The units of competency applying in the organisation can then be packaged or grouped together in sets which describe the jobs within the workplace.

### **What if there are no competency standards?**

If there are no standards available for the industry then it may be necessary to develop enterprise standards or, alternatively, lobby the industry training advisory board to investigate developing national standards.

This process can be time-consuming, but must be considered if the RPL assessment is to have credibility and lead to broad recognition for people's competency.

*For example, one organisation which decided to develop employee skill profiles based on competency standards, found that there were whole areas of work not covered by any relevant standards. This organisation hired a consultant to develop and write, with the help of workplace focus groups 30 units of competency to add to the pool of national units which were being used to provide RPL service to its 800 employees.*

The alternative is not to use competency standards, but to use the relevant curriculum which, if competency-based, will be neatly packaged into modules of training.

### **What if different organisations use different benchmarks?**

An example of this issue exists at present in the disability care workers sector where traditionally there has been no qualification structure and no accessible training programs. Three organisations which hire care workers are committed to providing an opportunity for their workers to gain a qualification and therefore to have a career path within the sector. All three, however, are using different benchmarks to recognise the skills and experience in the field of their staff:

- one organisation has chosen to use the national industry competency standards for the sector
- one has chosen to use the curriculum outcomes of the TAFE certificate
- one has chosen to use the curriculum outcomes of a certificate it has developed itself and which has accreditation with TAFE

These organisations have overcome the potential problem created by the use of three different sets of benchmarks by a process of communication and co-operation. They have decided to:

- share information and expertise
- communicate with each other to develop a common understanding of how each interprets the competencies

- train all their workplace assessors together using the same assessor training program
- plan the development and use of national assessment instruments

## Partnerships

A partner is someone or some organisation outside the workplace who is able to provide expert advice, guidance and support in the design and delivery of RPL assessments.

### Who can be a partner in an RPL assessment?

Many organisations will not have the expertise they need in order to set up an RPL process and will therefore have to buy it in or set up some sort of partnership with an organisation which can provide this expertise.

Furthermore, if the purpose of the RPL assessment is to gain a qualification, it makes good sense to form a partnership with the training provider or industry body that issues that qualification. The choice of partner may also be determined by training arrangements and partnerships already in place. For example, a number of vehicle manufacturers have strong partnerships with local TAFE institutions and therefore TAFE has continued to play a role in the design and conduct of this industry's RPL service.

Generally, RPL is one aspect of a major training plan designed to develop skills and offer qualifications and career progression. Therefore the partner chosen by an organisation to help and guide the design and delivery of the RPL process is likely to be determined by who is guiding the development of training in the industry/sector in general.

### The role the partners play

The extent of the partnership depends on the role that the organisation wishes the partner is to play. Will the organisation:

- contract out the entire RPL service to the partner, or
- seek the partner to be involved in certain areas only?

For instance the partner may:

- design and set up the RPL service and train RPL assessors
- design and test assessment instruments
- play an active role in the assessment process by conducting assessments in the workplace or by being part of the assessment panel
- play a monitoring or quality assurance role

## Staff training

In order to carry out RPL assessment in the workplace, the organisation will ideally need to prepare people to be RPL assessors and/or advisors. RPL assessors conduct the assessment. RPL advisors provide support and counselling to those who choose to go through the process and advise people on how to interpret the standards, what type of evidence to gather, how to present the evidence and so on. In some organisations the RPL assessor and advisor will be the same person.

Having identified the role the RPL assessor/advisor is to play, the next step is to:

- select suitable people who can be RPL assessors/advisors
- provide training to those who will play a role in the RPL assessment

The question of who within an organisation to select to become an RPL assessor or advisor is dealt with in 'Who should assess RPL?'

This section deals only with training of RPL assessors and advisors.

