

Skills, Knowledge and Employability

*Recognition of prior learning
Policy and practice for skills learned at work*

*Australia
Canada
New Zealand
South Africa
United States*

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Foreword

The recognition of prior learning (RPL) provides individuals with an opportunity to validate skills and competencies which have not been formally recognized. The importance of recognizing skills, including prior learning and previous experience, irrespective of the countries where they were acquired and whether acquired formally or informally, is highlighted by the ILO's newly adopted Recommendation (No. 195) on Human Resources Development: Education, training and lifelong learning.

During the General Discussion on human resources training and development at the International Labour Conference in 2000, the ILO's constituents expressed the view that better recognition of individual skills is beneficial for both workers' employability and enterprises' competitiveness. Those workers who acquired skills predominantly on the job or through other activities are often disadvantaged in gaining access to formal education and training, or in securing employment which adequately reflects their skills and experience. Workers with few, or no, formal qualifications are most vulnerable in securing decent employment. By formally recognizing their skills, RPL is seen as a means of creating a level playing field in order for them to gain opportunities for further learning and to improve career prospects. Recognition of skills can contribute much to workers' self-esteem and motivation. For enterprises, a better recognition of workers' skills is a way to overcome skills shortages and match skills demand with supply. It can also provide an opportunity to improve the overall skill level and work performance of an industry.

The role of RPL as a means of facilitating participation in formal education and training is often highlighted. However, few studies have examined the practice of RPL in the workplace, despite its potential contribution as a means of enhancing employability, labour mobility and career prospects. The present study contributes to improve our understanding in this under-researched area by examining current RPL policies and practices and critically examining their impact on employability and lifelong learning. It also contains a number of industry or work-based case studies and models and outlines the basis for good practice models. While the study draws on the experience of a limited number of countries, namely Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa and the United States, its findings provide important implications and lessons for other countries interested in, or currently implementing, RPL. The analysis of these countries also complements the work of the European Commission on the validation of non-formal and informal learning in its member States.

The study was commissioned within the framework of the work on skills recognition and qualifications frameworks in the Skills and Employability Department. I would like to express my sincere thanks to Ms Chloe Dyson and Professor Jack Keating for undertaking this important study and to Akiko Sakamoto for initiating and managing this project.

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Executive summary

The issue of skills recognition is a major theme of international debates on education and training strategy.¹ It is widely accepted that learning takes place not only in formal educational or training institutions but also in the workplace and in non-formal activities. However, not all learning is formally recognized, often leaving people who acquired skills and competencies non-formally or informally disadvantaged in accessing and advancing in employment and the formal education system.

While the majority of the research and policy documents on the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) focuses its role as a means of facilitating participation in, or returning to, formal education and training, the present study examines its policy and practice in recognizing skills learned in the workplace.

The United States, Canada, South Africa and Australia each can lay claim to some distinctive contributions to the concepts and practices of RPL. The concept first emerged in the U.S., while Canada has sustained a high level of development in the concepts and practices over the past two decades. South Africa currently is investing heavily to recognize prior learning in an effort to achieve economic and social objectives. New Zealand has been the first nation to establish a national qualifications framework and has used it as a basis for RPL. At the same time, Australia has developed a recognition system that does not separate learning gained through formal courses from that gained informally through work and life experiences.

Approaches to workplace RPL

There is a clear division between North America and the three nations of the southern hemisphere in the approach towards recognising workplace learning. Canada and the U.S. do not have national training or qualifications systems, and therefore lack the infrastructure to link workplace learning to national systems of qualifications. As a consequence, RPL is mostly confined to partnering arrangements with education and training providers. By contrast, South Africa, New Zealand and Australia all have national training and qualifications systems. All have adopted relatively advanced forms of competency based training and therefore they have the infrastructure to link workplace skills' recognition with national qualifications.

In the *United States*, enterprises work with colleges and universities to determine how workers can gain access to, or credit within, college courses. Thus industry is required to respond to the conventions laid down by the educational institution, rather than professional or vocational conventions. This may disadvantage the students whose learning is developed at the workplace or through informal learning, as this learning has to be expressed in a way that is palatable to the educational institution.

In *Canada*, possibly because of its smaller population, there is greater national capacity for RPL through a range of central bodies. Sector councils, which act as industry training authorities, have sponsored a range of joint sector initiatives to facilitate the implementation of systems to recognize prior learning. These include: an initiative of the Software Human Resources Council to develop partnerships with colleges across Canada

¹ In the ILO, the issue was debated during the International Labour Conference in 2000. Skills recognition has been an important work item in the ILO since then.

to develop skills profiles; the development of skills recognition processes in tourism through the Forum for International Trade Training; and the use of similar processes with the Canadian Steel Trades and Employment Congress to increase mobility across the steel industry. Other examples include work at provincial level in Manitoba to assist the hydroelectricity provider and the Manitoba Education and Youth Educational Assistant project which targets people working with students with special learning needs.

In *Australia*, technical and vocational qualifications are built into National Training Packages that package units of competency for use in certificate and diploma qualifications. These units are derived from workplace practice and are designed for assessment purposes. They include the range of workplace contexts and are supported by evidence for assessment purposes. Assessments are made by qualified assessors and through a registered training organization. Thus, all relevant technical and vocational qualifications can be awarded or partially awarded through workplace RPL assessments. Specific examples include: the Worker Assistance Program aimed at those displaced from the forestry sector: and, the Sydney Opera House program where employees could have their experience assessed and a national qualification was given for the first time.

New Zealand is similar to Australia. The country has an advanced competency-based training and qualifications system, and technical and vocational qualifications are based upon unit standards that are derived from industry and workplace practice. As in Australia, qualifications can be awarded directly through assessments against the unit standards, and can take place in the workplace, provided they are conducted by a trained and registered assessor. New Zealand also has 43 national Industry Training Organizations, mostly funded by industry. A number of these have developed industry-based RPL models, which in most cases are termed recognition of current competency. In most cases the assessments are carried out or supervised by the Industry Training Organizations, but in all cases they must meet quality assurance procedures set down and supervised by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority. Some examples of these processes are found in the experience of the seafood and the building and construction industries.

In *South Africa*, the recognition of prior learning is seen as a strategy that can be used by business to aid career progression and individual growth. As in Australia and New Zealand, the technical and vocational qualifications system is competency based, and all qualifications can be achieved through the recognition of informal or work-based learning. South Africa, possibly more than any other nation, is looking towards the recognition of workplace skills as a means of addressing pressing social and economic concerns. It is investing directly in industry models, and the South Africa Qualifications Authority has developed a generic process for both workplace and institutionally-based assessment of prior learning. The industry specific plans and models for RPL have been – and are being – developed by several of the sector education and training authorities.

The industry models are developmental and include systems, instruments and tools, along with the training and registration of assessors. In some cases, they include the establishment and/or accreditation of assessment centres, and the development and management of recording systems. The study analyses cases related to Construction Education and Training Authority and the Tourism, Hospitality and Sport Training Authority.

Implementation and impact

It is difficult to gain estimates of the amount of RPL that is realized in the workplace in Australia because the recognition system does not differentiate between learning gained through formal and informal means. There are similar difficulties in estimating the uptake

in New Zealand. Although there is a centralized system for recording all credits, they do not separate credits gained through formal and informal means.

The qualifications authority in South Africa has a major task in managing the records of all qualifications held by its citizens. Therefore, it is not surprising that there is no national estimate of credits gained through the recognition of prior learning. However, the industry-based models typically include records systems that in the future will provide a strong database. Some of the industry-based pilots have initial data that suggest levels are below the targets.

In general, the experience of RPL in most countries has been that the levels of participation have not been as great as the policy and system designers anticipated. Also it has been accessed mainly by people taking higher levels of qualifications (diplomas) as opposed to people who have faced barriers in their formal education.

The barriers can be institutional, conceptual, organizational, cultural and individual. These barriers are relatively common to all countries. Conceptual and cultural bias against the recognition of prior learning is common within tertiary education, and various industry and industrial arrangements and cultures can weaken RPL. At the institutional level federated nations face clear difficulties, although Australia is something of an exception through the development of its national training system.

Impact on employability and lifelong learning

There are no usable data or credible studies that estimate the impact of RPL on learners and their subsequent capacities to gain employment and continue into formal learning. On the other hand, virtually all of the case studies indicated that the outcomes for workers were positive. Typically, they gained self-esteem and in most cases the recognition of their skills and competences was either part of, or led to, further education and training. The support given by industry authorities in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa has been based upon judgements that the RPL processes lead to skills upgrades and better platforms for further skills upgrades. Together with the support of the industry organizations and unions, they indicate that the processes do contribute to the employability of workers.

There are several examples from the case studies where RPL was introduced to address identified problems, in either the decline of the industry, or the need for the industry to address problems of quality and workforce renewal (forestry in Australia, hydro-electricity in Canada, building and construction in New Zealand). In all cases these objectives were reported to have been met.

Numerous studies indicate that the major factor that influences individuals' propensity to undertake further education and training is their previous education and training. Consequently the RPL processes can be expected to make a contribution to lifelong learning.

Factors that facilitate the implementation

A comparison of the five countries shows different histories and patterns of RPL. As indicated above, each country can lay some claim to international leadership in some aspect during some period. Therefore, it is difficult to identify a single country that displays "best practice". However, there are factors that facilitate implementation. Some of these, such as the size of a country, are difficult to manipulate, but there are others that might be considered, especially over a longer term.

In general, it can be concluded that the following factors are conducive to the development of workplace RPL:

- outcomes and competency based qualifications and qualifications systems;
- award systems that work closely with industry and enterprises and that can be implemented in the workplace;
- national qualifications frameworks that can bring advantages of common records systems, quality assurance, common language that can assist in linking provider- and work-based learning, and national leadership;
- industry training agencies that can provide leadership and support to industry;
- funding arrangements that can support RPL processes;
- active participation of the industrial parties at the central and local levels that prove critical for leadership development.

Towards a good practice model

The following points are suggested as key elements of good practice:

- RPL systems and industry- and workplace-based models need a clear purpose for implementing them;
- RPL should have clear processes that are understood and accepted by the major stakeholders;
- it is important that the key players should be fully informed and, as far as possible, supportive of the processes;
- implementation should be cost- and time-effective, while being fair;
- carefully planned and negotiated post-assessment processes are needed and should be fair and equitable;
- review processes should be representative of stakeholders.

Acronyms

ACE	American Council on Education
AOD	alcohol and other drugs
ANTA	Australian National Training Authority
APL	accreditation of prior learning
AQF	Australian Qualifications Framework
AQTF	Australian Quality Training Framework
ATA	Automotive Training Australia
CAE	College of Advanced Education
CAEL	Council of Adult Experiential Learning
CBT	competency-based training
CETA	Construction Education and Training Authority
CLEP	College Level Examination Program
COSC	Charter Oak State College
ETQA	Education and Training Quality Authority
HRDC	Human Resources Development Canada
HSI	Hospitality Standards Institute
IAP	individual assessment plan
ITO	Industry Training Organizations
NQF	national qualifications framework
NZQF	New Zealand Qualifications Authority
PLAR	Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition
RCC	Recognition of Current Competency
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
RTO	Registered Training Organization
SA NQF	South African National Qualifications Framework
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
SETA	Sector Education Training Authority
SMEs	small and medium enterprises
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
TVET	Technical Vocational Education and Training
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WPLAR	Workplace Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition Committee

Part A. RPL: Qualifications and contexts

Background

The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) has attracted renewed interest in recent years. This development has been associated with efforts in promoting lifelong learning internationally and the development of competency based qualifications or national qualifications frameworks in some countries. The objective of promoting learning has been strongly indicated by the recent EU initiative on the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

In the International Labour Office, the importance of RPL has been discussed since the International Labour Conference (ILC) in 2000. As one of the key elements of HRD practice, the discussion highlighted the importance of:

... skills learned and competencies gained, irrespective of how and where they have been learned, e.g. through formal and non-formal education and training, work experience and on-the-job learning.

and that:

Every person should have the opportunity to have (such) experiences and skills assessed, recognized and certified (ILO, 2000).

The discussion culminated, in June 2004, in the adoption of the ILO Recommendation (No. 195) on “Human Resources Development: Education, training and lifelong learning”, where the importance of “recognizing skills, including prior learning and previous experience, irrespective of the countries where they were acquired and whether acquired formally or informally” was formally spelled out.

While the present study focuses on the recognition of skills learned in the workplace, RPL initially emerged within formal education and training provision. It was part of a broader movement towards flexibility within qualifications and articulation between qualifications within tertiary education sectors. As a consequence RPL has been associated, and in some cases confused, with other forms of articulation, such as credit transfer and advanced standing. Substantial investments have been made in some countries such as Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia in provider-based RPL. The investment has been into diverse contexts and practices, and much of it has been specific to single education and training institutions. These investments were rarely into system-wide RPL processes and infrastructure for RPL at the higher or further education levels, or indeed at the secondary education level. Although these innovations have frequently been backed by system-wide policies, the funding regimes and the infrastructure for qualifications have not, overall, been conducive to provider-based RPL.

As a consequence, the realization of RPL has been limited, and returns on investments made are limited in many providers. Provider-based “systems” tend to suffer from their dependency on advocates, institutional resistance, and funding mechanisms that do not encourage the practice. To be properly implemented, RPL requires substantial investment in assessor training, procedures for assessment and validation, and records systems.

The widespread interest in human resources and the reform of national and regional technical and further education systems have increased interest in RPL. The emergence of national and regional systems approach to industry and workplace skills has offered new

opportunities for the transfer of RPL principles and practices from formal education sectors and providers to the TVET sector and the workplace. In particular, competency-based qualifications overcome many of the objections to RPL that have been expressed within the traditional education sectors and providers.

The basic principle of RPL is that learning relevant to a qualification, its components or some other formally constructed unit of learning, should be recognized irrespective of the processes and experiences through which the learning has been acquired. The processes can include formal course instruction, learning from work experience, and learning through everyday life. Within this principle the main requirements for RPL are the relevance of the learning to the qualification or its components and the means of ensuring that learning has been achieved and is of sufficient standard for the recognition to be granted.

The evolution of the concept of competence, which at least in part is based upon workplace practice and demonstrated competence, offers new opportunities for RPL. In the context of increased demand for workplace skills in both developed and developing countries (De Ferranti et al., 2003) and the agenda of lifelong learning there is a need for workers to gain recognition of their skills as a basis for further education and training, and to assist them in their employment and occupational mobility.

In virtually all countries the workplace is the main location for the formation of industrial skills, and in most cases this formation is through informal and semi-formal processes. In some cases the skills formation processes are through apprenticeship systems. However, these systems are on a significant scale only in a small number of European countries, and to a lesser extent in Australia. Therefore, work-based recognition systems offer the only viable approach to giving recognition to workers for their work-acquired skills, and for establishing platforms for further education and training. The stakes, therefore, may be significant, especially in the context of negative pressure upon investments in formal workplace training with declining industrial sectors and occupational labour markets, and a movement towards small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

As Young (2001) points out, there has been a tendency for English-speaking countries to move towards “outcomes-based” qualifications over recent decades. This compares with the mainly “process-based” qualifications in Europe. The European Union has recently taken a considerable degree of interest in the recognition of informal learning (Bjornavold, 2000). However, this comes more than a decade after the large RPL movements in North America, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and even South Africa. It is possible that this is associated with the evolution of outcomes-based qualifications in English-speaking countries and the opportunities that they appear to offer for RPL.

Several of these countries (the United Kingdom, New Zealand, South Africa and Australia) have advanced from outcomes-based qualifications towards qualifications frameworks. In some cases the frameworks institutionalize the recognition of informal and non-formal learning. It is important to consider the factors that facilitate and inhibit the implementation of RPL systems and realize the potentials of these systems.

This study examines RPL practices, **with a focus on the workplace**, in five English-speaking countries. Three (Australia, New Zealand and South Africa) have developed national systems of industry competency standards, or competency-based training (CBT) systems. The same three have developed national qualifications frameworks and “recognition” systems for CBT that do not differentiate between the learning processes. Canada also has invested in CBT. However no national system has been developed. The United States has not adopted a national TVET system, although there is a variety of examples of standards-based education and training and qualifications. The United States

also provided the first cases of the development and use of RPL in some of its universities and colleges.

It will be observed from the country studies that RPL has different locations, interpretations and practices in each of these countries. The emphasis upon the workplace varies as does its purposes and association with the formal qualifications systems. Therefore, some of the comparative questions for the study are:

- What are the purposes of RPL in each of the countries?
- What are the factors, including institutional factors that influence its use, especially in the workplace?
- How do the structure and the qualifications base of the TVET/VET (vocational education and training) sector influence the concept, policies for, and practice of RPL?
- What are the main barriers to the practice of RPL, especially in the workplace?

Methodology

This study has attempted to examine RPL in some of the largest countries in the world (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa and the United States). The countries are located at distant points in the globe and in most cases have complex economic, social and educational structures and cultures.

As a relatively small exercise, therefore, the study does not attempt to provide a profound examination of these contexts. The education and training systems are not examined in depth and the study does not include quantitative data on the realisation of recognition through RPL – if such data exists.

