

Assessment for recognition of prior learning in technical and vocational education and training in Australia: where to from here?

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Abstract

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) provides formal recognition for vocational knowledge or skills gained on-the-job or as a result of other informal or unstructured learning experiences. RPL, if granted, can count towards completion of recognised vocational qualifications.

RPL provides a range of potential benefits for both learners and providers of technical and vocational educational and training (TVET) but also presents challenges. Assessment for RPL is invariably individualised and one-off rather than the more usual mass-assessment situation. This has implications for both costs and validity, including maintenance of consistent assessment standards. RPL also poses difficulties for the conventional models for publicly funding TVET, which generally assume that learners will typically engage in learning activities for a period of time and be assessed at the end. By contrast, RPL involves an up-front assessment, turning the conventional assessment situation on its head.

Since the early 1990s, promotion of RPL has been a major policy objective of the Australian TVET system. Progress has been made and awareness has increased but to date the take-up of RPL has not met expectations. This paper will review the current situation with a particular focus on the issues thrown up by RPL assessment and recent Australian government policy initiatives designed to address them.

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A note regarding the context

Technical and vocational education and training (TVET)² is defined more broadly in Australia than in many other countries. While it includes entry-level and preparatory training for young people, including some who are still at secondary school, the majority of learners are adults undertaking relatively small amounts of training to obtain specific skills. TVET also includes the formal or off-the-job component of the training programs undertaken by apprentices and trainees, now known collectively as New Apprentices. Again, this is not confined to young people under the age of 21 years, as approaching half the New Apprentices at any given time are adults. Despite the diversity among learners in TVET, one thing which they have in common is that the great majority undertake their program of learning for vocational reasons.

The TVET system in Australia spans a wide range of levels in the Australian Qualifications Framework: certificate I, certificate II, certificate III (the most common, which includes most traditional apprenticeships), certificate IV (which includes many post-trade qualifications), diploma, advanced diploma, associate degree (a dual-sector qualification), vocational graduate certificate and vocational graduate diploma. Certificate III is considered roughly equivalent to the senior secondary certificate, which is issued on completion of 12 years of schooling. A nationally recognised statement of attainment is issued for partial completion of a TVET qualification. It is important to note that although dual-sector qualifications and institutions do exist, TVET excludes higher education, which is delivered by the university sector and funded separately.

Since the late 1990s, Australia has developed a system of delivery, assessment and certification for TVET which is designed to ensure that the qualifications and statements of attainment issued to learners are recognised throughout the country and assured for quality. A key element of the Australian TVET system is the Australian Quality Training Framework.

Australia is a federation of six states and two territories (hereafter referred to as the states) in which constitutional authority for education and training rests, nominally, with the states. However, as a result of cooperative arrangements between the Australian and state governments, responsibility for TVET, including funding, has become shared and is embodied in formal arrangements agreed at ministerial level.

The 'curriculum' side of Australia's TVET system is covered by national training packages, which in most areas of learning have replaced the former national courses and modules. Training packages specify units of competence in terms of the knowledge and skills which are expected as outcomes (in effect, the standards for competence), and they also specify the combinations of units of competence which are needed for each qualification. Although training packages are not curriculum documents in the traditional sense, they do include evidence guides and other information to aid assessors.

² The more international term 'technical and vocational education and training (TVET)' is used throughout this paper although within Australia the term 'vocational education and training (VET)' is more usual. Other equivalent terms are 'further education and training (FET)' as used in South Africa and 'vocational and technical education and training (VTET)', used widely in south-east Asia. All are broadly equivalent.

1 Background

Recognition of prior learning (RPL³) provides formal recognition for vocational knowledge or skills gained on-the-job or as a result of other informal or unstructured learning experiences. RPL involves an up-front assessment to determine whether the applicant meets the requirements of the relevant subjects⁴. A person who has had subjects certificated via successful RPL can count these towards completion of a recognised qualification as if they had been completed via a formal learning program. In a competency-based training system learning programs can vary enormously in form and length: RPL is at the extreme end of the continuum as it represents an assessment-only pathway.