### **Training needs of the RPL assessor/advisor**

The RPL advisor needs to know and understand:

- the benefits of RPL to the applicant
- how to support an applicant in the RPL process and provide advice and feedback
- what type of evidence is acceptable and how it should be gathered
- at what points a person can apply for RPL
- where to get copies of the curriculum or competency standards
- the requirements of the curriculum or competency standards to be used in the assessment
- what type of record or certification will be given to successful applicants
- the costs of the RPL assessment

The RPL assessor needs to know and understand:

- the requirements of the curriculum/competency standards to be used in the assessment
- how to ensure assessment is valid, reliable, fair and flexible
- the acceptable and relevant sources of evidence
- what constitutes sufficient, current and authentic evidence
- how to make an assessment decision
- how to give feedback on the assessment
- how to record an RPL assessment in the record-keeping system

For workplace personnel the most common option for obtaining the training necessary for RPL assessment or advisory roles is an accredited assessor training course which

typically runs from 3–5 days. The relevant industry training advisory board should be able to give advice on who provides this type of training. Such courses cover feedback and counselling, sources and rules of evidence, how to conduct an assessment and make an assessment decision based on standards, how to record and review the assessment. The course should include a thorough treatment of RPL.

Whatever relevant training the RPL assessor undertakes, it should cover the relevant competency standards or curriculum throughout the training session. At the end of the training session, the assessor should be able to interpret the standards and to understand what they mean and how they relate to skills in the workplace.

In some workplaces it may be necessary to give extra training in communication skills and negotiation skills to RPL assessors. This will depend on the purpose of RPL and whether a training provider such as TAFE or an industry consultant is part of the RPL team in the organisation.

#### **Additional training needs**

Managers in a company which was conducting an employee skill profiling process, found that their RPL assessors needed extra training in presentation skills because they were to be responsible for presenting one hour briefings about the skill profiling process to all employees.

## Devoting time and money to the RPL process

As with any new process introduced into an organisation, a decision to devote a certain amount of time, energy and money to making it achieve what it is designed to achieve needs to be made at management level.

### **The role of the organisation**

Employers and other workplace organisations should consider how the organisation can meet the needs of all those involved in RPL.

#### Time—the essential resource in RPL assessment

RPL assessors and those being assessed need time off from their normal duties to promote the concept, listen to information, discuss the program with employees, do any necessary training, prepare for the assessment and actually do the assessment. If adequate time is not devoted to the process, then it is likely to fail. Most successful programs also have someone who takes the role of RPL co-ordinator which offers the process leadership, and those involved a central person to talk to.

#### Incentive

RPL assessors need to feel relaxed about their role and therefore a suitable incentive needs to be provided to attract people to take on the role of assessor.

This incentive may be simply recognition for the service that they are providing, improved professional status or progression within the organisational structure.

Needs of persons involved in RPL

The needs of those involved in the RPL process can be summarised as follows:

The people involved in RPL	Essential needs	Optional needs
<p><b>People who will become RPL assessors</b></p>	<p><b>Training needs</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• assessor training course</li> <li>• training in what the RPL process involves</li> </ul> <p><b>Other needs</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• incentive (pay, career progression, recognition)</li> <li>• time to do the necessary training</li> <li>• time to provide information to RPL applicants</li> <li>• time to conduct assessments and give feedback</li> </ul>	<p><b>Training needs</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• communication skills</li> <li>• conflict resolution</li> <li>• negotiation skills</li> </ul>
<p><b>People who will be assessed</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• incentive (qualification, career progression, pay)</li> <li>• information about the RPL process</li> <li>• on-going support, encouragement and advice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• confidence building program</li> <li>• interpreter</li> </ul>

### Costs to the organisation

In order to implement RPL certain items need to be in place. Those that are available will depend on the extent of the training and assessment programs established within the organisation concerned. Requirements and the associated costs that need to be considered include:

- obtaining relevant competency standards and/or curriculum documents
- developing enterprise-specific standards
- setting up a database of competency standards from which to create employee profiles or training needs charts
- setting up some form of record-keeping system to keep track of who was assessed and what credential they achieved

- developing assessment procedures
- training assessors

Introducing an RPL program to the organisation will introduce further costs which might include:

- acquiring specialist RPL advice and support
- time spent promoting the benefits of RPL to staff
- resources used to promote RPL
- time spent off the job preparing for and doing the RPL assessment
- time spent in reporting and record-keeping
- evaluating and monitoring the RPL system to ensure it is doing what is intended

These additional costs should be offset by the savings made through not delivering training to those who are already competent.

### **Fees for RPL assessment?**

Most organisations providing RPL assessment for their workforce do not charge a fee. However industry bodies and training providers often do. Discussion of this aspect of RPL and a list of typical fees appears in 'Putting RPL into practice' (see page 11).