However, the study has gone beyond a literature review. Given the diversity and complexity of purposes, policies and systems, models and practices, it has been necessary to make contact with key RPL practitioners and policy-makers in the five countries. Three of the five have national qualifications frameworks and in two (New Zealand and South Africa) these frameworks are served by large qualifications authorities. Key personnel in these authorities were able to provide both information and access to industry organizations that deal with RPL in the workplace. Two of the countries were visited by the authors, and field work was conducted in the remaining three (including Australia).

The methodology for the study, therefore, included the following activities:

- a literature review of RPL policies, practices and outcomes;
- a literature review of country-specific RPL policies, practices and critiques;
- electronic consultations with RPL policy-makers and practitioners in South Africa and the United States, using a prepared set of questions;
- the provision of case study material by personnel in all countries;
- field visits and interviews with policy personnel and practitioners in Australia, Canada and New Zealand;
- validation of findings with relevant personnel in each of the countries.

National contexts

Of the five countries included in this study, Australia, New Zealand and the United States are English-speaking. Canada is bilingual and South Africa is multi-lingual. Each country has been prominent in the development of RPL in different ways. RPL first emerged in the United States, as did the concept of competencies (for teachers), and it continues to demonstrate RPL practices in its higher and further education sectors. Canada has provided some of the most sustained intellectual drive for RPL and continues to demonstrate widespread interest and activity in RPL and its various types (such as prior learning assessment). However, neither country has national education or training systems. Therefore, it is difficult, especially in the case of the United States, to describe any national approaches.

Australia and New Zealand have both undertaken major reforms of their vocational education and training (VET) sectors. These reforms have resulted in national VET awards and consistent national procedures and infrastructure for delivering these awards. They have also established industry sector-based training organizations and boards that provide a potential infrastructure for the development and implementation of industry-based RPL systems. In both countries the competency-based VET systems have matured to a point where there is no formal difference between RPL and the assessment procedures used for awards that are gained through normal course delivery. As a consequence, much of the industry-based literature and official guidelines relevant to RPL is in the form of generic assessment materials. For example, both the New Zealand and Australian national VET systems require assessors to be qualified against specific assessment modules (units of competency and unit standards), and the quality assurance procedures encompass assessment processes and outcomes. Because of this integration there is little public discourse on RPL in the VET sector. The authorities responsible for the respective sets of national VET qualifications have not issued guidelines for RPL: it is assumed that RPL assessments are no different to other forms of VET assessments, whether they are provider or industry-based.

South Africa is also developing a national system for VET awards and has a similar infrastructure of training organizations (sector education and training authorities). These influential bodies carry the responsibility for collecting and distributing the revenue from industry training levies. The country has placed considerable demands upon RPL in an endeavour to address the human resource needs of the nation, and to redress the lack of access to education and training that most of the population has faced in the past. As a consequence there is a number of industry-based “RPL systems” being developed and tested, and the country offers the potential for a rich array of experiences in work-based assessment and RPL practices.

Qualifications systems

National qualification frameworks have been developed in a number of countries over the past decade. English-speaking countries have provided the lead in these frameworks. The most complete models are in, although not confined to, English-speaking countries (New Zealand, Scotland, South Africa) (Young, 2003). There are also qualifications frameworks and credit frameworks (Raffe, 2003) and, in most cases, these frameworks are relatively dynamic entities.

As Young (2003) argues, these frameworks are expressions of powerful forces in education and training and they have major implications for the construct, organization and recognition of knowledge. In several cases (New Zealand, England, Scotland, Australia) the frameworks had their origins in the TVET/VET sector and the movement towards CBT. The extension of the frameworks into the general education sectors has therefore

raised tensions over the perceived imposition of concept that are inappropriate for the higher education sector in particular. Tensions have been significant in New Zealand and South Africa (Ensor, 2003). They have been averted in the United Kingdom through the development of separate higher education frameworks and in Australia by having a weak framework. It is also the case that most of the frameworks are under some tension (see QCA, 2003, for England; Department of Education/Department of Labour, 2003, for South Africa; Keating, 2003, for Australia).

The frameworks have regulatory and enabling purposes, especially in the case of Scotland. The enabling purposes include that of seamlessness, which includes credit transfer and RPL. It is apparent that RPL and qualifications frameworks have come from similar underlying concept, although by no means identical or consistent. Some critics of the frameworks argue that they restrict the constructs of learning that can be recognized within qualifications. In several of these countries (especially Australia and New Zealand) RPL has matured into broader assessment approaches that do not differentiate between learning achieved through formal, non-formal, and informal learning. In these countries the workplace is regarded as a valid location not only for learning but for assessment of learning. Indeed, within the TVET/VET sectors, assessment within the workplace is frequently preferred to provider-based assessments.

Part B. Country studies

Australia

Background

In the Australian Vocational Education and Training sector, the definition of RPL has been refined since the introduction of RPL to take into account the transition to a competency-based training system and the introduction of a national qualifications framework. The Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) definition is:

... recognition of competencies currently held, regardless of how, when or where the learning has occurred. Under the Australian Quality Training Framework, competencies can be attained in a number of ways. This includes through any combination of formal and informal training and education, work experiences or general life experience. In order to grant RPL, the assessor must be confident that the candidate is currently confident against the endorsed industry or enterprise competency standards or outcomes specified in the Australian Qualifications Framework accredited courses. The evidence may take a variety of forms and could include certification, references from past employers, testimonials from clients and work samples. The assessor must ensure that the evidence is authentic, valid, reliable, current and sufficient (ANTA, 2001a: 9).

This definition characterizes RPL as an umbrella term that takes into account credit transfer, experiential and non-formal learning. The protocols governing the implementation of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) ensure that a form of automatic credit is available to students who have already achieved competence in part of a qualification at another training organization. This process is called Mutual Recognition (ANTA, 2001b), and can be dealt with separately to the RPL assessment process.

RPL is an important element of the AQF, and its function in the VET sector is to assist learners to move through qualification levels. It is also a feature of the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF), the quality system to which all providers of accredited training in VET must adhere. In the VET sector, AQTF standards for both public and private providers require these organizations to provide information to students before enrolment, and for them to have a RPL process in place. Training staff are also required to be informed of VET requirements upon enrolment and to be trained in assessment, a component of which is RPL. The AQTF was introduced in mid-2002 and there has been little written on whether the introduction of these standards has had an effect on the take-up of RPL and on the quality of RPL assessments (ANTA, 2001a).

In Australia, RPL developed from a project at the Ford Motor Company, which was designed to provide a mechanism that linked company-based training with accredited programmes. The impetus of its development was the movement in Australia in the 1990s towards award restructuring, an attempt to rationalize Australian industry so that it became more internationally competitive, with a more flexible, highly skilled and therefore productive workforce. Central to award restructuring was the breaking down of narrow job classifications, and the broadening of workers' skills, leading to the development of new career paths. RPL provided a means of recognizing skills developed on the job against the outcomes of accredited training programmes. In addition to facilitating the recognition of workplace skills against the outcomes of training courses, the initial RPL model was designed also to provide opportunities for people wanting to re-skill, for older workers to have their skills recognized for employment purposes and for women returning to study who were seeking to have skills they had developed informally, formally recognized (Davis and Brown, 1990; Brown, 1992; DEET, 1992). In 1992, there was national

agreement that RPL was beneficial to people in the workforce who had developed skills through learning on the job, as well as to people from disadvantaged groups, who had little access to traditional methods of education and training. The National Framework for the Recognition of Training, signed by State and Territory ministers, emphasized the requirement that RPL be one of the cornerstones of a national training system (Kenyon, 1996).

Potential benefits of RPL in Australia can be identified for individuals, educational institutions, workplaces, unions and Government. These benefits include reduction of costs and better use of training resources for individuals, enterprises, educational institutions and Government by avoiding duplication of training effort; to develop career paths for workers and to increase their access to better remuneration; to better place workers into employment; to develop processes that are student-centred; to assist with the integration of on and off the job assessment; to provide access to education and training for disadvantaged learners and to facilitate lifelong learning by providing access to learning pathways (Davis and Brown, 1990; Wheelahan, 2002).

The RPL processes used in Australia reflect that RPL is just good assessment practice. The national assessment principles that apply to assessment as part of training programmes apply equally to RPL. These principles, which are the basis for assessment against all accredited VET qualifications, include a requirement that all assessment processes are valid, reliable, flexible and fair. There are no mandated approaches regarding how RPL should take place: RPL assessors are encouraged to use a range of assessment methods in order to recognize prior learning (ANTA, 1999). However, there are some common elements to RPL processes used, and these elements reflect good practice in assessment, generally. They are the provision of information about RPL and the benchmark for the assessment; self-assessment against the benchmark; the collection of evidence to support the RPL application; assessment (this could include a combination of a number of assessment methods including demonstration, presentation of a portfolio, questioning, third party evidence, and so on); decision-making and review (Davis and Dyson, 1994).

There is some support for the argument that RPL should not be viewed differently from other forms of assessment. It is argued that RPL was initially introduced as a way of redressing the focus of the more traditional methods of assessment (that is, whether the course content has been learnt rather than whether competence is established) but now that the CBT system has matured, it is illogical to separate RPL from other assessment processes (Bateman, 2003). Detractors of this approach suggest that while RPL is indeed an assessment process, a special case can be made for treating it separately, based on the argument that candidates for RPL require a higher level of support than those involved in traditional CBT assessment processes and that, if not treated separately, RPL will not be adequately promoted (Wheelahan, 2002).

The national assessment principles state that RPL is offered to all potential applicants, and that RPL processes are fair and provide support to applicants. The requirement to offer RPL to all potential applicants is also enshrined in the AQTF Standards for organizations that offer accredited training. These standards also establish a requirement that training organizations have assessment systems in place. These systems are required to use qualified assessors, have robust administrative systems and institute processes to ensure that assessment systems and processes are developed in consultation with industry (ANTA, 2001a). Thus there is considerable commitment to the principle of RPL in policy documents and guidelines; however, the take-up of RPL in Australia is considered by some to be low. While there are national requirements for RPL to be implemented, the manner in which these determinations are carried out varies between industry areas, types of providers and across age groups (Wheelahan, 2002).

In Australia, RPL is viewed both as a process and an outcome. An individual can engage in an RPL process as a means of self-exploration and discovery: the process is an end in itself. It can also be an outcome of an assessment process, leading to certification. This is not say that these two approaches are mutually exclusive; rather that the RPL approach used will depend on the emphasis that the organization assessing prior learning will place upon the process. Thus in the Australian VET sector greater emphasis is placed on assessing competence against industry-developed competency standards: the emphasis is on building credentials. In the adult and community and further education sector in the same country, however, RPL is more commonly used to encourage an individual to reflect upon their learning in a move to increase confidence and direction (White, 1995; Wheelahan, 2002). RPL is also a pathway within a qualifications framework, or an element within a pathway: a mechanism for building a qualification.

Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF)

In its formative years RPL was used to recognize competency against a variety of benchmarks, including learning outcomes of courses, position descriptions, skills sets, and so on (Davis and Delaney, 1990). With the introduction of competency-based training and the later introduction of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), RPL assessments are now used almost exclusively for assessment against competency standards. Competency standards are developed with considerable industry input, and describe the skills, knowledge and attributes required for effective performance in the workplace. Competency standards are combined to form the vocational qualifications within the AQF, which is a unified system of twelve national qualifications in schools, vocational education and training and the higher education sector. These qualifications range from Certificate I to Doctoral Degree level, with six VET qualifications available in the framework. The AQF aims to:

- provide nationally consistent recognition of outcomes achieved in post-compulsory education;
- help with developing flexible pathways which assist people to move more easily between education and training sectors and between those sectors and the labour market by providing the basis for recognition of prior learning, including credit transfer and work and life experience;
- integrate and streamline the requirements of participating providers, employers and employees, individuals and interested organizations;
- offer flexibility to suit the diversity of purposes of education and training;
- encourage individuals to progress through the levels of education and training by improving access to qualifications, clearly defining avenues for achievement, and generally contributing to lifelong learning;
- encourage the provision of more and higher quality vocational education and training through qualifications that normally meet workplace requirements and vocational needs, thus contributing to national economic performance; and
- promote national and international recognition of qualifications offered in Australia (White, 1995; AQF Advisory Board, 2002).

The outcomes-based focus of the AQF, and the emphasis on linkages between qualifications increases the capacity of the system to support RPL. Under the AQF, providers of accredited training can be in an industry setting, a community setting, in public or private providers. These sectors can also work together in partnerships to provide

training and assessment. The mechanisms in place under the AQTF and in the rules that guide the packaging and assessment of qualifications have been developed to promote quality assurance across the VET system.

Implementation of RPL

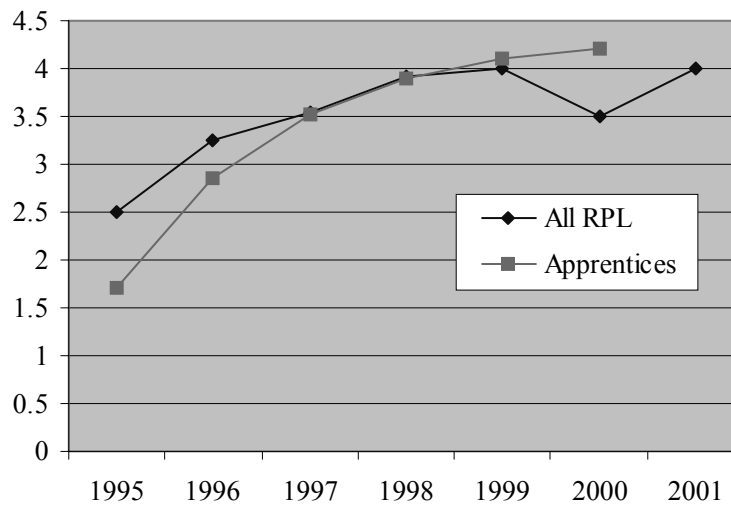
RPL has been a feature of the VET sector in Australia since the late 1980's. While market research conducted by the ANTA found that RPL was an attractive option for individuals in terms, reported take-up of RPL in Australia is low. Implementation across States and Territories and across industry areas has been uneven. The Australian experience tells us that the majority of RPL applications in VET are for qualifications at the higher levels of the AQF, and that access to RPL for indigenous Australians is limited, although people from non-English-speaking backgrounds and people with disabilities receive similar amounts of RPL as mainstream students. Available data indicates that the potential for RPL is not fully realized, both in the numbers of people who apply for RPL as well as the amount of RPL granted to those who do go through the RPL process. However, RPL is not consistently reported as not all providers are required to report on the amount of RPL activity, and some view RPL to be included in normal assessment practice (Ryan and Watson, 2001; Wheelahan, 2002; ANTA, 2003; Bateman, 2003).

Factors that limit take-up in the Australian context relate to promotion of RPL, cost, and attitudes of staff, students and employers to RPL. While higher education providers have policies and procedures on RPL, staff awareness of RPL processes is inconsistent across these providers, with staff who have a VET background appearing, generally, to be better informed than their colleagues. It seems also to be the case in some higher education providers where staff know that RPL is available to students, that they do not know enough about the process to pass the message on to students in a useful manner or to actively promote it (Ryan and Watson, 2001). There is some resistance to RPL in academic institutions, particularly universities. In the early days of the implementation of RPL, academics were not always accepting of the idea that a candidate for RPL could have developed the skills, knowledge and attributes through life or work experience or by completing courses at another institution that it would take them three or four years to develop in a university. Educational institutions that have no difficulty in filling their enrolments still resist the notion of RPL. Change to these attitudes came about where there is increased competition for students and where government policies have led to funding incentives directed to broadening access to education (Evans, 2000).

In Australia in 2000 RPL activities represented 2.5 per cent of total VET "collection hours" compared with 3.7 per cent for credit transfer (Bowman et al., 2003). Collection hours are equivalent to total credit given. The proportion of students who have gained some credit from RPL has risen from 2.4 per cent in 1995 to 4.0 per cent in 2001. There are slightly more women than men gaining this recognition. This has been concentrated at the higher levels, especially the diploma levels, and is almost non-existent at the basic level – Certificate I. RPL amongst equity groups has been relatively low.

It is difficult to gain estimates of the amount of RPL that is realized in the workplace in Australia because the recognition system does not differentiate between learning gained through formal and informal means. Thus a company may or may not provide training that leads to its workers gaining recognition against a nationally recognized qualification. However, one indication of a trend is the number of apprentices that have benefited from RPL.

Figure 1: Levels of RPL for all students and apprentices (percentage of collection hours), Australia, 1995-2001



Source: Bowman et al., 2003.

Figure 1 indicates that the percentage of apprentices gaining RPL has increased over a five-year period to a level above that for all RPL. Bowman et al. speculate that this may be due to the older age of apprentices and the fact that they have more work experience and skills that can be recognized through RPL. If this were the case then it would suggest that RPL in the workplace (or Recognition of Current Competency (RCC)) could be significant and represent a higher proportion of recognition than RPL within providers.

Bowman et al., 2003, have identified compliance with the quality assurance requirements for VET awards and an ongoing interest in meeting access and equity obligations as the major reason for providers' interest in recognition of prior learning. Industry has expressed a desire to offer RPL as a means of identifying skills gaps and to avoid unnecessary training through recognition of current skills gained on-the-job.