Under the provisions of the Australian Quality Training Framework, RPL includes recognition of current competencies, the situation which arises when workers in certain occupations already have their competence certificated but are required to have it periodically reassessed to maintain the currency of their occupational 'ticket', licence or other certification. Ideally, recognition of current competencies should be treated separately from RPL but under current definitions and reporting arrangements this is difficult to do. However, RPL specifically excludes credit transfer, the situation where a person is granted status or credit for equivalent subjects successfully completed with some other education or training organisation. Credit transfer is essentially an administrative process that does not involve an assessment of the applicant's competence.

Implementing RPL and promoting its utilisation has been a policy priority for the Australian TVET system since at least the early 1990s. Many other countries have pursued a similar line, for example, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and Canada, to name just a few. As recently as November 2004 the Danish parliament considered and adopted proposals to implement RPL within its education system, although the Danish initiative is a little different in that it covers both the TVET and the higher education sectors and it emphasises throughout the importance of RPL as the foundation for further learning rather than as an end in itself (Undervisnings Ministeriet, 2004).

In Australia, nationally recognised TVET is delivered and assessed by Registered Training Organisations. The Australian Quality Training Framework includes specific requirements which all Registered Training Organisations must meet in relation to assessment generally and RPL in particular:

- '8.2 a The [Registered Training Organisation] must ensure RPL is offered to all applicants on enrolment.
- b The [Registered Training Organisation] must have an RPL process that:
- i is structured to minimise the time and cost to applicants
 - ii provides adequate information, support and opportunities for participants to engage in the RPL process.'

(Australian Quality Training Framework Standards for Registered Training Organisations, ANTA 2005 p.10)

³ RPL is the term commonly used in Australia. Slightly different terminology is used in other countries, such as accreditation of prior learning (APL), accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL), prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR), college credit, *eerder verworven competenties* (EVC) in the Netherlands etc.

⁴ The term 'subject' will be used in this paper to refer to both units of competence and modules. As a result of the expansion of the competency-based approach to training and assessment in Australia, modules (the components of national courses) have been progressively replaced by units of competence (the building blocks for the qualifications specified in national training packages). Modules and national courses were generally specified using a traditional curriculum framework whereas units of competence and training package qualifications are specified in terms of outputs.

Additionally, the standards in the Australian Quality Training Framework relating to assessment and the issuing of nationally recognised qualifications and statements of attainment also apply to RPL. A review conducted in 2004 by the Australian National Training Authority and agreed by the then Ministerial Council for Vocational Education and Training⁵ affirmed the standards relating to RPL.

The policy emphasis given to RPL throughout the 1990s and the inclusion of an RPL requirement in the standards for Registered Training Organisations apparently led to an increase in the take-up among students, at least in the public TVET system (statistics are not available for the remainder of the system). The proportion of students with at least one RPL subject grew from 2.4% in 1995 to 4.0% in 1998 and has remained around that level since, though with a decline since the peak of 4.2% in 2002 (Bateman and Knight, p.25 and table below). The take-up is much greater at higher qualification levels, with 10.1% of diploma and higher level students in 2001 having one or more RPL subject and 6.3% of certificate III and IV students. Older students also have above average rates of RPL: 4.6% for the 20 to 24 year age group in 2001, 5.0% for the 25 to 39 year age group and 4.3% for the 40 to 64 year age group (*ibid.* p.28 and p.32).