## How long should RPL take?

When considering how much time and money should be devoted to RPL one question which arises is how much time should be spent on each RPL assessment. Although this depends on how much learning the applicant wants recognised, there are many other variables such as:

- the nature of the competency involved—how much evidence is required and how easy it is to collect
- the range of conditions in which the competency needs to be demonstrated
- how much assessment has been previously completed and documented, for example as 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. Examples of RPL 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.

## Record-keeping

If RPL is to provide true national recognition it is essential that there be a reliable and accessible means of recording recognition awarded. In the case of recognition for the purpose of credit in training courses, a system which can be used for recording RPL already exists and is being based on existing systems for recording formal training although it still requires some refining to make it a truly national system.

For work-based RPL assessment however, much more remains to be done. Until industry-based recording systems are fully established it is important that employers and industry bodies conducting RPL assessments and awarding RPL keep complete records. Without these it may be impossible for a worker who has gained RPL to obtain duplicate records when needed, or for the worker's claim of competency to be verified at a later date.



# Who should assess RPL?

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## What does RPL assessment involve?

An RPL assessment, like other competency-based assessments is a process of:

- gathering evidence of competence; and
- making a judgement about the extent to which a person has achieved the performance requirements set out in a competency standard or learning outcome in a training module.

The question of who should assess, therefore, is answered by considering the questions:

- Who is best placed to gather evidence?
- Who should make the judgement?

In many cases, the person being assessed can play a role in gathering evidence and this should not be overlooked.

In addition to involving the person being assessed, workplaces have to decide who else to involve in gathering evidence and how many people they want involved in making the judgement.

Since a number of people will be involved in the process, there needs to be a person who plans and manages this process of gathering and judging evidence—someone who co-ordinates this process and decides who is involved and the extent to which they are involved.

The decision about how many people to involve is dependent on:

- the type of recognition being given
- the quality assurance to be built into the assessment system
- the level of risk associated with the recognition

### **An assessment team**

In one workplace, it was decided to offer RPL for 'theory' modules only. The person being assessed gathered the evidence and a team of two judged the evidence. The two people who judged the evidence were the supervisor who had workplace expertise in the areas being assessed and who knew the 'jargon' of the workplace, and a TAFE lecturer who had expert knowledge of the area being assessed.

### **The extra dimensions in an RPL assessment**

In an RPL assessment the person being assessed is intimately involved in the assessment and therefore needs someone to provide information, explain the process, advise him or her about the type of evidence that is suitable and provide guidance in how to present the evidence. Therefore the RPL assessment process also involves other important aspects:

- promoting the benefits of RPL to prospective applicants
- providing information to prospective applicants about what they are expected to do
- giving advice on the type of evidence that is required for a successful RPL assessment
- providing encouragement to prospective applicants so they confidently seek out all evidence of their skills and knowledge relevant to the job

Therefore to answer the question of who should assess RPL, we must consider:

- the role the RPL applicant can play
- who can gather evidence
- who can judge evidence
- who can provide guidance and advice and promote RPL
- how to select the RPL assessors in an organisation
- what constitutes the profile of the 'good' RPL assessor

## **Involving the person applying for RPL in the assessment**

The person being assessed can also play a role in the assessment process by gathering evidence, once the requirements of the standards or curriculum are explained.

It is a good idea to involve the person applying for RPL in some way in the assessment process, since it is a process of self-development. In fact, where RPL assessment is based on a portfolio of evidence it is only the applicant who can identify the appropriate material.

It also makes good economic sense, because the amount of time the RPL assessor has to spend in gathering evidence is reduced if the applicants present, from the outset, as

much useful evidence as possible. The cost of the assessment to the organisation is therefore minimised.

## Who can gather evidence?

Those who can gather evidence of competence in the workplace include:

- the individual who is applying for RPL
- the workplace supervisor, team leader, line manager or employer
- fellow workers
- those who provided training on- and off-the-job
- an industry-based RPL assessor

## Who can judge the evidence?

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

- the workplace supervisor, team leader, line manager or employer
- those who provided training
- 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

The RPL assessors will review the evidence, ask further questions, set a test (if necessary), use the assessment instruments, make a judgement (usually in consultation with all others involved in the RPL assessment) and record the results. Making an assessment decision is a collective decision-making process, a team effort.