The cost of RPL has been identified as having some impact upon its take-up of RPL. Unreasonable RPL costs may affect whether an individual applies for RPL, especially where training costs are not significant (Ryan and Watson, 2001). The cost of RPL varies markedly between institutions, a reflection of local policy and commitment to vigorously implementing RPL. Funding models may also have an impact on how actively RPL is promoted to students and how many barriers are raised to students wanting to be assessed. That is, where an institution is not funded to conduct RPL assessments, this may serve as a disincentive to assessors and their managers.

RPL has a negative image amongst some practitioners because the formal training experience is seen as a superior process to that of learning through life and work experience. Some teachers and trainers consider RPL to be difficult, time-consuming and not part of their key function, while others acknowledge that carrying out RPL assessments gives them a useful insight to industry practice and acts as an incentive for learners (DET, 2001; Ryan and Watson, 2001). There is some evidence to show that students undervalue the learning that they have acquired, and are unable to recognize that it could earn them credit towards a qualification (Ryan and Watson, 2001).

If RPL is carried out at the workplace, individuals are less likely to have to bear the cost for assessment. However, other factors such as wanting to participate in training as part of the workgroup may affect take-up. At the workplace, RPL can be a useful tool,

when applied to a cohort of workers, to assist with training needs' analyses and the provision of customized training. Some studies of RPL at the workplace indicate that employers feel that they could make better use of RPL (Ryan and Watson, 2001).

The incentives for educational institutions to offer RPL will influence the commitment of the institution to its implementation. Universities cannot charge current or potential undergraduate students for RPL although post-graduate students can be charged a fee (Ryan, 2001). In the VET sector, some RPL is funded, depending on the type of provider and the type of training offered. Mutual recognition (automatic credit gained where a student has achieved competency in a unit of competency/qualification elsewhere) attracts no funding.

There is some pressure for more extensive implementation for RPL in Australia, particularly amongst disadvantaged groups of students (ANTA, 2003).

RPL and indigenous peoples

Where data was available in the VET sector, the take-up of RPL in Australia by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is lower than that of other students. This might be because these students tend to study at lower qualification levels in VET where there are fewer RPL applications. Another very strong influence on this low take-up rate is that indigenous students lose their Abstudy² allowance if they cease to become full-time students: where providers cannot offer alternative units to students who receive RPL, these students lose their livelihood. One provider of adult aboriginal education commented that many students refuse RPL where it is clear that they already have highly developed skills in the area of study they are enrolled in. The provider explained that RPL is taken up more readily by indigenous students where they are participating in workplace-based programmes, where employers wish to save time and where RPL candidates are employed and therefore will not lose benefits.

Other barriers to the use of RPL by indigenous Australians include a reluctance by individuals, especially from remote communities, to set themselves apart from their community and risk becoming detached from their cultural roots. The need to implement RPL processes that take into account the traditional systems of acknowledgement, passing on of knowledge, assessment and validation is central to the promotion of RPL in these communities. In addition, there is a need to provide culturally appropriate support in RPL assessments (such as the use of Elders³ to speak on behalf of the applicant, and the use of indigenous RPL assessors) and to provide assessment processes such as collective recognition, which acknowledge cultural values (NFAECG, 1995; Young Directions, 2002).

Industry-based RPL

RPL has the potential to be part of a strategy to increase the overall skills base in an organization or industry. It can be used to conduct a skills audit, as the basis for developing targeted training. It can assist organizations to recognize existing skills against the requirements of industry awards and national qualifications and it can also be used as a

² Abstudy (Aboriginal Study) is a Federal Government funded scheme to support indigenous students in their studies.

³ Aboriginal elders are the leaders in their communities.

mechanism for preparing workers to find other employment or enter training when organizations downsize.

As illustrated in the examples of industry sector models in part B of this report, enterprises can work with registered providers of accredited training or they can work independently, as long as they are registered training providers themselves.

The advantages of providing customized RPL approaches to industry are that the validity of the assessment is increased, that there is less disruption to the enterprise, that information about RPL and the process itself can be more meaningfully tailored to the enterprise and that evidence of competency is often easier to access.

Examples of industry sector models

Worker assistance programme – Forestry industry

This project is funded by the state government of Victoria and supported by the Construction Forestry Mining and Engineering Union and Forest and Forest Products Employment Skills Council. The state government's "Our Forests, Our Future" policy statement was developed in response to community pressure to reduce the size of the native timber industry. The Worker Assistance Programme, aimed to assist workers displaced from the industry, was instigated in 2002. It provides funds for relocation assistance for forestry workers, an employment incentive scheme and opportunities for retraining in addition to other benefits. One of its features is the assessment of the skills that workers have developed at the workplace in order to provide them with a skills passbook to present to prospective employers.

Sawmill workers and associated personnel are assessed. These workers are drawn from the range of occupations, from operatives on the mill floor to those working in offices at the mill. They include a cohort of mature aged workers (over 55 years), many of whom have worked in the industry for most of their lives, as did their fathers and grandfathers.

Workers are assessed against any benchmark that is relevant to their experience. Primarily, they are assessed against the competency standards in the Forestry Training Package,⁴ but workers have been assessed against the competencies in the Business Services Training Package and against heavy machinery competency standards, amongst others.

A local Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institute carries out the assessments. Qualified assessors are provided for each competency area. The advantage of using a TAFE institute is that there is a large pool of qualified assessors to draw from.

Five hundred people have been made redundant to date. Ninety-five per cent of these people have gone through the recognition process. Of these 8 per cent have entered further training and 67 per cent have found employment. Some workers have retired (7 per cent), others are not actively seeking employment (4 per cent) and others are receiving workers' compensation due to illness or disability.

⁴ Training Packages in Australia consist of units of competency that are packaged into VET qualifications. They have been nationally developed, through industry bodies, and are accepted by all of the states and territories and the industry parties as the basis for VET courses and qualifications.

While there is a substantial amount of discontent amongst workers because of forced redundancies, this has not served as a barrier to assessment. Workers are generally highly motivated to have skills recognized in order to find employment. Many in the group of workers have not engaged in training or assessment since they left school. In addition, literacy levels are generally fairly low, as most of the candidates for recognition left school before year 10. Given that the assessment process relies primarily on observation and oral questioning, and that it is carried out by assessors who have experience in the industry, these potential barriers are overcome.

The assessment process is a “Rolls-Royce” version of RPL. Assessors work in pairs, staying at the workplace until the process is complete. There is no formal application process. Instead, workers talk to assessors about their experience and an individual profile is developed. The assessors then match this profile with competency standards from relevant Training Packages, before going on to assess the workers against these competency standards. Workers can be assessed against competency standards from more than one Training Package, thus providing them with a greater number of employment or training pathways.

RPL in the Workers Assistance Programme is tailored to each individual candidate, and each person is given the amount of support they need to have their skills recognized. Assessors understand the context for assessment and because of this can allay any anxieties the candidates might have about the RPL process.

Sydney Opera House – Arts and Entertainment

The Sydney Opera House is Australia’s pre-eminent Performing Arts Centre, comprising five venues, which present opera, ballet, dance, theatre, symphony, concerts and contemporary performance. It is also a world-renowned architectural site and a tourist icon for Australia.

Staff employed by the Sydney Opera House work in a wide range of roles. These include producing shows, event management, theatre technical support roles (staging, lighting, sound/AV), customer service (ushering, sale of tickets, conducting tours for visitors), working with retail, food and beverage providers, maintenance and facilities work, security management, as well as financial and corporate functions.

The introduction of the Entertainment Training Package in 1999 provided nationally accredited qualifications to this industry for the first time. Many of the staff have been employed at the Sydney Opera House and in other organizations in the entertainment industry for many years. For these experienced staff, the opportunity to have their experience assessed and to attain a national qualification was important recognition of their expertise. RPL is therefore used to credential existing workers who meet the national competency standards.

The Sydney Opera House became a Registered Training Organization (RTO) primarily with a view to implementing the Entertainment Training Package. The national competency standards are also used as a benchmark for the provision of training. As a live performing arts centre of considerable size and complexity, the experiences gained here are superior to those that could be provided in a training-only environment.

Staff that were assessed in the RPL process were experienced in two main areas: theatre technical services and customer services. These work roles are covered under the Entertainment Training Package and qualifications are available that are relevant to the workplace.

Sydney Opera House staff have been trained as qualified assessors. Assessors sometimes work together to ensure they have expertise both in the vocational area (for example, staging) as well as expertise in how to conduct assessments.

The Sydney Opera House is committed to the provision and ongoing professional development of trained assessors. This is carried out as an RTO function through its assessors network. All of the Sydney Opera House workplace trainers and assessors belong to this network. In addition, trainers and assessors from other entertainment or training organizations with whom they work collaboratively are included.

In 2003 a focus of the professional development for this network was around holistic recognition and assessment. This was introduced to move away from unit by unit assessments, which are often difficult, repetitive and time consuming. Holistic assessment enables an assessment to address a number of related units simultaneously.

The national competency standards as outlined in the Entertainment Training Package are the benchmarks used for the assessments. The Entertainment Training Package comprises units of national competency standards as well as guidelines as to how they can be selected and packaged to meet the requirements of a national qualification.

Since the Sydney Opera House has become an RTO approximately 40 qualifications have been issued as an outcome of a recognition assessment.

Many of this group of people have extensive work experience but have not been involved in formal education for many years. Some members of this group lack confidence in their ability to meet educational requirements and to attain a formal qualification. In addition, the nature of the work in which they have been engaged poses challenges in identifying and locating appropriate evidence to substantiate claims for competency.

The assessment process used for recognition provides lots of additional support for applicants. This includes an initial briefing session, which clearly explains the process and checks that applicants are comfortable with the process. There are concise and clear applicant guidelines, the allocation of helpers or support people to assist applicants to prepare, and the use of holistic assessment methods, which focus on the real life work examples of applicants.

The RPL process used included comprehensive briefing of personnel through workshops conducted by vocational and assessment experts. The briefing session involves clarifying the purpose of assessment, provision of information about the competency standards and guidance on self-assessment and collection of evidence. The workshop then explores each cluster of competency standards and assists participants to identify appropriate examples or “stories of practice” which should enable them to meet the requirements of the selected units of competency. Participants also identify and get feedback on the types of workplace experiences that should relate to the units of competency or clusters (those that are complex, demonstrate richness of learning, are challenging, and where they are proud of their achievements).

After application, additional advice or support is provided as applicants complete their application and prepare for their assessment. In addition, a helper can be assigned from the workshop/briefing session.

The assessment focuses on the actual “stories of practice” in the first instance. Reflection points are built into the process where applicant and assessor can review the units of competency and consider the examples from work to identify where further exploration is required. Additional probe questions or scenarios are discussed if necessary to further explore aspects of the units of competency. Immediate feedback and

involvement in the decision-making is promoted to participants: sometimes the assessors need extra time to review the evidence, sometimes they are able to discuss their decision immediately and advise the applicant of the outcome. An appeals process is available to all participants.

The focus in the assessment is on the actual work experience or “stories of practice”. The intention of a competency-based system is to demonstrate competence in the workplace, and the process of discussing their examples in depth affirms the intent of the system.

The holistic approach is inclusive of workers’ experiences, fine-tunes the selection of appropriate evidence, and facilitates applicants to seek recognition. Features include the concise application form, briefing session, the comprehensive support provided to participants and timing of the recognition to fit in with work schedules.

Automotive Training Australia – Bicycle mechanics

Automotive Training Australia (ATA) is an assessment-only RTO that has undertaken a skills recognition process within the bicycle industry. “Industry” in this context is bicycle shops that sell and service bicycles. Qualifications relating to bicycle mechanics and salespeople are available, but there were few opportunities for people in these jobs to gain these qualifications. It is not economically viable for TAFE Institutes to offer courses for this group as the numbers of people that need training are few, and prospective participants are scattered around the state of Victoria (one of the eight Australian states and territories).

ATA auspices a recognition process that provides for the recognition of the knowledge and skills of workers against nationally recognized qualifications in the bicycle sector, and promotes it to the industry as a way to improve the quality of work which specialty bicycle shops use as a marketing tool. This is a way of competing with larger department stores.

ATA identified approximately 70 workers who wanted to complete the Certificates III in Bicycle Mechanics/Bicycle Sales, and employers have accessed New Apprenticeship arrangements as a means of funding the costs of assessment for about 70 per cent of these people. The employer receives Federal Government New Apprenticeship incentives for entering their employee into a New Apprenticeship. This assists in paying for the assessment process. It also assists in funding separate fee for service training such as workplace based development and workshops and seminars. People identified for training were generally quite experienced and well advanced towards meeting the competencies within the qualifications.

Qualified assessors who are registered with ATA conduct the Recognition of Current Competence (RCC – an alternative term for Recognition of Prior Learning) assessments, using a standard RCC assessment process. The assessors visit the participants at the workplace, brief them about RCC and the competency standards and assess them drawing on a range of evidence. Where participants do not have access to the required equipment, it is organized for them to visit other bicycle shops for purposes of assessment. The advantage of assessment at the workplace is that demonstration of skills is facilitated and there is easy access to verification of competence by employers. In addition, it minimizes the disruption to businesses and their daily operations with assessment and training being conducted on the job.

Alcohol and Other Drugs Workforce (Australia)

Since the introduction of the Victorian Drug Treatment Service framework in 1997, the alcohol and drug specialist service system has continued to grow and expand.

There are some 80 drug treatment agencies receiving state government funding to deliver a range of treatment types across the state of Victoria. Treatment gaps have been identified and new programmes developed in response. In order for the government's drug policy objectives to be achieved in an ongoing, managed and economical fashion, a substantial investment needed to be made to ensure that suitable workers are attracted to the drug and alcohol area and are able to see a career pathway within the service.

One-quarter of drug and alcohol workers who responded to a survey in 2000 indicated that they have no tertiary qualifications, and 15 per cent did not complete secondary school (DTSU, 2000). Prior to the RCC project there was no formal education or training qualification requirement for alcohol and drug workers. The current workforce is made up of highly experienced workers, the majority of whom hold tertiary qualifications but not specifically in alcohol and other drugs (AOD), who need now to become qualified and accepted as alcohol and drug professionals.

The Alcohol and Other Drugs Workforce Development Programme commenced in December 2001. This programme was initially funded under the Victorian Government Drug Initiative following recommendations by the Drug Policy Expert Committee (DPEC).

The DPEC recommendations included "professionalization" of the AOD field and to provide opportunities that enable workers to become recognized as qualified health professionals. The primary aim of the workforce development programme is to facilitate, professionalize and sustain the AOD workforce.

One response to the above recommendation was to identify a minimum qualification standard to be introduced from 1 July 2006. The standard indicates that workers require specific AOD qualifications at a minimum qualification of Certificate IV Alcohol and Drug Worker or if holding health, behavioural or social science degrees, a minimum number of AOD specific competencies.

In order to assist the workforce of approximately 800 equivalent full-time workers to meet the above minimum standard, the state government of Victoria invested in a Recognition of Current Competency project that was conducted by a registered training organization.

RCC/RPL was offered to all workers to assist them achieve the required minimum qualification standard. There were initially over 800 responses with 623 workers being eligible to participate. Over the 12 months of the project, 341 of the workers withdrew from the process and 283 completed the RCC process and achieving either a Diploma in Alcohol and Other Drugs Work, a Certificate IV in Alcohol and Other Drugs Work or a statement of attainment for the units of competency that they completed.

Workers were assisted to develop an individual assessment plan (IAP) that encouraged them to identify the Units of Competency from the Alcohol and Drugs Training Package for which they believed they could provide evidence of competency.

Workers were supported to develop a portfolio of evidence against the Units of Competency, their IAP and any existing relevant qualifications. Assessments were

undertaken in the workplace, taking into account evidence collected through workplace audit, job description audit and job role audit. Assessment was conducted in line with ANTA assessment guidelines and the process included briefing of participants, self-assessment, collection of evidence and included an appeals process. Two hundred and eighty-three people completed the process.

Factors that had the greatest impact on the success of the project were the amount of support from employers, the extent to which clear information about RCC/RPL was provided and the level of worker commitment to the RCC/RPL process and its outcomes.

Conclusion

There is considerable support at the national level for the implementation of RPL in Australia. The AQF, the AQTF and the assessment guidelines that underpin Training Packages all promote the take-up of RPL.

These benefits include the reduction of costs and the better use of training resources for individuals, enterprises, educational institutions and government by avoiding duplication of training effort; to develop career paths for workers and to increase their access to better remuneration; to better place workers into employment; to develop processes that are student-centred; to assist with the integration of on and off-the-job assessment; to provide access to education and training for disadvantaged learners and to facilitate lifelong learning by providing access to learning pathways. While these policies require training organizations to implement RPL, the quality of the RPL processes offered rests on the commitment to RPL at a local level.

A range of practical and philosophical factors influence the take-up of RPL in the Higher Education and VET sectors. In industry, where RPL processes are viewed as part of an assessment process to assist in determining training needs, these factors have less of an impact. Instead, using RPL is a business decision. Partnerships between industry and training providers and the registration of enterprises as training providers assist in the development of RPL processes that meet the needs of industry.

South Africa

Background

RPL in South Africa is closely associated with broad education, training and industrial strategies in the post-apartheid era. One consequence of apartheid has been an underdeveloped human capital supply (Bird, 2003) and large gaps in income that are associated with levels of education and training. As a consequence there has been a major drive for investment in adult education and training, including the establishment of a national training system and a national qualifications framework. The huge economic and social development needs combined with the legacy of social and economic exclusion of the apartheid era require the country to find ways of more rapidly widening access to education and training. RPL is seen as one of the means of achieving this.