Proportion of students granted RPL, by qualification level and age, 2001 to 2004

Qualification/age category	2001	2002	2003	2004
<i>Qualification level of major course</i>				
Diploma & above	10.1%	11.0%	10.5%	10.0%
Certificate III & IV	6.3%	6.7%	6.6%	5.5%
Certificate I & II	1.9%	1.9%	1.8%	1.8%
Other programs	0.7%	0.6%	0.4%	0.3%
<i>Age group</i>				
15-19 years	2.1%	2.5%	2.3%	2.1%
20-24 years	4.6%	4.7%	4.5%	4.2%
25-39 years	5.0%	5.1%	4.8%	4.4%
40-64 years	4.3%	4.7%	4.5%	4.1%
Other including age unknown	1.4%	1.4%	1.0%	1.0%
All students (per cent)	4.0%	4.2%	3.9%	3.6%
Number of students ('000)	1,679.2	1,682.9	1,717.8	1,595.2

Scope: covers all students in the public TVET system. Granted RPL means a successful RPL application in one or more subject in the year shown.

Source: National Centre for Vocational Education Research, unpublished statistics.

These statistics cannot indicate whether current RPL levels are meeting the needs of industry and individuals nor whether an optimum level of take-up has been achieved. Although specific targets were never set, there is a view among government officials, perhaps prompted by representations from peak employer and employee bodies, that the promotion and take-up of RPL has not lived up to expectations. In order to address this issue, the Council of Australian Governments (2006) has agreed that those Registered Training Organisations which receive public funds to deliver training should offer RPL to all workers entering training other than new entrants to the labour market, thus strengthening the requirements already set down in the Australian Quality Training Framework (at Standard 6.3 xi, ANTA 2005 p.8). The Council has

⁵ Replaced in 2005 by the Ministerial Council for Vocational and Technical Education as part of new national arrangements for funding and managing the training system.

also established a three-year program to enhance the capacity of the training system to deliver RPL services and to promote good practice (the details of the three-year program agreed by the Council have yet to be worked out).

2 Assessment issues affecting the take-up of RPL

There is now sufficient evidence available from research to indicate that while the concept of RPL is still widely supported in principle (Hargreaves pp.2-3), a range of assessment issues need to be addressed if it is to develop further. It is noteworthy that the 2004 RPL submission to the Danish parliament, one of the most recent national RPL initiatives, points out that RPL ‘... makes new demands on the education system and presupposes that relevant methods are developed to ensure a reliable assessment of an individual’s prior learning’ (Undervisnings Ministeriet at <http://pub.uvm.dk/2005/priorlearning/kap02.html>, viewed 10/3/06). By contrast, the crucial role of assessment in achieving widespread understanding and take-up of RPL was probably underestimated in the early years of the Australian experience. The fact that a large number of other developments in TVET in Australia were occurring at the same time (i.e. the early to mid 1990s) probably contributed to this.

Complexity and cost have been identified as the two major factors influencing RPL in practice (see for example Smith 2004b p.5, Hargreaves pp.7-8). The reasons for this need to be understood if a way forward is to be found.

Australia has implemented a competency-based approach to TVET. In this system most teaching, learning and assessment take place in a real or simulated working environment. This creates particular problems for RPL assessment as the context needed to allow the applicant to demonstrate the required knowledge and skills through immediately observable performance is generally not available. Nor, in general, is it feasible to develop standardised assessment tasks which could be administered to assess an applicant’s competence because of the need for a realistic context. The very large number of units of competence specified in the National Training Packages (over 13,400 in use in 2004, National Centre for Vocational Education Research, unpublished statistics) also renders this approach infeasible on practical grounds, although the growing sophistication of online assessment suggests that it could encompass RPL in some subject areas (Booth et al. 2003 provide a comprehensive discussion of the present online assessment situation in Australia).

As a result, RPL assessment depends heavily on supporting evidence supplied by the applicant, an employer or by some other person who has first-hand knowledge of the applicant’s competence and performance in a relevant context. The situation is complicated by the fact that the requirements for most units of competence are specified in terms of elements of competence, each of which must be addressed, either specifically or as part of an holistic approach to RPL assessment. Although Registered Training Organisations generally take a flexible and broad approach to what constitutes acceptable evidence, it is clear that applicants can face a daunting task assembling the necessary portfolio, often needing guidance and support, and assessors face an equally daunting task evaluating it. A recurring theme in the literature is the need for assessors, who are usually also teachers, to have significant expertise and supporting resources for cost-effective delivery of RPL services and for them to feel confident about the RPL assessments they have made.