The evidence must be judged to see whether it is:

- *valid (Is the evidence relevant to the competency being assessed?)*
- *sufficient (Have you collected enough evidence to satisfy you that the person is competent across the full range of work situations?)*
- *authentic (Are you satisfied that the evidence actually relates to the applicant's performance and not that of another person?)*
- *current (How recent is the evidence—does the applicant still possess the skills and knowledge claimed?)*

The number of people involved in making the judgement will depend on the quality assurance measures that are in place which ensure that the judgement is valid and reliable; the type of recognition being sought (*is it to gain a qualification?—is it to move to a new classification?*); and the degree of risk resulting from an incorrect decision.

## Who can provide applicant advice, counselling or guidance?

RPL assessment also involves giving advice and support to the person being assessed. This may be done by one of the people who carry out the actual assessment or it can be done by someone else—an RPL advisor or co-ordinator whose role is to advise, support and counsel and who may or may not be involved in the actual assessment.

The RPL advisor takes on the role of promoting RPL, guiding and counselling applicants and helping them prepare the required evidence.

They may be someone inside the organisations such as:

- a workplace supervisor
- a team leader
- someone from the personnel or human resources section
- the employer

This role could be taken on by someone outside the organisation, depending on whether:

- the organisation has established some sort of partnership with a local training provider
- the organisation has established some sort of partnership with the local industry training advisory body
- the industry has RPL advisors or assessors who can provide a service to organisations without the resources to train their own advisors
- the organisation uses a private consultant to provide such a service

## Selecting RPL assessors in an organisation

A factor which contributes to assuring quality of the RPL process is making sure that those who become RPL assessors have the required experience and expertise as well as the attributes and people skills needed to support the RPL philosophy. Selecting the right people for the job is a crucial step in a quality RPL system.

*For example, in Western Australia, the Building and Construction Industry Training Council requires all those who apply to become RPL assessors for the industry to undergo a screening process for their suitability as assessors. Those who are deemed suitable and who successfully complete a five-day RPL assessor training program become registered as industry RPL assessors.*

It is crucial that those who become RPL assessors in the workplace are committed to the concept of RPL and actually want to take on this role. Industry sectors which have RPL assessors who travel around various organisations conducting assessments will usually encourage people within their network to become RPL assessors.

*For example, in Victoria the Pharmacy Guild uses a retired pharmacist as one of its industry assessors.*

Those who choose to take on the role can usually see some benefits to themselves—it is another skill they will acquire and it may ultimately give them the opportunity to pursue a training or human resource management path.

In some organisations assessment is part of the supervisor's role and assessor training is therefore part of the professional development of the supervisor or team leader. In many organisations, because RPL is a relatively new initiative, RPL work is taken on as an extra duty and no extra time is allocated to it. This can lead to increased pressure on the person who conducts assessments, which in turn will affect the quality of the RPL process. Adequate resources in terms of time and training time are essential if an organisation decides to adopt RPL as part of its training and human resource management systems.

### **Profile of a good assessor**

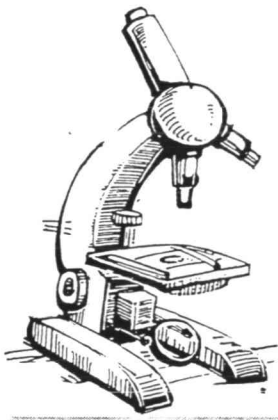
The following self-assessment checklist may be a useful starting point for anyone considering taking on the role of RPL assessor in an organisation.



## RPL assessor checklist

<b>Experience</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
• Do you have a qualification in the area in which RPL assessment is to be carried out?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Do you have at least experience in the industry appropriate to the competencies you would assess?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Have your previous positions involved a large degree of decision-making?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Have your previous positions involved listening to and negotiating with people?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Do you have experience in talking to people, listening to them and making connections between what they say and a set of performance requirements?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Expertise</b>		
• Do you have expert knowledge of the area or industry?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Do you have expert knowledge of the competency-based approach to training and assessment?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Do you have a sound knowledge of the competency standards for the industry?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Do you have a good working knowledge of the RPL process?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Are you a good listener?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Are you good at paraphrasing and summarising clearly and concisely what other people say?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Do you write in a simple, easy-to-understand, concise way?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Attributes</b>		
• Do you consider yourself to be:		
- personable?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
- sensitive to different cultures?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
- fair?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
- committed to RPL?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
- unbiased?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
- a caring person?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Are you able to make people feel at ease?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>





# The RPL process

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Having set up the infrastructure to support the RPL system and having identified who is going to play a role in the assessment process, the next step is to provide the service.