The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) policy document (SAQA, 2003a) defines RPL in the following manner:

Recognition of prior learning means the comparison of the previous learning and experience of a learner howsoever obtained against the learning outcomes required for a specified qualification, and the acceptance for the purposes of qualification of that which meets the requirements.

RPL is formally recognized through the national qualifications framework (NQF) and the SAQA as a means of:

- facilitating access to, and mobility and progression within education, training and career paths. Target groups may be, for example, under-qualified adult learners seeking to upgrade their qualifications, or learners seeking to enter tertiary education through non-traditional routes. In general, these groups will be seeking recognition against higher level qualifications;
- accelerating the redress of past unfair discrimination, training and employment opportunities. Target groups supported through this objective will more typically be workers on the shop floor or unemployed.

The nature of the RPL processes is likely to be different for these two groups. However, the same quality principles and, to a large extent, procedures apply to them. Therefore, there is a degree of tension between two principal objectives within the NQF: the regulatory aspect of quality assurance of qualifications and the enabling or liberating aspects of broadening access and redressing disadvantage. There are two aspects of RPL in South Africa that appear to reflect and are designed to manage these tensions. First, the SAQA policy notes that there is no fundamental difference in the assessment of previously acquired skills and knowledge and the assessment of skills and knowledge acquired through current learning programmes. Second, RPL is being introduced in a developmental and incremental manner.

The various documents on RPL (those of the SAQA and the industry sector education and training authorities) also cite a wide range of benefits of RPL. They include those for:

- the individual, such as recognition for employment and work purposes, access to formal learning, saving of time and costs in formal learning, motivation for continued or lifelong learning, and personal outcomes of confidence and self esteem;
- employers, such as a better qualified workforce for training, workforce deployment, quality and efficiency, and investment purposes;
- the country, including a reduction in costs of education and training, access of the population to education and training, lifelong learning, and social objectives of the redress of barriers and disadvantage;
- providers, including the opening up of markets for assessment and for education and training.

The SAQA RPL policy makes the point that:

RPL in South Africa has, unlike similar initiatives in other countries, a very specific agenda. RPL is meant to support transformation of the education and training system of the country. This calls for an approach to the development of RPL policy and practices that explicitly addresses the visible and invisible barriers to learning and assessment (SAQA, 2002a, p11).

Therefore, on the one hand the concept and management of RPL in South Africa is relatively standardized and centralized. On the other it does recognize that one size does not fit all and that providers will have different strategies in implementing RPL for different client groups. The SAQA (2003b) has issued *Guidelines for the Implementation of the Recognition of Prior Learning* which are more detailed than any equivalent document issued in most other countries. The guidelines indicate relatively common stages for RPL incorporating pre-assessment, assessment, moderation, feedback and award.

These stages are generic, and the guidelines are essentially developmental, with an emphasis upon capacity building of resources and staff, including the development and moderation of assessment instruments and tools, and quality management systems and procedures. The Guidelines locate the authority for quality assurance with Education and Training Quality Authorities (ETQAs) that are accredited by the SAQA. The majority of these authorities are industry Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs), and much of the developmental activity in RPL in South Africa is located with them.

The Guidelines emphasize a holistic approach to RPL and the assessment process, which recognizes the different contexts and clients for RPL. In addition, it puts forward an approach to the development of assessment methodologies, which is cognizant of an integrated approach to the assessment and recognition of prior learning within an outcomes-based paradigm.

As well, RPL is regarded as a developmental tool more broadly in education and training in South Africa. It has been formulated following the establishment of democratic government and an explicit agenda of nation building and social inclusion. These principles have informed clear principles and an agenda for education and training that underpin RPL. Thus RPL can be used to examine historical rigidities and barriers that might continue to exist in education and training particularly regarding the inclusion in curricula of knowledge and knowledge systems that traditionally fall outside formally recognized academic discourses.

As mentioned, the SAQA has issued a detailed policy document (SAQA, 2003a) and criteria and guidelines for the implementation of RPL (SAQA, 2003b). This contrasts with most other countries that have relatively open definitions of RPL (or similar concepts – Prior Learning Assessment, Assessment of Prior Learning, Recognition of Current Competency) and have not developed common procedures for its implementation, especially within the tertiary education sectors. On the other hand, several countries (New Zealand and Australia) have established standards, qualifications and procedures for assessments within their technical and vocational education and training sectors, and have assumed that these assessment “systems” should apply equally to assessments for learning gained through formal and informal means.

It is the case, however, that RPL is subjected to demands and expectations in South Africa that are not as prominent in other countries, and possibly in greater tension than in other countries. The country has a mixture of a relatively mature and academic education and training “system”, with high status and standard tertiary institutions, policies and investments to broaden education and training, and a proliferation of private training providers of variable standards. It also has a sophisticated industrial and technological economy alongside a large informal sector, and a history of economic and social exclusion that the country is attempting to rectify. There also is an urgent national economic agenda towards which education and training are regarded as key contributors. Consequently within education and training there is a “greater emphasis upon social goals” (Harris, 2000, p58), but this is alongside the needs of industry and the need for quality assurance. Consequently, the NQF is seen as “*the vehicle for reconfiguring the nature of epistemology and pedagogy*” (Harris 2000, p58), a demand that goes beyond those made of other national qualifications frameworks.

The SAQA and its qualifications framework arguably is the most active theatre for debates about definition of knowledge of all of the national qualifications frameworks (Young, 2003). Harris (2000) notes, for example, that “*RPL recipients may come from traditions of learning which are not based on western, Enlightenment principles of detachment*” (p. 63). The 12 fields and their sub-fields of learning within the NQF integrate traditional vocational and general areas, and the standards development process is undertaken by groups (National Standards Bodies) that are representative of industry,

education and social interests. This compares with standards development for vocational qualifications in countries such as the United Kingdom, Mexico and Australia where they are based on observations of workplace practices and undertaken by groups representative of industry only. As Harris notes, the objective within the NQF is to take account of the person as a social being as well as an economic being. Unlike other countries with national qualifications frameworks (with the partial exception of Mexico) South Africa has potential candidates for RPL who *“have had their experience and hence possible learning constructed under very particular and disadvantaged conditions”*. This clearly would include workers who entered the workforce prior to the post-apartheid era and who had little opportunity for formal education and training.

This combination of demands has led to RPL being seen as a more important investment than in almost any other country. At once RPL offers the potential for reducing the costs of delivering education and training and thus widening access, and of redressing previous and continuing disadvantage. These purposes are within a policy context that makes education a priority for social and economic purposes. The learner orientation of RPL leads to the centrality of the engagement of the learner or candidate with the assessment and recognition processes. As can be seen with the industry models, therefore, there is a strong emphasis upon interactive relationships between the candidate and the institutional arrangements for recognition. The models attempt to reconcile learner centredness, negotiated procedures, and flexible assessments with rigorous standards and quality assurance systems for recognition.

To an extent this has been attempted through the set of relationships between the workplace, the SETAs and the SAQF, and the respective roles of RPL advisers, assessors and moderators. As several of the industry-based models indicate, this has implications for costs and the particular challenge is to educate all of the participants and stakeholders in the concept and requirements of RPL and get sufficient numbers of candidates to achieve economies of scale.

National qualifications framework

RPL is to be conducted against the purpose and exit level outcomes of qualifications and/or against unit standards as the constituent parts of qualifications. Unit standards are part of the extensive set of developments surrounding the national qualifications framework (NQF). The NQF is a framework on which standards and qualifications, agreed to by education and training stakeholders throughout the country, are registered. It has been informed by some international developments, especially those in Scotland and New Zealand and has been described in terms of “transforming the country” in the post-apartheid era. It has multiple purposes, including:

- the integration of the different sectors and an integrative approach to theory and practice in learning programmes;
- supporting better access into and progression within education and training;
- improving quality; and
- improving opportunities for the disadvantaged, and the social and economic development of the country.

There is a very strong agenda of incorporating all learning into 12 broad learning fields and sub-fields to facilitate the establishment of learning pathways and to aid progression and portability of learning within different contexts. In addition, education and training delivery in South Africa is characterized by both private and public provision. Hence there is a strong quality assurance agenda, and an attempt to have all quality

qualifications accredited within the framework. This framework is currently under review and is likely to be changed quite radically and will probably be extended to 10 levels. Two “types” of qualifications are registered on the national qualifications framework. Unit standard-based qualifications are made up of national unit standards, which are located at levels within the framework, and have volume defined by nominal learning time. Non-unit standards-based qualifications are described in terms of exit level outcomes and are also credit-based, but are not defined in terms of unit standards (many of these qualifications however make use of stand-alone unit standards as part of the overall outcomes of the qualifications). They provide the currency for the national qualifications system, and for RPL systems.

The typical criticism of the unit standards-based approach that has been adopted in South Africa and New Zealand is that they are restrictive in the range and concept of knowledge that they recognize. On the other hand the “outcomes-based” qualifications that are a feature of countries such as South Africa, New Zealand and Australia provide greater capacity for RPL or the recognition of informal learning than the “process-based qualifications” that are more typical of European countries (Young, 2001). However, it is envisaged that RPL, depending on the context, will take place against the overall purpose and learning outcomes of qualifications to facilitate a more holistic approach to the assessment and recognition of prior learning. Authorities are reluctant to recognize “processes”, which are hard to verify outside of formal settings. Assessment is mostly outcomes-based, and qualifications that are outcomes-based provide opportunities for recognition of learning gained outside of formal settings.

More than 8,000 qualifications have been registered on the SA NQF to date, of which 600 are “new” qualifications, including both unit standards-based and non-unit standards-based qualifications. The older qualifications (pre NQF) that have been registered are in the process of being reconfigured into an outcomes-based format. The task of the development of unit standards is still in progress and is foreseen to continue for some time. Thus the policy and guidelines for RPL make the point that recognition of prior learning can be conducted against both types of qualifications, i.e. unit standards-based and more traditional exit point-based qualifications. The SA NQF also is developing a National Learner Record Database that can record all formal recognition of learning, including that recognized through RPL.

A recent Consultative Document on the NQF (Department of Education/Department of Labour, 2003) has identified three learning modes or typical pathways: discipline – based, career-focused/general vocational and occupational context-based. It has cited “strained relationships between constituencies representing workplace-based and institution-based learning.” (p. 7) and that “there are clear indications that the SAQA architecture is not holding” (p. 9). The document concludes that credit-based pathways have not been realized through the NQF, and this may have significant implications for RPL.

Industry-based models

Industry in South Africa ranges between highly sophisticated international companies and a large informal sector. Firms within the formal sector pay a training levy that is administered by the sector education and training authorities. Deller (2003) makes the point that higher and further education providers in South Africa reach only one million people. Businesses that pay training levies have about 13.8 million employees (out of a total labour force of 17 million) and therefore should expect some returns in training from this investment. RPL is seen as a strategy that can be used by business to aid career progression and individual growth, without necessarily being linked to formal credit.

The process of RPL is described by the SAQA as:

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- identifying what a person knows and can do;
 - matching the person's knowledge, skills and experience to specific standards and the associated assessment criteria of a qualification;
 - assessing the learning against those standards; and
 - crediting the person for skills, knowledge and experience built up through formal, informal and non-formal learning that occurred in the past.

(SAQA, 2003a, p3.)

These processes underpin the development of industry sector specific plans for RPL and models for RPL that have been developed and are being developed by several of the SETAs. The overall approach outlined by the SAQA is not only for industry-based models, and it is considered to be a generic process for both workplace and institutionally-based accreditation of prior learning (APL). The SAQA guidelines stress the need for policies and procedures that indicate the purpose of RPL within the sectors, the market and target area, the support structures, and the quality assurance systems. The industry-based models outlined in this report, however, are specifically designed for the workplace.

As indicated in the summaries below, the industry sector models are developmental. They include the development of systems, instruments and tools, the training and registration of assessors, in some cases the establishment and/or accreditation of RPL/assessment centres, and the development and management and recording systems, which are linked to the National Learner Record Database. The database is an attempt to consolidate all of the records of qualifications and recognition towards qualifications that are within the NQF. This includes the records held by the higher education and further education authorities that previously have administered these qualifications. The cost of RPL within the models may be met by the SETA, the employer, or the individual. The position of the union movement is that they should be met by the employer of the SETA (Fazel, 2003).

South Africa has developed and is implementing a form of industry-based training known as Learnerships. They are a response to current declines in apprenticeship commencements in South Africa. The reforms in industry-based training include:

- broadening the industries (and workplaces) within which apprenticeships are included; (note: learnerships are not considered only for industry, but could in some cases, be seen as "internships" and/or alternative routes to the achievement of professional qualifications);
- developing more flexible employment arrangements for apprenticeships;
- allowing more flexible time periods, e.g. 1 to 4 years;
- allowing more diverse forms of apprenticeships, including school students taking apprenticeships on a part-time basis;
- encouraging training institutions to be more flexible.

The reforms are seen as being potentially well served by RPL.

Examples of industry sector models

CETA – Construction Education and Training Authority

Purpose

The Construction Education and Training Authority (CETA) is conducting a three-year development project in RPL supported by the European Union. It is directed towards bricklayers, carpenters painters/decorators, plasterers/tilers, and plumbers. The stated purposes of this model include:

- individual access to qualifications and the provision of a stepping stone to further development and lifelong learning opportunities;
- reduction of training and development costs for individuals and employers;
- personal outcomes such as improved confidence;
- access to jobs that require qualifications;
- helping the skills needs of the country and increasing the qualifications base of the workforce to increase competitiveness and attract greater investment;
- involvement of employers in employees' qualifications processes;
- assistance in matching pay levels with qualifications; and
- increasing provider market options, including an assessment market, and strengthening their role in the community.

Procedures

The model has three core elements: advising candidates on gaining recognition; assessing against the evidence, and verification of the outcomes.

As in other industry RPL models an Adviser is appointed to manage the process.

- The Adviser needs to be competent and qualified against the qualifications or unit standards against which the candidate is to be assessed, and registered with the CETA (it should be noted that this is a particular requirement from the CETA – currently policy requires that the Assessor should be registered – not the Adviser as well). The Adviser assists the candidate to develop the portfolio of evidence, decide when it is ready for assessment, and advise him/her of learning development options.
- The Assessor needs to be competent and qualified against the relevant qualifications and unit standards and the SAQA registered Practitioner Qualifications. The Assessor role goes beyond the formal assessment and includes supporting the candidate during the assessment processes.
- Verifiers also need to be competent and qualified against the relevant qualification or unit standards, and they act on behalf of the awarding body – the ETQA. There are internal and external verifiers, and they quality assure the processes, instruments and outcomes of the RPL.

Features

The model stresses quality assurance as the “foundation of RPL”, and the key elements are the accreditation of assessment providers, qualified and registered practitioners, and the standardized RPL system for the industry that includes operating materials, assessment tools and a quality management system. The project includes establishing a number of RPL centres for the industry (28), the training, qualifying and registration of practitioners (376), the completion of guidelines and procedures, and the establishment of a database.

This is an ambitious project and is one of the more complete international models in terms of its scope, ambition and infrastructure. By 2001 1,266 candidates had been certified compared with a target of 6,000. This shortfall may be due to an overly ambitious target, or to the reluctance on the part of workers to enter the processes, as has been found in many other cases. RPL appears to have strong support of the union (Fazel, 2003).

THETA – Tourism, Hospitality and Sport Training Authority

Purposes

The purposes established by the Theta (Tourism, Hospitality and Sport Training Authority) are the provision of access to further learning, and redress through certification and recognition. The system takes a holistic and development approach to RPL and it emphasizes that the RPL process must prepare and advise the learner within the social context rather than the unit standard context only. There also should be clear consideration of barriers, informal learning background, and the wider expertise of the learner.

The Theta policy also stresses that the RPL process needs to be centred around the development of the learner and should have a clear workforce focus and be designed as an entry point to further learning, rather than an end point on its own.

Procedures

RPL can be provided by education and training providers, but they must have a clear RPL strategy, a quality management support infrastructure, and sufficient resources to conduct RPL. The strategy needs to include details of the institutional environment, including factors such as unbiased admission procedures and learner support procedures and resources.

There is a strong emphasis upon the pre-assessment processes, so that the learner can gain the maximum benefits from RPL. The processes typically include a discussion with the candidate about the purposes of RPL, and are designed to elicit sources of evidence that the candidate might use in the process. The process also clarifies the requirements for the assessment procedures. An assessment plan is developed in consultation with the candidate.

Features

Given the nature of the industry, the Theta model is oriented towards provider-based delivery of RPL. There is a strong emphasis on access to RPL and the redress the barriers to formal learning that many people in or wanting to enter the industry have faced. Like other industry RPL models in South Africa, the challenge of matching standards and quality assurance with the broader social objectives of redress and access are explicit in the model.

Examples of this are the requirement for providers to have an assessment plan that details the purpose of RPL, and the interactions between the assessor and the candidate. Also, the evidence requirements in the assessment process must identify the potential barriers for candidates and alternatives that can overcome these barriers.

Like other models the Theta model is developmental. Providers are also required to detail their staff induction and development practices, and their assessment instruments and recording systems.