Online support systems have the potential to facilitate RPL by helping applicants understand the requirements and guiding them through the process, for example, the *Prove It!* system developed by the Department of Education and Training (2005) for use in the state of New South Wales. However, such systems do not reduce the underlying complexities which often exist.

3 Other issues affecting the take-up of RPL

With the exception of specialist assessment centres, for most Registered Training Organisations RPL assessment interacts with other aspects of their operations. Apart from the diversion of teaching resources away from mainstream training activities, successful RPL assessments can lead to non-viable class sizes and create difficulties because not all learners in a group are at the same stage in their course. The comparability of RPL with the outcome from other learning pathways is also a concern, either real or imagined, for some teachers and employers. Related to this, some industry and professional bodies place caps on the amount of RPL which can count as credit towards a qualification, placing Registered Training Organisations in a difficult position because of potential non-compliance with the standards set down in the Australian Quality Training Framework.

Externally imposed requirements have also been noted as a disincentive, particularly where alternative approaches to RPL assessment are being considered. In case studies undertaken by Smith (2004b, p.6) it was reported that some Registered Training Organisations considered that documentation requirements were excessive and officials auditing for compliance with the Australian Quality Training Framework Standards were concerned that insufficient documentary evidence of competence was available when an holistic approach to RPL assessment had been adopted.

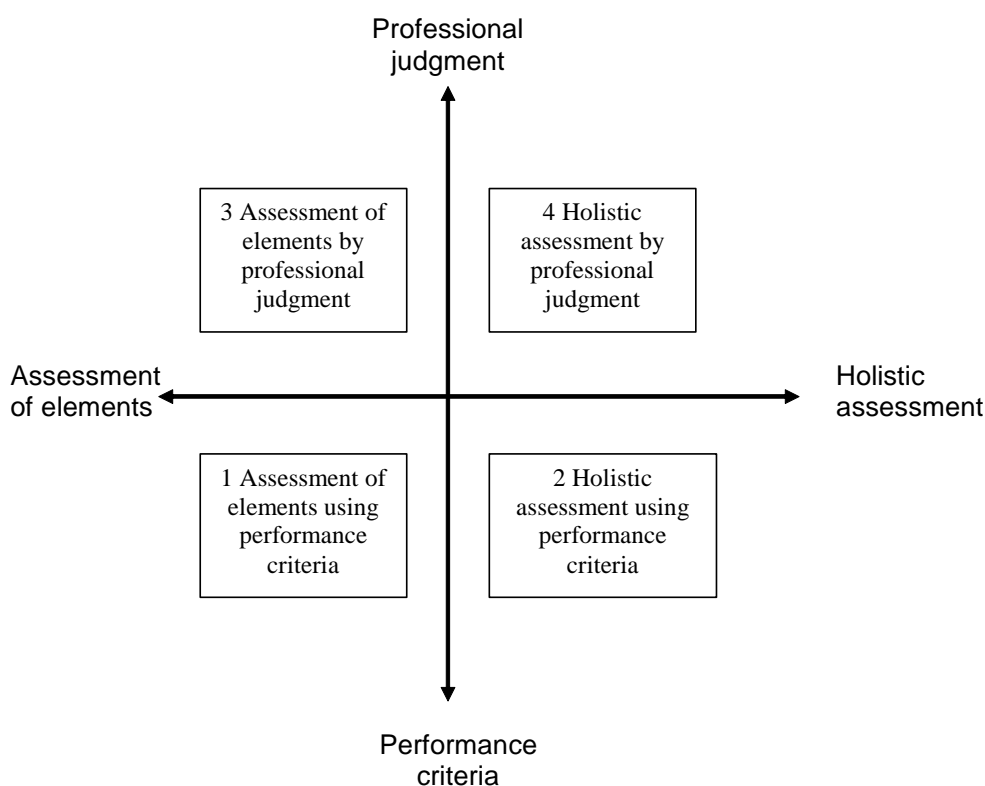
The available research suggests that funding (as distinct from cost) is mostly a second-order issue affecting the take-up of RPL. Although funding levels for RPL vary, there is no strong evidence to suggest that take-up is lower when RPL is funded at a lower rate than is applied to other training programs (Bowman et al 2003, p.41ff). At the national level, the Australian government has sought to remove one possible funding disincentive by agreeing to count RPL outcomes at full value rather than using a discounting formula when measuring the levels of training activity covered by the funding agreements between the Australian government and the states. Furthermore, most states (the jurisdictions which disburse funding and manage the public TVET system) have moved towards parity funding for RPL. It should also be noted that funding issues are not usually a concern when the assessment is for recognition of current competencies, a specific sub-category of RPL where workers in certain occupations already have their competence certificated but are required to have it periodically reassessed to maintain the currency of their occupational 'ticket', licence or other certification. Here, the assessment is generally undertaken on a fee-for-service or cost-recovery basis.