The RPL process generally involves a number of steps or stages:

## 1 Promoting RPL

The aim of this stage is to explain the benefits of RPL and to encourage people to take part in the process.

## 2 Initial support and counselling

During this phase the relevant industry or enterprise competency standards or learning outcomes in a module are explained. The type of evidence that is required to support a claim for RPL is also explained.

## 3 Preparing for the assessment

This may involve officially applying for RPL and gathering evidence of competency.

## 4 Assessment

The aim of this stage is for one or more assessors to review the evidence and make a judgement as to whether the person has submitted enough evidence or whether further evidence needs to be collected.

## 5 Feedback and counselling after assessment

During this stage, the assessors tell the person what the outcome of the RPL assessment is and give guidance about further training opportunities and, if necessary, the appeals process.

## 6 Recording and certification

This is when the outcome is recorded in the relevant record-keeping system, credit is awarded and, where applicable, a certificate or statement of attainment or employee profile is issued.

These six stages are a guide for the workplace—some organisations may find that they do stages 1 and 2 together, or that stages 4 and 5 happen together. The important

thing is that RPL assessors and those who design the service take into account the fact that RPL is a process which involves:

- promotion and dissemination of information
- assessment
- feedback/recording/certification

Although not actually a stage in the RPL process, there is a seventh aspect which must not be overlooked: provision for dealing with appeals.

Each of these stages in the RPL process are described below with examples and practical guidance. The initial work on defining features of a well-designed RPL system was published by the Vocational Education Employment and Training Advisory Committee in 1993 in *Arrangements for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Australia*. The approach identified is the one that organisations with a commitment to RPL have adopted and it is the one which is typical of organisations which have been successful.

## Promoting RPL

Promoting, or providing information is the first stage of RPL. 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.*

The features of a well-designed promotion/information stage have been described as include:

- a marketing plan with appropriate publicity (for an organisation—addresses to groups, letter to employees, articles in company magazines, posters in the workplace; for an industry group—press releases, addresses to groups, work site visits, articles in 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 time frame for recognition
- readily available written material which is eye-catching and free of jargon

### **Type of information the RPL assessor needs**

The information that RPL assessors and advisors need includes:

- how to support an applicant in the RPL process and provide advice and feedback
- what type of evidence to gather
- how to conduct an RPL assessment
- at what points a person can apply for RPL

- where to get the curriculum or competency standards
- how to understand the requirements of the curriculum or competency standards
- what type of record will be given to the successful applicants
- how to record an RPL assessment in the record-keeping system
- the costs of the RPL assessment

### Information for people applying for RPL

For those who apply for RPL, it will be necessary to provide information to them about the benefits to them as well as what will be expected of them. This can be done through information or briefing sessions at work, conducted by the RPL assessors as well as through leaflets and notices. Those who produce RPL information and advice should also consider the needs of special groups—for instance those for whom English is a second language and those who are hearing- or sight-impaired.

The kind of information that RPL applicants need is not just introductory information about what RPL is and the benefits to them, but specific information on:

- how to understand and interpret learning outcomes or units of competency
- how to gather appropriate evidence
- how to present the evidence
- their role in an RPL interview

Another effective way to promote RPL is to pilot the process with a small group and then get the group to spread the word about the RPL process.

Promotion can also occur through networks—particularly in smaller communities or workplaces. This is an effective and efficient way of spreading information. If the message has been spread throughout a network of people, a training provider will find that clients will expect and seek out RPL. In this way the training provider can rely less on promotion of RPL as a way of encouraging people to gain recognition.

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

Another way of promoting RPL is to provide special programs which target likely applicants—one instance of this is a special RPL confidence-building program for women which can be run within or external to the workplace.