HWSETA – Health and Welfare

Purpose

The Health and Welfare SETA locates two primary purposes for RPL:

- *Diagnosis, Prediction and Access* – admission and placement in a course, and gathering of information for an organization's skills audit, and planning workplace reorganization;
- *Accreditation and exemption* – earning of credits towards and acquisition of a full qualification; and purposes of remuneration levels and promotion based upon knowledge and skills.

The RPL policy and procedures acknowledge a wide range of learning experiences and locations, and recognizes the RPL candidate, the RPL adviser/evidence facilitator and the RPL assessor as the stakeholders in the processes. The employer is not necessarily included in recognition of the fact that candidates may not be employed, and the need for the externality of the quality assurance of the assessments.

Procedures

The assessments within the RPL processes are based upon the principles of validity, reliability, fairness, and practicability. The last of these recognizes that the costs of RPL can be excessive.

A prominent role is given to the RPL adviser/evidence facilitator in recognition of the diverse background of the candidates, including people who have difficulty in confronting new technical concepts and language. This role is more explicit in South African RPL models than those of other countries, and this is a manifestation of the social purposes of RPL. The advisers/evidence facilitator has an educative and support role with the candidate, and this role can continue after the candidate has achieved the unit standards or qualifications that were applied for.

The development of a portfolio is central to the evidence base for the assessment, and this is supported by the RPL adviser/facilitator. Evidence within the portfolio can be direct, indirect or historical. The candidate also will need to undertake a practical assessment, and/or a knowledge test, and/or an interview.

A judgement on the basis of the evidence is made by a qualified assessor. This is then reviewed by a moderator appointed by the ETQA (the HWSETA) and the credits are recorded by the ETQA. There is feedback to candidates after the assessment and the option of an appeal.

Features

The health and welfare sector in South Africa is very broad and includes people working in a very wide variety of circumstances and communities. Therefore the RPL

system needs to be relatively open to allow recognition of learning gained through community life. At the same time, however, it needs to be rigorous and be based upon valid evidence of knowledge and skills against units standards within tightly managed processes. Therefore, while the sector is very diverse, and the RPL facilitator/adviser has a supportive and educative role, the formal recognition procedures are relatively centralized, and require the Chief Executive Officer of the ETQA to formally sign off on all credits that result from the RPL processes.

MERSETA – Manufacturing, Engineering and Related Services

Purpose

The Manufacturing, Engineering and Related Services RPL system is directed towards employed, unemployed and pre-employed learners. It is designed to allow credits to be awarded towards a national qualification on the NQF, and acknowledges that people can work in a variety of settings – school, casual work, the workplace, and through self – study, training courses, apprenticeships and learnerships. It is based upon the objectives of saving time and costs and of encouraging adults to further invest in education and training.

Procedures

The formal processes that are stipulated in the model are based upon the key elements laid out in the SA NQF guidelines, and a six step process has been developed for RPL to be achieved, as shown in the following outline:

1	Stakeholders decide on the number of learnerships and skills programmes.
2	Assessor/RPL adviser screens individual learners to establish their experience, interests and qualifications. Individuals provide evidence.
3	In the case of learnerships the individual may enter into a contract with the company.
4	A period of self-assessment follows assisted by the assessor/RPL adviser.
5	A learner supported by the adviser develops a portfolio over variable time periods. The assessor undertakes a summative assessment to identify gaps and the development of an individual training plan.
6	Mentors, trainers, assessors and facilitators assist the learner and conduct different forms of assessment .

These processes are modified for different categories of candidates – employed, unemployed and pre-employed – and involve an interactive relationship between the candidate and the assessor or RPL Adviser.

Following a period of self-assessment the main element of the process is the development of a RPL portfolio by the candidate. The portfolio includes a personal profile, the learner's personal, occupational and educational goals, and evidence of accomplishment. This evidence needs to meet the NQF guidelines for validity, sufficiency, currency and authenticity. Portfolios may be based upon experience in the workplace, such as a logbook, or upon work outside of the formal workplace, such as voluntary work in churches or community organizations.

The nature of these processes can vary from one workplace to another, and may involve a contract with the employer. Different roles may also be played by supervisors, mentors, trainers, assessors and facilitators.

Features

In relative terms the MERSETA model is typical of other manufacturing sector approaches to qualifications and skills recognitions systems in other countries. It is relatively formalized, and it is assumed that learning will predominantly be through work

and instruction, rather than community life or experience. Nevertheless like other industry systems it includes a prominent role for the RPL adviser/evidence facilitator, and has a heavy emphasis upon the evidence portfolio. This provides for a considerable degree of flexibility. The SETA trains the advisers, and attention is given to special need issues like language, gender and cultural issues that is built into the training to enable them to deal with any special requirement from learners. Most RPL candidates are adults who have not been subjected to any form of testing in their working life. This requires some convincing and motivation to get them to build the portfolio of evidence. A major challenge is to build incentives for RPL.

An evaluation of the implementation of the model in the New Tyre Chamber (Ralphs, 2003) indicated the importance of communication and a high degree of ownership or by-in from company managers and workplace supervisors and other workplace stakeholders.

CHIETA – Chemical Industries Education and Training Authority

Purpose

The CHIETA RPL model, like other industry-based models, has broad social, educational and industry purposes. They include:

- the redress of past imbalances and accelerated access to further education and training;
- the recognition of learning gained outside formal programmes;
- assisting learning programmes by identifying gaps in knowledge and skills;
- access to education and training programmes, and more mobile career paths.

The model is supported by a detailed policy statement and guidelines, and research funded by the National Skills Fund. It has been supported by a year-long development phase that includes training of a target of 765 practitioners (assessors, moderators, and evidence facilitators). A number of enterprises have been accredited for RPL, and while small and medium-size companies had a limited awareness of RPL, large enterprises and organized labour have policies and/or supported RPL and see substantial benefits from the practice.

Procedures

The model has steps for two types of candidates – those with and those without existing verifiable evidence. The main difference is in the assessment process. Candidates who have existing evidence construct this into a portfolio that is presented to the assessor. Candidates without existing evidence negotiate a time for the assessment, and the assessor explains the processes and methods for the assessment. Both types of candidate are subject to the same standards and quality assurance procedures.

The model places a strong emphasis upon the assessment processes. The key principles that guide it are validity, fairness, reliability and consistency, cost effectiveness, openness, and systematic recording. A wide range of methods can be used, including oral assessments, examinations, projects, case studies, demonstrations and portfolios. The assessments are subject to separate moderation processes.

Features

Compared with other industry models the CHIETA model is relatively formal, with a heavier emphasis upon more traditional assessment modes. The assessor can be

responsible for both the advisory and the assessment roles, although the provider could split these roles. The model is supported with common application forms, assessment records, and evidence guides.

Like some other industry-based models in South Africa (e.g. CETA, 2003) the investment in RPL by the industry is substantial, and there is a major role for CHIETA in recording results, moderation, quality assurance and materials provision. It also has a major developmental and evaluative function, and supports the development of the model by gathering and analysing statistics and other data on RPL in the industry.

Conclusion

RPL in South Africa is intensely developmental, that is, it can be characterized by a combination of high expectation, clarity and consistency of principles, clear social, economic and educational objectives, high levels of policy investment, and an understanding that its formative processes may lead to some changes in practice and associated infrastructure.

The foundation for RPL, unlike that in many other countries, is legislative. The National Education Policy Act of 1996 laid down that education and training policy should achieve equitable educational opportunities and should redress past inequalities of learning provision. Subsequently the Employment Act of 1998 (No. 55) moved away from the notion that only formal education and training should be recognized. In a similar manner, the SA NQF is a relatively complete construct when compared with similar formal frameworks in the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Australia. The industry models cited above are relatively standardized, and require heavy investments of RPL advisers, assessors, and moderators, and the responsibilities taken by the SETAs is substantial. Hence there are large, and possibly heavy expectations on these formal structures to deliver the perceived benefits. Therefore, RPL in South Africa faces some tensions.

As Harris (1997) notes, national qualifications frameworks have their origins and primary purposes in vocational training, and South Africa is no exception. Because of the location of qualifications frameworks in outcomes-based learning, it shares with the other most complete qualifications framework, that of New Zealand, some tensions and resistance from the higher education sector (Cretchley and Castle, 2001). Outcomes-based learning, and associated systems of RPL and credit transfer are more easily developed and adopted for lower-level qualifications than for higher-level qualifications. Cretchley and Castle (2001), however, conclude that RPL is compatible with the principles of adult learning, and problems are associated with the realities of mass delivery and assessment systems. This is a view that is supported by Stuart (1996) who fears that RPL practitioners will become obsessed with assessment and proving the academic viability and cost-effectiveness of the RPL process. In Young's terms, the "intrinsic logic" is impeded by the institutional logic, which can be deep-seated. Nevertheless RPL has been formally accepted into the higher education sector (du Pré, 2002).

The issues for workplace RPL may be different. Cooper (1998) questions whether RPL will touch the millions of workers who will not be in the corporate global economy. Lugg et al. (1998) argue that outcomes for workers may not necessarily be positive, either in gaining recognition or in gains in the workplace and employment. For the former, one of the problems has been the appropriateness of the assessment methods used for RPL. There are also issues of whether the unit standards and the ways in which they are assessed are appropriate for workers who have been restricted in the breadth of their work experience. Nevertheless the Congress of South African Trade Unions has supported RPL as "one strategy within the larger project to transform work and society" (du Pré, p. 212).

At the more immediate and practical level the challenges include those of training sufficient numbers of assessors and advisers, giving them the experience and capacity to work in a range of enterprises – especially SMEs, the incorporation of RPL into business strategies, including human resource strategies, reducing costs but maintaining the quality of RPL, and convincing managers and workers of its value.

Beyond the workplace there is some evidence of unfulfilled expectations for the implementation of RPL, as has been the case in several other countries. Universities have been slow to adopt the practice, and there is evidence of a lack of knowledge and some confusion of RPL with credit transfer (UW, 2000). These difficulties are also reflected in the Consultative Document.

New Zealand

Background

Recognition of Prior Learning and its underlying principles have been long standing in New Zealand. They reach back to the 1980s and therefore well precede the developments that are currently taking place in Europe and South Africa. New Zealand was the first country to establish a national qualifications framework (NZQF) with its own authority – the New Zealand Qualifications Authority, and was certainly the first country to establish a comprehensive framework that attempted to encompass all mainstream qualifications, including higher education qualifications.

New Zealand also introduced the concept and construct of “unit standards” into its qualifications at an early stage. Unit standards derive from vocational qualifications, but have had some impact upon school level qualifications, and to a lesser extent on some tertiary qualifications. Hence the New Zealand “qualifications system” is amongst the most advanced of the Anglophone approaches of what Young (2001) has termed the “outcomes-based qualifications” system. Outcomes-based qualifications are based primarily upon demonstrable skills and knowledge that frequently are occupationally derived and specific. Hence they have their origins in the vocational and technical sectors, although they have influenced general education, especially through initiatives such as the General National Vocational Qualifications (now Vocational A levels) in the United Kingdom. They tend to be modular based and invite different funding, accountability and other regulatory arrangements. This type of qualification is by no means complete across the sectors, especially across the higher education sector. Nevertheless the concept of outcomes-based qualifications has a strong presence in New Zealand qualifications and this has had a major influence upon RPL and official policies towards it.

The combination of the early development of RPL and the strength of the “outcomes-based” aspect of the qualifications and the qualifications system and framework make RPL a relatively mature concept in New Zealand. As a consequence there is little explicit documentation about RPL, and there is not the heady policy investment and high expectations that it carries in South Africa, and some of the literature produced by the European Union. As the NZQA notes:

in a sense, the assessment of prior learning is no longer a special case. All assessment has benefited from the development of RPL practices. All Framework assessment can have the flexibility that was once unique to assessment of prior learning.

It further notes that:

an important principle of the National Qualifications Framework is that skills, knowledge and understanding gained outside formal education or training will be recognized. (NZQA, 2003a).

Thus in official terms there is no difference between RPL and assessment against designated learning outcomes or standards. These can be the unit standards that make up qualifications within the NZQF, or the outcomes and standards of other qualifications. Within the official lexicon, therefore, RPL has become APL – accreditation of prior learning. Within industry it has mostly become RCC. This integrated concept of RPL means that there is no official definition of it, or of APL or RCC in New Zealand. As can be seen from the industry-based examples, different industries use the different terms – APL, RPL and RCC.⁵

The key to RPL/APL is the provision of evidence that is valid, relevant and sufficient to indicate that the person has the learning that is laid down in the unit standard. The form of this evidence, and the time period over which it is assembled are not prescribed, although different industries and different qualifications will require different forms of evidence gathered over different time periods.

Assessment within APL/RCC systems is undertaken by accredited assessors within accredited organizations. The assessors and organizations that assess and issue vocational qualifications are accredited by the NZQA and the relevant Industry Training Organization (ITO). Quality assurance of the assessment and awarding processes is carried out by the NZQA. Qualified assessors typically will be qualified to or above the level of the qualification/unit standards that are being assessed, and are also qualified against special assessor unit standards that have been developed by the NZQA.

There are unit standards that recognize the skills and knowledge involved in organising or facilitating the assessment of prior learning. Accredited organizations may require their assessors to have achieved these assessor standards, but the Authority (NZQA) does not set these requirements. (NZQA, 2003a).

During the 1980s New Zealand introduced a phase of radical economic reform designed to introduce market principles into the economy and its infrastructure. The reforms included privatization of state-owned enterprises and utilities and deregulation of the labour market. These reforms extended to the education and training sector with attempts to weaken “provider captures” within what was regarded as a supply-driven system. The reforms included attempts to develop a more open training market and to put the steerage of the VET sector into the hands of industry. This involved the establishment of a competency-based VET system derived from industry and occupational practices, and the establishment of a range of industry training bodies to direct industry-based training. The reforms also involved encouragement for the establishment of private providers of training. In September 2003 there were 907 private registered training establishments compared with nine public registered training establishments in New Zealand.

Economic changes have led to the weakening of occupational labour markets in New Zealand. This has led to a decline in union movement membership and a decline in the apprenticeship system (since then attempts have been made to revise apprenticeships through “Modern Apprenticeships”). The combined impact of these changes has been the weakening of a traditional provider-driven and controlled qualifications system in New

⁵ A definition was adopted by the NZQA of the relationship of RPL to the NZQF. However, this has been superseded by the acceptance of its incorporation into the evidence-based assessment regime.

Zealand. They have combined with other factors to produce the particular approach towards RPL. These other factors include:

- *A strong history of innovation in education and training.* New Zealand has been prominent in a wide range of innovations on the international stage. These innovations cover areas such as literacy programmes (such as Reading Recovery), the national qualifications framework, and its unit standards-based approach.
- *A high migration country.* New Zealand has high levels of immigration and emigration. Migration is with other Pacific islands and Australia, and to a lesser extent other English-speaking countries. This has influenced its approach towards qualifications and the protection of occupational standards.
- *Economic crisis.* During the 1980s New Zealand faced major structural weaknesses in its economy. They included a reliance upon commodity exports, and what were regarded as structural rigidities in industry and the labour market. These were similar to weaknesses in the Australian economy, but on a greater scale. Hence its reforms have been more radical than in most other developed countries and have had an impact upon education and, especially, training.

These factors have combined to influence New Zealand's approach to qualifications and RPL. The approach combines:

- a highly centralized qualifications system designed to maintain standards, reduce provider autonomy, but allow for greater seamlessness;
- a competency-based training system that locates knowledge and skills within industry, and which shares responsibility for quality between industry bodies and the central authority;
- a culture of flexibility and innovation in education and training; and
- a relatively open market approach in further education, but within a regulatory system that is administered in part through the qualifications system.

These factors have led New Zealand to adopt a highly outcomes-based approach towards vocational education, and it shares with Australia a high concentration upon the forms, processes and integrity of the assessment systems. Within these regimes, therefore, there is no need and in fact no basis for separating assessment for learning gained through formal and informal means.

The national qualifications framework

The national qualifications framework for New Zealand (NZQF) is designed to provide:

- nationally recognized, consistent standards and qualifications;
- recognition and credit for all learning of knowledge and skills.

The framework has 10 levels ranging from National Certificates for senior secondary school students (awarded at all levels but normally at levels 1 to 4) and National Diplomas (awarded at level 5 and upwards). Each level has three sets of domains that guide the processes of development for unit standards and qualifications and which assist articulation arrangements. The domains are process, learning demand, and responsibility. Each of these

domains has a descriptor at each of the ten levels of the framework. For example, the process domain descriptor for level 4 is as follows:

Carry out processes that:

- require a wide range of technical or scholastic skills;
- offer a considerable choice of procedures;
- are employed in a variety of familiar and unfamiliar contexts;

Levels are defined by the combination of the three domain descriptors.⁶

Within the NQF there were 17,156 national unit standards and 905 National Certificates and National Diplomas in September 2003 covering almost every area of work and learning. The unit standards vary in terms of their credit value and are placed on the framework at different levels depending on their level of difficulty (Strathdee, 2003). Unit standards have a common structure, although they can vary in length and volume. They consist of a title, a number of elements that describe in competency or performance terms the learning to be achieved, such as “demonstrate knowledge of the uses and features of spreadsheets”, and a number of performance criteria for each of the elements, such as “describe the use of spreadsheets, demonstrate their advantages, etc.”.