Finally, various studies have noted situations where individuals who might be eligible for RPL have elected to undertake the learning program instead because they or their employers feel that they will benefit from the learning process. While this might reduce the take-up of RPL it should be regarded as a legitimate preference being exercised by individuals or their employers unless the decision has been prompted by actual or expected difficulties with RPL processes.

4 Finding a way forward

Smith (2004a, Figures 1-3 and discussion) suggests that there are two dimensions to RPL assessment. These provide insight into the present situation in Australia and indicate how barriers to the further development of RPL might be addressed. The 'mode of decision making' continuum ranges from a consideration of actual performance at the one extreme to a more indirect evaluation of competence based on the professional judgement of the assessor at the other. The second continuum, which is perhaps not completely independent of the first, is termed 'focus of assessment'. This ranges from a detailed assessment of the various elements required for competence to an holistic approach which takes a fully integrated view when assessing. When combined, these continua yield a 'space' which defines a set of 'decision-making – assessment focus quadrants', as shown in the figure below (reproduced from Smith 2004a, numbering added).

Smith's 'decision-making – assessment focus' quadrants



As with any model, there is a degree of simplification here. Within each quadrant there exists an unlimited range of possibilities; in fact, a given RPL assessment could occur anywhere in the 'space' formed by the two dimensions. There is also the possibility that an assessor will choose to assess some of the elements of competence within a subject holistically or through the exercise of professional judgement while requiring evidence of actual performance for other, more critical elements. Additionally, the nature of the assessment for a given subject may vary depending on the evidence which applicants are able to provide and their personal qualities, such as articulateness, self-awareness and understanding of the subject criteria. Despite the range of variation which can occur in practice the model has considerable utility because of the insight which it provides.

Smith argues that much, perhaps most, of the RPL assessment in TVET in Australia is located in quadrant one. Here the focus is on the elements of competence and evidence of performance against these is required, on the grounds that this is necessary for a valid and low-risk outcome. Validity is a key requirement of all assessment, and any consideration of validity must include

the consequences which might ensue from using the assessment result, what Messick has termed the 'consequential basis' of assessment validity (Messick, 1993, p.20ff). Clearly there will be some situations where the possible consequences are of such great importance that assessment, whether for RPL or otherwise, must be based on performance criteria applied to the elements of competence, for example, situations where lack of competence would pose a threat to the safety of others (Knight 2004 pp.3-4). On the other hand, this detailed and highly evidential approach to RPL assessment involves the greatest complexity and cost for applicants, their employers and assessors. Consideration of alternatives is warranted if the consequences allow it. It should be noted that in the special case of recognition of current competencies it would be reasonable for the assessment to be concentrated in quadrant one.