## Initial support and counselling

During this stage the benchmarks which will be applied in the assessment phase are explained, and those who have decided to apply for RPL are helped to clarify their expectations. Features of a well-designed support and counselling phase include:

- conducting an information or briefing session at a convenient time and in an inviting and comfortable environment for the applicants—this briefing session can

be conducted by those who are RPL advisors or assessors and should have the support of others such as the workplace supervisor

- providing an opportunity for those who want to apply for RPL to clarify their objectives and express their fears
- providing individual guidance and support on training programs, courses, qualifications and competency standards
- providing the applicants with a written statement of specific standards or learning outcomes which may apply to them

### Information for applicants

The Pharmacy Guild provides a comprehensive folder of information for its RPL applicants. This contains:

- an introduction to skills recognition and career systems for pharmacy assistants including detailed specifications and benchmarks
- an introduction to RPL
- case studies of pharmacy assistants gaining RPL
- a self-assessment questionnaire to assist applicants in deciding their areas of strength and areas needing extra training
- an RPL application form
- guidance on the pharmacy assistant performance review process

This information enables the applicants to prepare themselves for the process and contribute effectively to the assessment process.

## Preparing for the assessment

This phase, sometimes called the *application stage*, usually involves lodging an application form with supporting documentation outlining previous studies, work experience and other information. The aim of this stage is to enable those who apply for RPL to document their claim for competency in enough detail to help the assessor reach an assessment decision.

Features of a well-designed preparation phase include:

- clarification of specific performance criteria or learning outcomes to guide the person applying for RPL
- self-assessment opportunities (for example, checklists, key questions, computer-generated tests)
- application forms which are user-friendly, in plain English and designed to assist applicants to organise their evidence
- guidelines for the applicant suggesting possible sources of evidence, the requirement to authenticate evidence and confirm the currency of skills and competencies claimed

- opportunities for further support from an RPL mentor, assessor or 'buddy', if required
- ability to obtain top-up, refresher or additional learning prior to assessment
- opportunity for the applicant to negotiate the form of assessment

## Assessment

The aim of this stage is for the assessor to determine, through a systematic review of evidence, whether the applicant can demonstrate achievement of the competencies or learning outcomes. The features of a well-designed assessment are:

- assessors who are familiar with their field, the standards, assessment methods and who have effective communication and questioning skills
- flexible and responsive attitude on the assessor's part as to what constitutes acceptable evidence
- commitment to explicit competency standards or learning outcomes as the full and proper basis for assessment decisions
- adoption of cost- and time-effective methods which are appropriate to the risk involved and amount of assessment rigour necessary
- systematic review of the evidence which may include an interview, the evidence provided on the application form, workplace assessment and performance tests

## Feedback and counselling after assessment

This is when the applicant for RPL is advised of the outcome. Guidance is given to unsuccessful applicants about further training opportunities and the appeals process. The features of a well-designed system are:

- clear, prompt, constructive feedback which promotes the development of the applicant
- a review period with the assessor for both successful and unsuccessful applicants in order to:
  - prepare a learning/development plan
  - seek feedback from the applicant on the RPL process they have just gone through
  - provide information about appeals

## Recording and certification

This is when credit is awarded or positive outcomes of the assessment are recognised. This can include annotating a trainee record or skills passport, issuing of a credential, or entering results on an industry database. The features of a well-designed recording/certification stage are:

- a streamlined reporting system involving the minimum of paperwork which allows the assessor to record the evidence, record the competencies or learning outcomes confirmed and provide sufficient summary evidence for third parties (for example, registrars) and those who may have to handle appeals
- a robust record-keeping system which provides applicants with prompt, official notification of RPL results
- prompt action by administrative staff to complete the documentation and records
- standardised reporting on RPL results which does not give less credit to outcomes achieved through the RPL process compared with normal training, and yet allows the organisation to monitor the use and outcomes of the RPL service

## Appeals

If RPL is to gain the respect and acceptance of 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.