The use of unit standards in New Zealand, like the use of units of competency in Australia, is central to the concept of RPL in the country. The unit standards are an advanced form of “outcomes-based” qualifications, or components of qualifications. Therefore, RPL is no different to other forms of assessment *because this advanced form of outcomes-based qualifications does not include the learning processes in either the concept or body of the qualification, or in the assessment processes that lead to the qualification*. There can be some confusion over this matter in the practice of deeming unit standards-based upon experience. However, this generally is regarded as evidence of learning rather than a process that must be undertaken for recognition to be given.

Not all standards are unit standards. They can also be achievement standards (for the school level certificate) or subjects or modules. These standards are not competency-based and are not derived empirically. They can be similar to the unit standards in that they can have specific criteria for assessment. By 2006 it is intended that all New Zealand Qualifications will be on a National Register of Qualifications, to be administered by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA).⁷ Currently about a third of the qualifications is administered by the NZQA. All results for qualifications on this register are to be reported to and recorded by the NZQA. Currently it has a database of the qualifications and elements of qualifications held by one million people, and the National Student Information database will provide the opportunity for a skills or learning passport.

Some see Recognition of Current Competency (RCC) as undermining the Register. Because degrees are meant to be taught and assessed by people with a research background of a higher degree, RCC may undermine this as it can be assessed by people without this background. This relates to the nature of an award – whether it is exit level, average level, or at the modal level. So for example, if a degree is based upon the standards achieved at the end of a course the final or exit level components of the degree should be taught and assessed by person with the appropriate experience. But the earlier components could be

⁶ See NZQA: <http://www.kiwiquals.govt.nz/framework/rol/docs/levelsdes.doc>.

⁷ See NZQA: <http://www.kiwiquals.govt.nz/publications/docs/regspolicy-mayo3.doc>.

taught and assessed by people without this experience. RCC is based upon competence of each unit standard, so the concept of exit level cannot apply. The issue becomes even more complicated with the growth of degrees taught and issued by the Polytechnics. These degrees are located between the two cultures of process and outcomes-based qualifications that have been described by Young (2001).

The NZQF and the Authority have been controversial in New Zealand and have had a turbulent history (Strathdee, 2003). While its introduction into the TVET sector has been mostly accepted it has faced resistance from the schools and especially the higher education sectors. The NZQA was almost abandoned a few years ago and tensions continue to exist with the higher education sector. New Zealand arguable has one of the most centralized qualifications systems of all countries. It attempts to encompass all qualifications, and provide a framework for comparing and in some cases incorporating overseas qualifications. The Authority administers a framework that includes a level based set of descriptors for the alignment and development of qualifications; develops and administers mainstream school and vocational and further education qualifications, and has now established a register within which all qualifications are intended to be registered.

Industry-based Recognition of Current Competency

As with other national qualifications frameworks the NZQF is built in the first instance upon vocational qualifications. Vocational qualifications and their composite unit standards have been developed through a number of standards-setting bodies under the supervision of the 43 industry sector Industry Training Organizations (ITOs – see ITF, 2003). These bodies have been modelled on the British Training and Enterprise Councils (since abandoned) and represent industry interests, and are partially funded by government but mainly by industry to support industry-based training. In turn they can fund vocational training, including RCC. The role of the ITOs includes:

- setting national skills standards for their industry;
- providing information and advice to trainees and their employers;
- arranging for the delivery of on and off-the-job training (including developing training packages for employers);
- arranging for the assessment of trainees; and
- arranging the monitoring of quality training.

The Industrial Training Act of 1990 established unit standards-based training, which established benchmarks for training. All vocational qualifications are based upon unit standards, which reflect best practice in industry. Consequently the vocational qualifications are strongly outcomes-based.

Workplace learning can be on-job, off-job by a registered training provider, or a combination of both ... The learning can be self-paced, or training can be delivered by an experienced staff member, or an external trainer. (Tertiary Education Commission, 2003).

The funding of accreditation of prior learning (APL) or Recognition of Current Competency (RCC) is different between the industry and tertiary education sectors. The ITOs can use their funds to support RCC, and can thus have a major influence on workplace practices. However, the Tertiary Education Commission, the body that funds further and higher education, does not provide funding and there is a lack of incentives for tertiary education providers to deliver RPL. The challenge is to develop a funding model that promotes rather than penalizes good practice.

There is a consensus amongst these organizations that APL within provider-based programmes is not appropriate training for industry-based recognition purposes (similar issues have occurred in Australia). RCC stresses that competency must be related to industry work practices, and the demonstration of competency within an industry situation. To an extent, as the NZQA (2003a) points out, all assessment of industry-based standards and qualifications is APL/RCC, as it involves the presentation of evidence that the candidate is competent against the unit standards. However, several of the industry organizations stress the importance of demonstrating competency in the workplace, and in some cases experience in the workplace.

Nevertheless, several of the industry bodies have developed explicit RCC systems. In contrast to those of the South African Sector Education Training Authority, these systems or models tend to be related to particular characteristics or needs of the industry at points in time. A large number of the ITFs have no explicit policies and procedures for RPL/RCC as their assessment and recognition regimes do not specify any course enrolment or completion. Therefore, they are inherently outcomes-based and the assessment guides that are issued by the ITFs are tantamount to RCC models.

Industry-based models

Seafoods ITA

Purpose

The seafood industry has only recently developed qualifications and unit standards. As the qualifications have matured there has been a ready buy-in by the industry of these qualifications as employers and workers in the industry are looking for some guarantee of the competencies of the people who are coming into the industry. The processes of the development of qualifications and the design of a RCC system have been based directly in the industry, and are particular to the industry.

Workers within the industry have not had qualifications but have learnt from the shop floor and have a good grasp of the competencies that are needed. So the industry wanted a process for assessing competencies and recognizing this through qualifications. In particular, both employers and workers have been eager to have the skills recognized and the standards of the industry protected.

Procedures

There are two types of situations:

- (i) The use of existing unit standards within the NQF. Assessments are undertaken by registered assessors. Support is provided by the ITO for the coordination of the assessment and the moderation. Funding can be provided by the ITO if the person is employed in the industry.
- (ii) The establishment of new qualifications. For example, a factory trawler technician is a hugely skilled job that has had no formal skills recognition. Therefore, there has been a dual process of standards and qualifications development, and a recognition process. Both are workplace-based. Standards for a level 4 certificate and a level 6 diploma were developed with the assistance of a standards writer who worked with the technicians. The factory trawler technicians then got together and cross-assessed each other. The assessments were verified by the chief technicians. The standards of the assessment were very high because the technicians owned the skills that they were assessing, and most did not gain the qualifications immediately. This has led to

further training, which can only be on the job. The technicians are brought together once a year to verify the assessments.

Features

A particular feature of the seafood industry is that of customary fishing practices, which are grounded in customary rights and the Treaty of Waitangi. For the Maori people there is no separation between preserving customary practices and the commercial aspects of fishing. This has been recognized in the unit standards as a means of giving recognition to customary Maori practices. There is a huge knowledge base that is at risk of being lost. This has been built into RCC by training the elders in assessment methods and techniques.

Building and construction

Purpose

There have been concerns in New Zealand about the quality of building, especially in the residential building sector, and recent regulations require higher standards of competency and certification. It is recognized in the industry that experience is not sufficient to guarantee competence. “Deeming” of competence needs to be treated with caution, and there is a concern that the apprenticeship system should not be short-circuited. That means that the training and recognition processes should not be seen as a cheap means of circumventing the apprenticeship system.

There are about 10,000 people in the industry who need to become qualified. They have been given five years in which to achieve this. There are also many people who come from the United Kingdom, the United States and South Africa who want to enter the industry, and require recognition against the New Zealand qualifications. So an RCC system has been developed to meet these needs.

Procedures

There are 16 qualifications that are available in the building industry. For each there are self-paced learning packages. People are provided with a range of options to gain the training, and much of the training can be done on the job.

Any provider that is accredited by the NZQA and the ITO can provide the RCC. The system is laid down by the ITO, which is also responsible for quality assurance. The applicants first sit a theory test and put together a detailed work history. This is reviewed by an accredited workplace assessor. This review includes the examination of some work completed by the applicant. The outcomes of the review must be verified by a third party. For example, this could be a client in the case of a self-employed worker.

The process is on a unit by unit, rather than a holistic basis, and is not an easy task. Evidence needs to be provided against each unit. However, the ITO wants to make it as seamless as possible and the aim is to provide sufficient evidence against each unit standard.

Workers are given three months to undertake the process. Between 50 to 90 per cent of the applicants need to do some retraining following the process, and the ITO facilitates this. Applicants who achieve less than 50 per cent of the standards are required to undertake the entire self-paced package. Some workers dislike examinations, preferring to take the package rather than sit for the test. Workers who need assistance with literacy and numeracy skills are given extra assistance. The costs of the processes, including the assessments, guidance and self paced modules are approximately \$2745 (NZ) – about US\$1,700.

Features

Qualifications in the industry are workplace qualifications. Therefore, the traditional idea of RPL is not appropriate for the industry. There are acute issues of safety in the industry, and the qualifications and the RCC processes and standards must reflect this. It is important that training providers and the workplace assessors should also protect the standards.

All qualifications in the building and construction industry are apprenticeship-based (there is one exception – a management diploma), and there is an aging workforce. The impact of CBT on apprenticeship systems typically is variable. For young apprentices the length of the apprenticeships generally has not changed. Older apprentices are more likely to benefit (see the Australian chapter). Hence there are competing pressures of protecting standards and rigour, but being fair to workers. The aim is to have a training programme that is suitable for each worker.

Retail ITO

Purpose

The Retail ITO has adopted a policy of support for RPL (it does not use the term RCC). It is “committed to RPL as a process that enables people of all ages, backgrounds and attitudes to receive formal recognition for skills and knowledge they already possess.” (Retail ITO, 2002). It accepts a wide range of sources of skills and knowledge apart from the workplace, including hobbies and talents and community-based education or experience, such as voluntary work.

Consistent with the general approach to RPL in New Zealand there is no formal difference between qualifications and unit standards gained through formal and RPL means. To allow people recognition, the ITO has taken the approach of encouraging the integration of the qualifications in the company and industry.

Different documents and assessment approaches have been developed for different parts of the industry. The industry takes the view that RPL is for a person who has all the skills but has not had the opportunity to obtain the qualifications because they were unavailable when these people entered the industry. About 1,500 people over the past two years have accessed the RCC system. Most are at the lower levels, but about 40-50 people have gained qualifications at level 3, and the ITO is now looking towards level 4.

The ITO is looking at people who are at the top of companies but have no qualifications. If they access RCC, it will encourage others. This includes women who have returned to work. It sees RCC as a means of raising standards in the industry.

Procedures

The RCC is largely face to face, whereas RPL is mainly collecting documentary evidence. Typical of the New Zealand approach, the processes are flexible and can be adapted to the characteristics of the firm. The main objective is to ensure that assessments are valid, fair, consistent and accessible.

The ITO provides or registers the assessors who support candidates in the development of a portfolio of evidence and guide them through the RPL assessment processes. There are different assessors for different parts of the industry. All of the assessments are subject to moderation, and there are appeals procedures. The assessments allow for a wide range of evidence, including process-based evidence, such as verified work experience and positions of responsibility and leadership.

The ITO has outlined a clear procedure for RPL, which includes the early registration of the candidate with the NZQA. There are fees for the assessments, and they are equivalent to those for other modes of assessment. The processes can be subject to audits over an 18-month period.

Features

To an extent the retail RPL model typifies the New Zealand approach:

- it is based upon assessment procedures that are the same as those for formal learning processes;
- it allows a considerable amount of industry discretion. In the case of retail it can include a type of “deeming” of skills and knowledge based upon experience. That is the evidence that workers have had specified amounts of knowledge and is accepted as valid for assessment purposes. This would not be acceptable in some other industries, e.g. adventure sports.
- it is strongly linked to the NZQA and its unit standards system.

Hospitality Standards Institute

Purpose

Prior to the establishment of the NZQF there were very few relevant qualifications in the hospitality industry. With the development of the unit standards there is now an opportunity for people to have their knowledge and skills recognized and to use what it calls APL as a means of improving the standards of the industry and the profiles of the occupations within it.

In the case of hospitality many people have had poor experiences of formal education because it does not accommodate their styles of learning – especially kinaesthetic learning. The evidence was provided by references, and this was validated through visual checks. Also, there is a large number of people from overseas in the industry. If appropriate and necessary an interpreter will be used in the RCC process.

The industry has taken a developmental approach to RCC. It is a combination of RCC and course work so that a candidate combines a formal learning process with RCC.

Procedures

The assessment process has three elements: a portfolio of evidence, an APL questionnaire that is developed by the Hospitality Standards Institute (HSI), and practical observations and questions. The HSI allows relatively flexible procedures for APL, which can be carried out by organizations registered with the NZQA and the HSI. The assessor is registered with the HSI and can only assess against standards and qualifications within the scope of the registration. The HSI has provided a comprehensive set of guides and forms to assist in the APL processes.

The process includes a pre-assessment stage, where the candidate negotiates with the assessor on the standards and qualifications against which the APL takes place. Consistent with a developmental approach, the assessor undertakes a training needs analysis. Following the assessment an industry verifier reviews the assessment. The outcomes of the assessment are discussed with the candidate and the results are recorded by the HSI. The assessment process in the industry tends to be holistic.

Evidence can include prior performance, products such as reports and accounts, references and testimonials, work histories, certificates, and performance appraisals.

Features

The hospitality industry is large, growing, and largely unqualified. It has a large number of workers in part-time and casual employment and there is a strong agenda of building the professionalism of the industry and of recognizing the skills and knowledge of people who have been working in the industry.

Road transport

The NZ Road Transport and Logistics ITO (2003), notes that “in certain circumstances Assessors may have to consider awarding competency in a unit standards-based upon the consideration of evidence pertaining to the candidates’ prior knowledge or experience.” RCC is not available for all unit standards, especially those involving driving licenses, and those that can be gained through RCC are listed by the ITO.

The ITO has recently introduced a qualification for senior tradesmen, and has about 85 people who have gained a level 3 qualification (certificate). They are people who have learned on the job, and the assessments took place over approximately two days.

Procedures

The assessment process requires some practical assessment of part of each unit standard, and the elements of the unit standards that require practical assessments are specified by the RTO. The ITO requires that a minimum of 25 per cent of the recognition is through formal assessment, compared with historical evidence-based processes. There is a strong emphasis upon currency of competence and the evidence for this, as well as relevance and sufficiency.

Because of safety issues in the industry, assessors can only verify that the candidate was competent against the unit standard at the time of assessment. In making a final decision, the assessor should be confident that given the same circumstances and/or conditions, the candidate could repeat competent performance. The ITO is wary of what it calls “evidence traps”. It provides examples of evidence that is not valid, or relevant, or which cannot be authenticated.

Features

The road transport approach is an example of the contrasting pressures upon RCC/RPL. The industry is highly regulated and licensed, and this has been long standing, and the deregulatory wind that swept across New Zealand in the 1980s had a minimal impact upon the industry. On the other hand, many people come to the industry with licenses, which may be what the ITO calls “old style licenses” and a lot of experience in road transport. Hence the approach of the ITO is to create the opportunities for RCC, but to ensure that the assessment approach is rigorous, direct and current, and that it allows for caveats.

Provider-based models

The long history of RPL in New Zealand and its evolution into the assessment and qualification practices have meant that the country does not see the need for the standardized models that are being developed in South Africa. It is the case that resistance to RPL continues in the higher education sector, as is the case in almost every country. However, it has had an impact within the broader tertiary education sector, which includes

Colleges of Advanced Education and Polytechnics. There are several examples where RPL has been used to address particular issues or obstacles in recognition or course access procedures and to provide opportunities to groups affected by these obstacles. As well, the “model” of RPL has allowed the development of organizations that can specialize in providing assessment services, frequently in combination with training development. Three examples of provider-based RPL models and practices are provided below.

Christchurch College of Advanced Education (CAE)

The Christchurch CAE conducts a Graduate Certificate in Clinical Teaching for health professionals. The course is undertaken by a variety of professionals ranging from experienced medical practitioners to community health workers. RPL is used in two ways. First it is used as a deeming process for the purposes of course entry. Some of the workers have no degree, but the Academic Board has accepted entry upon the basis of knowledge that is recognized through RPL. Second, it is used to give advanced standing in the course (Jansen et al., 2003).

The RPL and the advanced standing are integrated into the course delivery for indigenous (Maori) health workers. The medical professionals typically have a strong knowledge of the technical elements of the course but have a weaker knowledge of cultural matters and language. This is the reverse for community health workers. Therefore, different areas of recognition can be awarded for different types of workers and experience. Then, as a whole group, people with different experiences and knowledge can assist each other.

Otago Polytechnic

Otago Polytechnic provides RPL/RCC for the sports industry. Qualifications have been established for volunteer workers in the sports industry. However, the Government will not pay for their delivery because their level is too low. So some providers are using RPL as a means of funding. The qualification is a National Certificate in Sports, which is available at three levels. Recently it has been decided to introduce a diploma-level qualification. There are about 300 providers of sports training in New Zealand. It is an oddity that the qualifications were not oriented towards the paid workforce. The courses are important because there is a growing shortage of coaches, referees, and administrative volunteers.