Moving RPL assessment to quadrant two in Smith's model, that is, to a more integrated, holistic assessment based on performance criteria, has the potential to reduce some of the complexity and cost for assessors and Registered Training Organisations because the need for detailed consideration of performance against every element of competence is removed. However, it is likely to have fewer benefits for applicants and those who provide evidence on their behalf because evidence of actual performance is still required.

Quadrants three and four in Smith's model have the greatest potential for reducing cost and complexity but require a higher level of expertise and confidence on the part of assessors because inferences about competence must be made which are not based on direct evidence of performance. The key finding from a range of recent studies, summarised by Hargreaves (2006, p.10), is that cost-effective RPL requires experienced professional assessors:

'Assessment in general requires experienced professionals confident about making [the] necessary judgements. The maintenance of industry standards, the credibility of qualifications and the reputation of training organisations are very much dependent upon assessors having the skills and knowledge necessary to manage the risks associated with assessment. With RPL, this ability is critical.'

Bowen-Clewley (2002) has shown how a structured, professional conversation between an RPL applicant and an experienced assessor can be used as the basis for an efficient and effective assessment, while still addressing the elements of competence if that is required. The advantages of such an approach include immediate feedback to the applicant and identification of areas where further learning may be required to achieve competence. Such an approach does need to be underpinned by arrangements which ensure that the assessors have sufficient expertise to make reliable RPL assessments when using this methodology.

In Smith's model, quadrant four (holistic assessment by professional judgement) has the greatest potential for cost-effective RPL but requires the most expertise and carries the greatest risk that an applicant who is not competent in all required areas is granted RPL. For this reason it may not be applicable to all subjects or to all training packages and may require risk mitigation strategies, such as checking by a second, independent assessor. On the other hand, the integrated approach, making inferences from a range of evidence, has the potential to address more than one subject or even a whole qualification in a single process. Some precedents for the approach indicated in quadrant four exist in other arenas, for example, 'impression marking' of essay responses to examination questions, where studies have shown that the marks or grades awarded have a high correlation with the results of more time-consuming marking against detailed criteria.

Overall, the findings from the research, when considered in the context of Smith's model, indicate that the further development of RPL in Australia is likely to depend on moving from an atomised approach based on hard evidence of performance to a more holistic approach in which inferences about competence are made by an assessment expert with a detailed knowledge of the subject or subjects for which RPL is sought. This shift will not be feasible or applicable in all cases and 'mixed-quadrant' approaches will continue to provide the basis for a valid assessment in many situations. However, if the overall balance can be shifted away from quadrant one and

towards quadrant four then a higher level of take-up of RPL should ensue because it is cheaper and less complex for both applicants and assessors.

5 Conclusion

Developing and promoting RPL is still an important priority for the TVET system in Australia. The fact that it has been the subject of consideration by the Committee of Australian Governments, one of the highest-level government bodies in the country, is clear testimony of this. However, most of the focus to date has been on addressing implementation issues, increasing awareness, developing resources which assist learners, training providers and assessors and removing possible funding disincentives.

The underlying premise of most RPL assessment, yet to be considered critically by assessors, is that evidence of performance against detailed criteria needs to be collected and evaluated. Alternative approaches have been suggested in this paper, or at least the general form that these might take. It is recognised that holistic approaches based on professional judgement may not be applicable to all subjects. However, the available information suggests that further development of RPL is unlikely to occur unless these possibilities are explored.

The level of RPL take-up which might ultimately be achieved is itself problematic. There is no hard information to indicate that the RPL rates among enrolling students could or should be much higher than they are at present. Even less is known about the relevance and possible benefits of RPL among those who have skills which could be certificated but do not currently enrol in a TVET program. While it may be true that the take-up of RPL after a decade as a policy priority is 'disappointing', the suggestion that it is 'low' is difficult to evaluate. However, this does not mean that improvements to RPL processes should not be promoted. Reducing the cost and complexity would be a worthwhile goal in itself, with the additional benefit that it must surely lead to increased take-up.

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