### Minimising appeals

While it is good practice to have an appeals process in place, it is far better practice to avoid the need to use it. The following steps can be taken to minimise the incidence of appeals:

- providing clear guidelines to applicants regarding the RPL procedures and requirements regarding evidence
- ensuring that advisors and, where appropriate, mentors are available to assist the applicant develop the application and present the evidence
- providing comprehensive, clear and constructive feedback on the assessment result to unsuccessful applicants explaining the reasons for their lack of success and the next steps they need to take
- allowing and encouraging unsuccessful applicants to discuss their RPL assessment results with the assessor(s)

### Informal review

To help avoid the complexity and cost of conducting a full-scale appeal, it is a good idea to build into the appeals process a provision which allows the applicant the option of approaching the RPL assessor informally for a review of the decision prior to lodging a formal appeal. This enables a decision to be revised if the assessor agrees that suitable grounds for appeal exist. Alternatively the applicant may learn more about why the application was unsuccessful. If the matter is not resolved to the applicant's satisfaction the applicant can then proceed with a formal appeal.

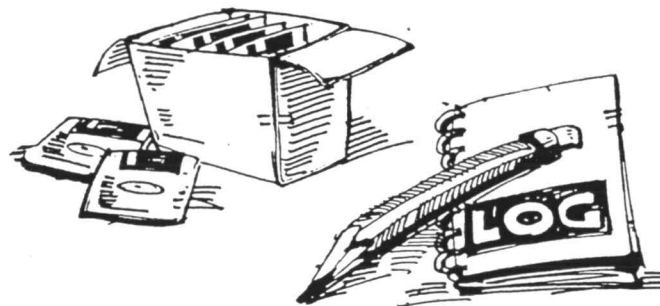
### Who hears appeals

If the assessment was conducted internally by a company or an enterprise, it is common for appeals to be heard by the site consultative committee, if one exists. It is important that appeals be heard by a person or panel that is seen to be independent of

the original assessor. In the building industry in Western Australia, for instance, appeals are dealt with by the Accreditation and Registration Committee of the Building and Construction Industry Training Council. This sort of external panel is most important where the RPL process relates to providing a licence to successful applicants.

### **Good documentation necessary**

One of the key factors to an effective appeal process is the 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.





# RPL principles

The process for recognising prior learning which has been described is based on and guided by a set of principles. These RPL principles are set out in the National Framework for the Recognition of Training and are the ones best known and widely accepted in Australia. Although they were designed with training in mind, they are equally applicable to assessment for RPL in the workplace. It is therefore strongly recommended that they be adopted and promoted by workplaces providing RPL.

The NFROT RPL principles relate to five concepts:

- competence
- commitment
- access
- fairness
- support

The NFROT principles are provided here to act as a summary of the preceding information.

## 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 and assessor competence have been comprehensively covered but the implications for the assessment process are worth reinforcing.

## Assessment process

The assessment methods used to gather evidence of competency must reflect the competency itself. Evidence is the information and observations which provide proof of a person's competence. 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.

## 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 organisation's commitment to RPL is linked to:

- the perceived benefits of RPL to itself and to those individuals who apply for RPL
- the extent to which the organisation provides training and support to those who play an assessment role
- time and resources it 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 their 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 organisation**

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 is also a way of identifying further training needed and is 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 is conducting the RPL assessment (for example, the workplace supervisor, team leader or manager)
- the employees 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.

## **Access**

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

The principle of access involves taking into account:

- many people who apply 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

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

RPL applicants who have no previous formal vocational qualifications and they 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.

In an industry 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.

## 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 skill 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, may be daunted by them and may not demonstrate their true ability 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 new 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.

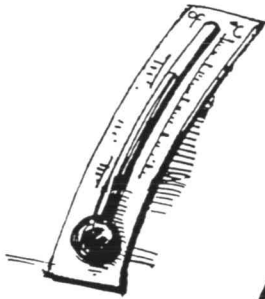
For some people—particularly those who may feel hesitant about the process, effective support may be provided by someone who has successfully completed an RPL assessment.

## Checklist

In order to check that your organisation meets the five principles for RPL, ask yourself the following questions:

	Yes	No
<b>Competence</b>		
• Have you decided on 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 in the organisation understand the benefits of RPL?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Have you provided incentives for people to apply for RPL and 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"/>
• Have you organised for information about RPL to be given to employees who are likely to benefit?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Access</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
• Have you considered the special needs any group of employees may have?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Fairness</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
• Have you considered any potential barriers to RPL for your workforce 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"/>





# 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).
- Appointing a person to act as a co-ordinator of RPL activity where the organisation is large enough to sustain this role. The monitoring role held by the co-ordinator, as well as their role in gathering and dissemination information, assists in ensuring consistency and maintenance of standards.