The candidates are mainly paid workers in regional sports organizations, fitness centres, national sports organizations, etc. Also, some are schools students undertaking vocational programmes through what is known as the Gateway to Industry programmes (about 70 schools are involved). Each applicant is interviewed to see what can be cross-credited towards the award. It is a process of identifying the relevant unit standard.

RPL can be through evidence-based assessment or direct assessments. In the later case there is an attempt to undertake assessments on the job. These assessments are mainly paper-based, and there is a huge variety of circumstances, so the presentation of evidence and its validation need to be flexible. The major limitation is the cost. Sometimes a subsidy is available and in other cases the employer will pay. Therefore, the relationship between the provider and the key stakeholder groups is critical.

Macquarie Institute

Macquarie Institute is a private training, assessment and consulting company. It is founded on workplace training and assessment. It deals in a very wide range of areas such as electrical supply, forestry and road transport. It deals mainly in the technical and business management areas. The company employs six assessors. It provides RCC services

mainly through an ITO, upon the request of a company. This will involve a scoping exercise and can range from providing RCC to every person who wants it in a company of 1,000 employees, to just one person in a relatively small company. Part of the scoping exercise is to find out what is needed in terms of RCC and training. For example, it could be qualifications upgrades for older workers, assessment of apprentices, RCC for a labourer who has been doing technical work, a qualified technical worker who is doing management work.

The institute charges the company, which then can be reimbursed through the ITO or the Tertiary Education Commission. It budgets on the basis of an average of three visits to the companies. During the first visit it is explained to the workers what is required of the process – the unit standards, the evidence requirements. The second is a mainly paper-based assessment – but Macquarie is now looking towards the possibilities of E-learning techniques, although there are difficulties with this. The third visit is post-assessment, and can include an appeals procedure. Appeals can be made through the employer, the assessor, the relevant ITO, or even the NZQA.

On the whole the processes have been trouble free because of the partnership with companies. Also, many workers gain their first qualification and this generates great spirit and a sense of encouragement. Most resistance comes from people who already have a qualification, especially those who have a degree. There can also be resistance from people who are pushed into the processes, especially when they realize what is required to gather the evidence. Some employers give workers time and support for the process, and others see it largely as a private benefit. In most cases there is little union involvement.

Conclusion

Prior to the introduction of the NZQA, RPL/RCC was a relatively informal process in New Zealand. Now it has been tightened up and uses clear benchmarks through the unit standards and procedures that include assessors registered by the ITOs, processes laid down by the ITOs and moderators. These systems operate within the framework of the NZQF and the quality assurance requirements of the NZQA. The quality assurance systems include the training and registration of assessors against unit standards for assessment, including workplace assessment.

There is a greater variation in approaches to RPL in New Zealand than in South Africa, the other country that uses a unit standards-based approach (although to an extent the Australian Training Packages approximate the unit standards-based qualifications). RCC can be different from one sector to another, and even from one workplace to another. This is probably an expression of the maturity of RPL/RCC in New Zealand in that industry and workplace variation is acceptable within a standards-based qualification system, and within assessment and quality assurance regimes that ensure consistency and reliability. In this context the biggest issue for RCC is sufficiency of evidence to ensure validity and reliability of competence. This varies across industry areas and those areas that have major health and safety factors require much more certainty than some other areas.

There is great diversity across the industries. For example, in the sports, fitness and recreation industry there is an enormous range of activities and the safety and liability issues are significant. Some of the activities, such as skiing, are seasonal and the workers tend to be global. So there is a need to look at the international aspects of qualifications and protect the integrity of the New Zealand qualifications. The demands of white water rafting require high level qualifications and the industry is suspicious of any qualifications that do not have rigorous processes. In some of these areas, legislative requirements need to be met.

Some industries have cultures of assessment, and in others the ITOs are trying to develop this culture. In some industries RCC is seen as an easy route towards a qualification, and the ITOs are concerned to combat this view, and this requires that the assessment processes should be rigorous. This includes using properly trained verifiers.

In other industries there is a reluctance to use RCC. In the agriculture industry, for example, there is a strong agenda of building a training culture and RCC may undermine this. There has also been a bad record with safety in the industry and a key purpose of training is to strengthen health and safety. To an extent RCC could make a contribution by helping to identify what people do not know.

There are issues associated with access to RPL, and especially for workers to getting time to undertake RPL. This has required some industries to redesign their assessment procedures so that they can fit into different work patterns and be taken over more extended periods of time.

Beyond the industry models RPL is well embedded in education and training philosophy and practice in New Zealand. This applies to public and private education and training organizations. At the tertiary level there is a variety of types of providers: universities, CAEs, polytechnics, and private training and education providers.

Assessment

The New Zealand approach to qualifications, and especially vocational qualifications, is heavily reliant upon assessment. Quality assessment systems, it is argued, provide for a better integration of teaching, learning and assessment, ensure standards and the integrity of the qualifications, are fairer, and allow for the recognition of learning gained outside the formal learning processes.

The basic philosophy of the “new” forms of assessment is that learners undertake the assessment when they are ready to do so, and they can persevere until they have achieved the outcome (NZQA, 2001). The essence of “standards-based assessment” is the production of “evidence” that is:

- relevant to the outcomes and standards that are being assessed;
- authentic in that the evidence being evaluated belongs to the person being assessed;
- valid in that it is fit for the purpose; and
- direct, so that it is close as possible to the conditions of the actual purpose.

The assessment processes also should be fair. This means that the time period in which to gain the evidence is sufficient. The amount of evidence should not be excessive, and the candidate is kept fully informed about the processes and requirements. It also needs to be cost efficient.

All of these requirements mean there has been substantial investment in assessment in New Zealand. Unit standards have been developed for the assessment processes. Training organizations and the ITOs, as well as the NZQA, have invested in assessment tools.

Assessors have to be trained and registered, and the assessment processes are conducted, supervised, moderated and audited through various arrangements between the training provider, ITO and the NZQA.

Debates continue on the forms of assessment. On the whole, holistic assessment has been supported within the TVET sector. However, as the industry-based examples show, some industries require greater surety that candidates are competent against unit standards. Therefore, some industries require that some unit standards be assessed through rigorous testing methods.

Essentially, any debate about RPL in New Zealand has been absorbed into debates about assessment and evidence. Prior learning is defined simply as learning that has occurred outside a formal learning programme and at some period before the assessment. The NZQA identifies two forms of RPL – that based upon verifiable evidence available before the assessment, and that where evidence is not available. The difference between these two forms therefore is only in the forms of assessment undertaken. In the former case, the assessment will be based mostly upon an evaluation of the evidence that is provided by the candidate. In the latter, the evidence will need to be generated through assessment tasks, whether they be examinations, or practical performance tests.

In this sense New Zealand shares an RPL approach with Australia which does not separate it from outcomes or standards-based assessment. Good RPL is good assessment. What identifies RPL from other forms of recognition is when and how the learning occurred. Both assessment for RPL and course-based assessment must conform to the same rules of evidence.

RPL and the indigenous population

RPL and RCC also have some relevance for the indigenous (Maori) and Pacific Islands communities. Standards-based qualifications in New Zealand raise issues of valid knowledge and skills, the recognition of this knowledge and the expression of the knowledge amongst Maori and Pacific Islands. Some of the case studies that have been cited have integrated RPL/RCC within learning and assessment processes as a means of acknowledging and utilizing the different forms and processes of learning within Maori traditions.

The Maori culture has a strong presence within the NZ education, training and qualifications system. There are several qualifications for Maori people, and some industries have incorporated Maori knowledge, skills and traditions into unit standards and qualifications. There were 182 Maori training establishments in September 2003.

The main impact of the Maori culture upon RPL is in the forms of assessment that can be used. This is outlined in specific documentation,⁸ and can include practices such as group assessment, and testimony from community elders. Conceptually, therefore, RPL is a useful concept in a situation of cultural diversity in that it can allow for flexibility in the construct of knowledge, its expression, and in the evidence of knowledge and skills.

Outcomes and lessons learnt

In September 2003 there were almost a million people awarded with a total of 48 million credits within the NZQA. Within industry 24,500 workers undertook training in 2002 and were awarded over 2 million unit standards. It is not possible to record how many of these were through RPL and RCC, as the assessment processes do not facilitate this. In some countries the funding arrangements are linked to delivery modes and this allows for estimates of RPL. However, this is not the case in New Zealand. As the building

⁸ See: <http://www.nzqa.govt.nz/for-maori/resources/index.html>.

and construction case shows, RCC and course-based recognition are integrated, and the funding arrangements for further and higher education do not account for RPL.

Nevertheless New Zealand is arguably the most mature international example of RPL. This is located in a philosophy that accepts wide forms of learning and a qualifications system that is more oriented towards outcomes than most others. Within this structure and culture there is acceptance of variation at the industry, workplace and provider levels, and, as in most cases, the strength of RPL lies with the practitioners.

RPL practice is influenced by funding arrangements, the purposes and circumstances of industry sectors, and the attitudes of workers. There is no strong evidence of union support for or resistance to RPL, although in some industries, such as the construction industry, their support has been important.

If there is a key lesson from the New Zealand experience, it might be that the key issue for RPL is assessment. In essence, the New Zealand model does not separate RPL and assessment. Consequently, heavy demands are put upon assessments. They need to be rigorous to ensure standards, flexible to ensure access and relevance, cost effective, and accessible.

Canada

Background

Recognition of Prior Learning is an umbrella term used in Canada to describe qualification recognition (assessment of credentials), credit recognition (the granting of credit based on equivalent competencies), and Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR), and the assessment of experiential learning (SLFDB, 2003). The term PLAR is presently the most commonly used term to describe RPL in Canada. However, for reasons of consistency, RPL is used in this report.

Canada has ten provinces and three territories, each of which has their own educational system. Canada saw the introduction of RPL (or Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition-PLAR) in the 1980s where it was applied as a means to grant educational credit to learning acquired in non-college settings. It was first used in Winnipeg, Manitoba, within the areas of nursing, dental assisting and early childhood education. At the time, there was a substantial number of mature-aged students seeking college credentials in vocational areas where there was a need for qualified practitioners. In the mid-1980s Quebec introduced a province-wide PLAR system at secondary school and college level. This initiative, funded by the Canadian Department of Manpower and Immigration, focused on the development of a PLAR framework, the development of a system to support the implementation of PLAR, and research and development directed towards assisting and advising colleges, promoting communication between colleges, and improving the relationship between college programmes and labour market needs. Since the 1990s the implementation of PLAR across Canada has been irregular, but because of a number of national initiatives it has been implemented to a greater or lesser extent across the country (Blower, 2000).

While the level of participation in post-secondary education is very high (39 per cent of Canadians aged between 25-64 have a post-secondary credential), the introduction of new technologies, an ageing population, a shortage of skilled workers in some occupations and high unemployment rates amongst low-skilled workers all lead to a need for greater skills development and participation in education and training. The Canadian Government has set a target of 50 per cent participation over the next decade, and has identified RPL as

being one of the key strategies in assisting this target to be met (Government of Canada, 2002).

Canada's Innovation Strategy (Government of Canada, 2002) indicates that the skills and knowledge of Canadians are undervalued and not given due recognition. A study carried out in 2001 estimated that the economic benefits of recognizing prior learning would lead to an annual increase in income to Canadians of \$4.1 to \$5.9 billion. This study claims that this increase would lead to a personal gain of \$8,000 to \$12,000 per annum. The Innovation Strategy suggests that RPL could be used to motivate adults to increase their skills and would remove barriers to full participation in the workforce. The study identified that the groups that have the greatest difficulty in having their skills recognized were people with work-based training and individuals in licensed professions who have transferred between educational institutions or between provinces and immigrants (Gain, 2001).

Canada depends on attracting skilled immigrants to fill labour gaps. Immigrants are expected to account for 100 per cent of labour growth by 2011, and for all net population growth by 2131 (Denton, 1999). Recent immigrants possess higher average levels of education than the Canadian-born population but immigrants have lower employment levels at the appropriate level, leading to an increasing level of poverty amongst recent arrivals. The Canadian Government has identified that more effective processes need to be instituted in order to recognize the qualifications of skilled immigrants (Government of Canada, 2002).

Canada does not have a national education system. Instead, education falls under the jurisdiction of the provinces and territories. Each province and territory has its own set of standards, policies, procedures and programmes, designed to meet local conditions. While this arrangement leads to systems that are responsive to the needs of learners, it does mean that opportunities for ensuring transferability and or portability of credentials are always present. This issue is highlighted when considering the portability of credentials related to licensing and registration of occupations. Accredited training occurs in colleges and universities, and there is some progress towards the development of outcomes-based curricula, particularly in community colleges. This work, driven by the need to have clear and measurable benchmarks for assessment, takes place at programme level, but the activity is not systemic. College curricula are not consistent across colleges, but credit transfer is available within, and often between, provinces.

There is considerable workplace-specific training taking place in industry. National competency standards describing occupational functions do not exist but individual companies develop competency standards for the purpose of job classification, succession planning, assessment and professional development. Regulatory bodies are also active in developing competency standards, and most of these are accepted across provinces and territories, subject to the Agreement on Internal Trade (Blower, 2000; Day, 2000).

A study of the implementation of RPL across seven colleges in Canada, conducted in 1999 and extended in 2002 provided the following picture of RPL in Canada:

- 65.1 per cent of RPL participants were women;
- 52 per cent of participants were 30 years of age or older, 38 per cent of this group were 35 years old or older, and 12 per cent were over 45 years of age;
- 63 per cent of students were studying part-time;
- 7,912 assessments were carried out over the previous five years, in 1,400 courses;

-
- the methods of assessment being used to establish prior learning included challenge testing (the most common method), demonstration of skills, portfolio assessment, military programme evaluation and workplace training programme evaluation (the least common method);
 - the greatest number of assessments took place in the health sciences and human services; and
 - fees for assessment were typically \$50 to \$150, although there were examples of no fees being charged, as well as fees of \$350 (Aarts, 1999).

The report considered that the take-up rate of RPL was low, indicating that this was due to incomplete record-keeping, lack of awareness of RPL by the public, a delivery structure that was not cost-effective, low priority placed on RPL by governments and institutions and inflexible programme delivery systems that failed to accommodate part-time students.

The extended study suggested that there needed to be an increased effort in communicating opportunities presented by RPL to stakeholders; that there be an increase in the amount of professional development made available to RPL practitioners; that RPL methodologies be further developed and that further linkages be developed between educational institutions and workplaces in order to enhance the participation of workers presently not connected to training institutions (Aarts, 1999).

Other studies indicate that RPL is underutilized in Canada. In addition to the reasons recorded in relation to the cross-Canada study cited above, a number of barriers to the implementation of RPL were identified. Concerns included a perception by practitioners that RPL would lead to a decline in the quality of education, that it would cost too much to develop and implement RPL processes, that existing funding models placed constraints on the provision of RPL, and that the lack of a national system limited the opportunities for recognition (Thomas, 1999; Thomas et al, 2002; Saskatchewan Labour Force Development Board, 2003).

Challenges also arise when applying RPL to the needs of the aboriginal people of Canada. While each cultural group has different preoccupations, one common factor is the way that knowledge is viewed in aboriginal communities – as the product and province of the community rather than the individual. Learning is seen as a collaborative process, and individuals find it difficult to speak about their strengths, or to “boast”. Added to this is the perception held by some PLAR practitioners that knowledge is viewed too narrowly and that in seeking recognition against mainstream credentials, aboriginal people are not able to capitalize on the knowledge they have developed within their communities, as their knowledge is viewed with condescension by Western educators. RPL is valued as a mechanism that assists aboriginal people to gain confidence through the naming of their skills and knowledge and to identify future learning goals, without it necessarily being a pathway to gaining a credential. Strategies used in Canada to make RPL more culturally appropriate include the use of “interpreters”, who translate the learning of the aboriginal students into a language that is acceptable in the mainstream, and the acceptance of portfolios in forms such as quilts, artwork and oral presentations, a demonstration of a truly flexible assessment process (Hill, 1999).

RPL in the workplace

A recent survey indicated that RPL is not used extensively in workplaces in Canada. However, it is gaining momentum as organizations develop competency standards and look for assessment practices that meet workplace needs. The report, *Workplace Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition The Manitoba Report* identified examples of

workplace RPL in four Canadian provinces (Oars Training Inc., 2002). This was not purported to be an exhaustive study, and an RPL conference held in October, 2003 indicated that there is broader application of RPL in the workplace, although this activity was concentrated in a small number of provinces. Manitoba, is presently leading the way in workplace RPL. This may be due to the commitment by the Manitoba government to the implementation of RPL, outlined in the Manitoba Policy Framework for Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (Government of Manitoba, 2001). A review of the implementation of this framework reported that the development of a Workplace Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition Committee (WPLAR), a partnership between business, labour and government, supported and coordinated the implementation of RPL in the workplace. Projects supported by WPLAR led to the development of enterprise competency standards, the development of online assessment tools, the development of workplace passports and the implementation of RPL assessment activities in workplaces (Government of Manitoba, 2003).

Other RPL workplace projects are underway in British Columbia, where the College of Pharmacists use RPL as part of a development and assessment process (Simosko, 2003) and in Saskatchewan, where the application of RPL to nursing is being examined (MacDonald et al., 2003) and in Ontario, where RPL processes are being developed for childhood educators (Martin, 2003).