## A monitoring system

The Building and Construction ITAB in Western Australia has a rigorous system of quality assurance. This ITAB conducts RPL assessments and then makes a recommendation that the individual be awarded RPL and that a certificate of training be issued to the state training authority.

Ten per cent of all assessments conducted by the ITAB's assessors are monitored by other assessors. The actual assessment to be monitored is determined by the skills recognition manager.

The monitoring assessor completes a monitoring report, ticks off competencies the assessor should be demonstrating and gives the assessor a rating. This report is confidential between monitor, assessor and the skills recognition manager. Periodically the skills recognition manager will collate all the monitoring results and feed them back to the assessors as a group.

Evaluations also provide useful information which can be used to improve or maintain the quality of RPL assessment. The following are examples of possible evaluation methods.

- Obtaining feedback on the RPL process from the applicants after assessment for RPL has been completed. This may be done informally upon completion of the assessment and/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 of RPL principles
- training in assessment techniques
- subject expertise

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 (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 of 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 or procedures (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 which establishes 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 information packages supplied to applicants for RPL.

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

The checklist on the following page has been compiled to help organisations determine whether sufficient attention has been given to quality in the processes used for assessing RPL.

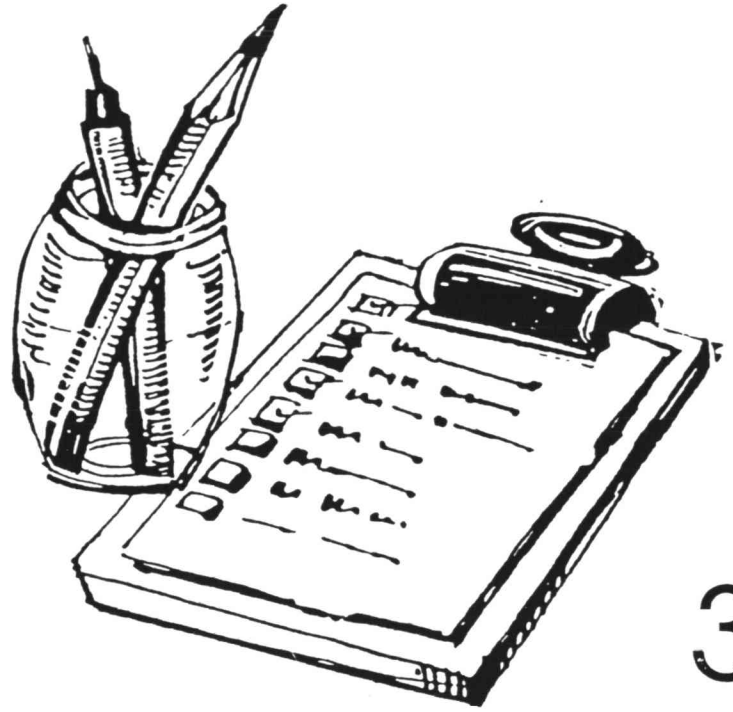
It is not expected that every factor will be incorporated into the processes used—some of them are alternatives which can be substituted for each other. However the more that are included, the better will be the prospects for quality in RPL decisions.



## 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 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="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
• Are all persons conducting assessments for RPL trained in assessment techniques?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
• Are RPL assessors encouraged and assisted to share information via networks, meetings case studies and publications?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
• Are RPL assessors expected to keep their skills up to date via training workshops, forums and observation of each other conducting assessments?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<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 a 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





# 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  
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3/122 Forrest Road  
Armadale WA 6112  
Telephone: (09) 497 1499 Fax: (09) 497 4918  
Contact: Wendy Shearwood



# Glossary

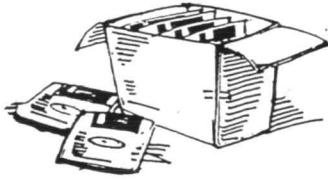
The definition of terms used in competency-based training and assessment in Australia have tended to vary over time. In this report we have attempted to use terms in a consistent way and the meanings attached to the most important of these are given below.

<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 pages 7 and 23.
<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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