As the examples of RPL in the workplace at the end of this chapter demonstrate, RPL is used in the workplace for the purposes of succession planning, gaining registration, and gaining qualifications. The Manitoba Report provides a useful analysis of the key requirements for the successful implementation of RPL in the workplace in Canada, as quoted below:

Key requirements are:

- expertise in designing and working with competency-based tools;
- subject-matter expertise on required skills, knowledge and attitudes;
- expertise on developing and delivering workplace training;
- capacity to provide advice to the individual on the PLAR process;
- expertise in flexible assessment and recognition of workplace learning;
- knowledge and experience in transferring learning to the job;
- capability to coordinate with internal and external stakeholders;
- expertise in the evaluation of training impacts on the job;
- capability to create efficient documentation;
- capability of managing the overall PLAR system development and implementation (Oars Training Inc., 2002).

The characteristics described here are not confined to successful implementation of RPL in Canada. They describe the features of a robust and quality-controlled CBT system anywhere.

The Canadian labour movement is ambivalent about RPL and its place in the workplace. It recognizes the potential that RPL offers to workers, because it has the potential to provide equitable access to education and training and portability of education and training across Canada. However, labour has concerns about the application of RPL by employers, fearing that it might be used as a tool to divide workers, based on the credentials they have gained through the RPL process. The labour movement also holds fears about protecting the confidentiality of workers' records, the dilution of apprenticeships through fast-tracking through apprenticeship programmes, the cost of

skills development becoming the responsibility of workers and the undermining of national education standards where the responsibility of education and training is undertaken by corporations.

The labour movement suggests that if RPL is to be implemented in the workplace that it be used to promote a broad range of skills, including critical thinking and citizenship, rather than confining recognition to competency standards. It also suggests that union input to the development of RPL processes and mechanisms is essential and that assessment processes should not be limited to standardized tests, which have an inbuilt bias. It suggests instead that assessment approaches be tailored to the needs of the individual and that candidates be fully briefed before assessment to ensure that processes are transparent (Canadian Labour Congress, 2000).

National initiatives

While the responsibility for the implementation of RPL rests with the provinces and territories, there are some national mechanisms supporting RPL. In 1997 the Canadian Labour Force Development Board developed 14 guiding principles to act as a framework for the implementation of RPL across Canada. These principles, which have served as a basis for policy development or RPL process development in many Canadian provinces, include advice on how RPL should be accessed, how RPL processes should be carried out, and how RPL decisions should be recognized. They are underpinned by the beliefs that RPL processes should be transparent, fair and equitable.

A second set of principles to guide the development of RPL processes have been developed by the Provincial Assessment Committee. These principles were designed to assist provinces to develop a consistent approach to the recognition of foreign qualifications. They were the result of collaboration between the Canadian Information Centre for International Credential Evaluation Service, the International Qualifications Assessment Service and the Service des Equivalences, together with a representative from the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship, Culture and Recreation. These principles are based on seven basic tenets relating to access, equity, quality of assessment and consistency in the treatment of foreign credentials. Guidelines for assessment of foreign credentials are also included, outlining procedures for the evaluation of foreign credentials, for the timely processing of evaluations of qualifications, for the provision of clear information about recognition as well as advice about fees, document requirements and appeals (Provincial Assessment Committee, 1998).

Canadian Sector Councils, which act as industry training authorities, have sponsored a range of joint sector initiatives to facilitate the implementation of RPL. These include an initiative of the Software Human Resources Council to develop partnerships with colleges across Canada to include RPL in the development of occupational skills profiles; the development of RPL processes in Tourism (Forum for International Trade Training) and the use of RPL to increase mobility across the Steel Industry (Canadian Steel Trades and Employment Congress), amongst others.

Certification bodies also have a role in supporting the implementation of RPL to support labour mobility across Canada. These include initiatives in nursing sponsored by the Alberta Association of Registered Nurses; in chartered accountancy, led by the Ontario Institute of Chartered Accountants and in forestry, an initiative of the Newfoundland and Labrador Fish Harvesters (Oars Training Inc., 2002; Robinson, 2003).

Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) is a national body that has a significant role in developing national RPL practices. HRDC works with provinces in identifying opportunities for research, cooperative arrangements and implementation support. The HRDC also supports bi-annual conferences on the topic of RPL and has

sponsored pilot projects designed to develop industry-college partnerships that have an RPL focus.

Examples of RPL in industry settings

Midwives of Manitoba Prior Learning Assessment and Experiential Assessment Project

Purpose

Midwifery was established as a registered profession in Canada in the 1990s. It is now regulated in five Canadian provinces. The College of Midwives was established in Manitoba in 2000 as the regulatory body for Manitoba midwives. Midwives must be legally registered to practice in Canada.

Midwives are primary care providers, which means that they can be solely responsible for the welfare and safety of mothers and babies. Thus it is vital that the processes used for establishing competence are rigorous and defensible.

In order to be awarded registration as a midwife, applicants had to prove competency against a set of core competencies and task lists. However, until recently there were no midwifery courses offered in Canada. Canadian colleges cannot produce enough midwives to meet the need. Individuals travel to the United States, and even as far as Australia to complete training courses. These people are considered to be foreign educated, along with immigrants who received training in their own countries. The regulation authority has committed to multiple entry routes for midwifery registration, in an attempt to include aboriginal midwives and others who had gained experience through work and related courses. A feasibility study confirmed that RPL could be used to assess the competencies of these groups.

Procedures

An RPL process was developed, called Prior Learning Assessment and Experiential Assessment. It was based on RPL models developed in Ontario and British Columbia. The RPL process is a lengthy one, taking eight months from the submission of the application to the end of the process. Applicants pay \$3,500 to be assessed, but this is paid in instalments, in an attempt to make it affordable. This fee is substantially less than the fee for a midwifery course. Seven applicants are participating in 2003.

Applicants undergo self-assessment against core competency assessment criteria. Self-assessment is designed to encourage the applicant to assess whether they have the core competencies and to consider whether they will be able to practice as expected. In Manitoba, as primary care givers, they are on call and have heavy responsibilities. After self-assessment they submit an application with supporting documentation. If this initial application is approved, applicants go on to complete four days of examinations, covering clinical practice and theory. The applicant's file is then reviewed by assessors and a final assessment report completed. Presently if gaps in competency are identified, there is no process for addressing these training needs. If an applicant is assessed as competent, she attends an orientation programme and applies for registration.

Features

This RPL project was developed to address a critical gap in the workforce. By developing RPL as one of the multiple pathways to registration, the College of Midwives provided an assessment system that was both extremely rigorous and fair.

Manitoba Hydro

Purpose

A strategic review of Manitoba Hydro's succession planning revealed that a large number of managers was due to retire over the next three years. A competency profile for human resource advisers was developed through a development needs assessment, carried out with workers, unions and management. The traditional benchmark for managers, a four-year commerce degree, was rejected because a group of long-serving employees would not meet this requirement and would be unfairly excluded from management positions.

Procedures

A communication strategy was developed to inform workers about the competency profile, its purpose and opportunities for RPL assessment.

An assessment development plan was developed for each candidate based on an assessment against the competency profile. Candidates carried out a self-assessment against the competency profile, and were asked to gather evidence, using an evidence guide designed to assist them to organize their evidence in a succinct and precise manner. Portfolios, the most commonly used format used for RPL assessments in Canada, were not used at Manitoba Hydro as they were considered inefficient and impractical. Candidates were not permitted to present a portfolio of evidence. Instead they had to summarize their evidence in a couple of pages. The amount of time taken to collect evidence was tracked throughout the project, and averaged between 50 and 100 hours per candidate. A temporary adviser supported candidates throughout the process.

Assessments were carried out drawing on evidence presented and panel discussions. The assessment panel consisted of a human resources manager, the head of training and the consultant who "built" the assessment system. A learning plan was developed after assessment. This plan outlined the credit earned, gaps in competencies and recommendations for development. These recommendations included formal education, involvement in strategic projects and cross-functional teams, and mentoring. Once the development process was completed, candidates were able to apply for management positions, having met the minimum requirements. Twelve candidates commenced the project. As it gained momentum this number increased to 36.

Features

The RPL process used at Manitoba Hydro provided candidates with clear information about what to expect during the RPL process and with support before assessment. The process, developed to provide opportunities to the existing workforce, was designed for the enterprise, by the enterprise, with expert input.

Manitoba Education and Youth Educational Assistant project

Purpose

A review of Special Education in Schools, completed in 1999, identified that people who worked with students with special learning needs required training. The role of education assistant has grown as an occupational group since children with special needs were included in the mainstream education system in 1968. Education assistants, typically, were parents who had special needs children themselves or people from the community who had experience with these children. Numbers of education assistants grew from zero in 1968 to 4,328 in 2003. They come from a range of backgrounds, some with extensive

work experience and no training, others with training and a couple of years of work experience. Consultations indicated that formal training was not an option for this group: their pay rates varied from \$7 to \$19.80 an hour. They could not afford to pay for formal education programmes, nor could they take a year off work to undertake training.

Procedures

A job analysis led to the development of work-related competencies and a set of six qualities relevant to all educational assistants in the Manitoba school system, no matter the context in which they worked. A development framework was produced, which had as its features individual growth plans, RPL including a range of assessment activities and development activities, such as mentorship, self-directed learning, workshops, reading, e-learning and workshops.

Features

The assessment and development aspect of the project has just started. The project team suggests that the development framework promotes lifelong learning by linking the recognition and development process to the current and future needs of the participants.

Conclusion

RPL has been used in Canada for over 30 years but the success of its implementation has been dependent on the will of provincial governments and the energy and commitment of individual “champions”. As governments change and champions join or leave the system, its fortunes ebb and flow.

While there are a number of national initiatives designed to support its implementation, the absence of a national educational system means that barriers still exist that prevent a systemic approach to RPL. These barriers result in an absence of mutual recognition across provincial boundaries, the lack of a recognition framework and qualifications framework and a sporadic (although increasingly consistent) development of national occupational or professional standards.

The community college system in Canada, providing as it does, technical and vocational training, is at the forefront of developing RPL processes for use in industry settings. Strong partnerships have been forged between these colleges and the private sector, and these partnerships are strengthening as industry gains a better understanding of how RPL can be applied in the workplace. The community colleges are also moving toward the development of outcomes-based curricula, and individual companies are developing enterprise-based competency standards, both of which will facilitate the take-up and application of RPL. Licensing and regulatory bodies are perhaps the most successful in developing RPL initiatives that have a national application.

There are considerable incentives for RPL to be implemented more broadly in Canada. The aboriginal population is the only sector of the Canadian-born population that is growing. Immigration is seen as the primary source of the labour force growth that is needed to sustain the country as its population ages and dwindles. The challenge is to develop RPL processes that meet the needs of the aboriginal peoples and the needs of the highly-skilled immigrants who are being attracted to the country.

United States

Background

The United States uses different terms for RPL, according to context. The terms accreditation of prior learning (APL) or Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) are most commonly used for credit provided to individuals seeking recognition of skills and knowledge acquired outside the classroom, against college credentials. The Council of Adult Experiential Learning (CAEL) defines PLA as:

... a method whereby learning gained through an individual's life experience is considered as credit toward a college degree program. As this learning can come from a variety of sources, including work, hobbies, military service and family responsibilities, this credit may be given depending on the criteria established by the PLA-offering institution. Prior Learning Assessment can be administered through exams, portfolios or curriculum evaluation (CAEL, 2003: 20).

In the United States, a report, "Less Time, More Options" produced by the Carnegie Commission in 1971, argued that a greater value should be placed on non-institutional learning. Recommendations arising from this report called for the broadening of post-secondary educational opportunities to include training in industry, in the military and through apprenticeships and that credit be given for this learning; secondly that more opportunities be given for older people to re-enter higher education and that lifelong learning be promoted and supported by government funding. This report and subsequent RPL activity was responding to changes in American society: changing demands for qualified workers, post World War II; changes in the demographic make-up of those involved in education; the increasing number of women who had to gain qualifications so that they could better pursue employment and changes in the characteristics of people attending college, bringing with it a different mix of ages, ethnic background and experience (Evans, 2000; Flint, 2003).

The Educational Testing Service was developed in 1974 in response to this commitment to the provision of greater access to education. Its mission was to develop alternative approaches to assessment, so that people who had developed skills and knowledge in non-classroom settings could have college-level learning recognized (Tate 1999; International Labour Office, 2003). Much of the work of this service was informed by work of the American Council on Education (ACE), which since 1942 had been providing a recognition service that assisted veterans to have the learning developed through military training recognized for academic credit purposes (Center for Adult Learning Educational Credentials, 2003).

RPL in the United States is more likely to be for the purposes of obtaining college credit rather than that of vocational certification, as the drive toward development of industry "competency standards" has only recently gained momentum. Some colleges in the United States award credit that is not course-specific, providing a more learner-centred approach, which can be instrumental in providing access to education for under-represented groups. This approach recognizes that knowledge achieved through life and work experience cannot easily be slotted into "academic divisions of knowledge", and recognizes the breadth of learning that an individual accrues (Michelson, 2000, p. 2).

Credit can be towards completing a degree or for college credits required for occupational purposes. Prior learning assessment is also used to gain entry in higher education, avoiding the requirement to first enroll in prerequisite or preparatory courses.

It is also possible to have prior learning recognized using the College Credit Recommendation Service (ACE credit system), where training provided by employers is

evaluated for credit toward college credentials (ACE, 2003). Workplace courses are given parity with degree courses and potential college students are able to refer to a national guide, which lists the courses for which credit has been granted. In the case of ACE credit, there is no need for a case-by-case APL.

The American post-secondary or higher education system awards students credit hours towards educational qualifications. For example, a student must earn 124 credit hours in order to gain a bachelor degree. Fifteen hours of classroom instruction translates to one credit hour. Many colleges have a limit on the amount of credit that can be gained through RPL assessment. This limit is typically 30 hours.

Junior or community colleges (also called two-year colleges) act as a bridge between high school and four-year colleges for many students. Students who have attended a junior college can complete their degrees at a four-year university. Vocational education and training courses are typically offered at the two-year colleges, and it is these programmes that have a strong link to the non-recognized training offered at workplaces. The content of college courses is not always clearly understood and credit transfer between institutions is not automatic.

The implementation of RPL in the United States is idiosyncratic. There is no national RPL policy but many examples of RPL practice. The processes used to establish credit against college courses are described below.

The College Credit Recommendation Service (known as the ACE credit system) examines training undertaken at the workplace. This system examines the outcomes of non-college courses and examinations and determines in which college courses this training would earn credit. A database of the decisions is maintained by the service (College Credit Recommendation Service, 2003). Not all colleges in the United States accept the advice of the College Credit Recommendation Service, and to date ACE has evaluated only a small proportion of all formal training offered in that country (College Credit Recommendation Service 2003; Robins 2003). This may be due to the cost to employers for programme evaluation, which can be prohibitive for smaller organizations. In addition, not all learning can be categorized into a traditional subject area, and for some subject areas there is not a standardized test available. Importantly, the use of systems that employ a traditional method of assessment (the standardized test), does not necessarily suit the needs of the non-traditional learner (Mann, 1998).

Credit can also be gained for military experience, where some colleges have a system that recognizes specific military documents as a basis for college credit. These documents include reports of transfer or discharge, or reports of evaluation of military experiences during military service (ACE, 2002). People in the military can also take Defense Activity for Nontraditional Support (DANTES) examinations to establish credit toward undergraduate credits (Fjortoft et al., 2001; University of Phoenix Online, 2003).

Another system is the College Level Examination Program (CLEP), which provides students with the opportunity to demonstrate college-level achievement through a programme of exams in undergraduate college courses. There are 2,900 colleges that grant credit and/or advanced standing for CLEP exams (College Board.com, 2003). The DANTES examinations are now used for non-military purposes, although more colleges accept the CLEP tests.

Learners can also have their learning recognized through portfolio assessment. This process recognizes documented learning that has taken place in contexts other than educational institutions. Many institutions also accept portfolios that document learning developed through life experience and work experience. The portfolio also provides a narrative of the candidate's life and an expression of the person's personal and career

goals. The development of a portfolio is viewed as an educative process in itself and has spawned the development of Prior Learning Assessment courses, where potential applicants for RPL enroll in a course that assists them to compile an experiential learning portfolio (University of Phoenix Online, 2003). Portfolio assessment ascertains to what degree a candidate possesses learning that will translate into the college context (Mann, 1998). The amount of credit available is limited and credit granted may not be transferable to other colleges. Applicants need to be enrolled at the college on order to gain access to this option (Fjortoft, 2001; Robins, 2003; University of Phoenix Online, 2003).

A scan of American college websites indicates that while portfolio assessment is widely offered, there are few examples of this method of assessment being supplemented by other assessment methods, with the exception of examinations. This reliance on portfolio assessment has the potential to disadvantage RPL applicants who have limited time or who do not have highly developed literacy and organizational skills. Michelson suggests that many RPL applicants do not want, or need, to enter into the process of self-exploration that typifies the portfolio preparation process. Instead they want a route to credit that is efficient while maintaining validity and rigour. She adds that the portfolio process and the “narrative logic” that underpins it can disadvantage women and people from working class and non-western traditions, given that a “linear journey to coherence and self-mastery” is not relevant to these groups. She suggests that what is needed is a variety of assessment methods and an opening up of what constitutes “knowledge” so that collective learning can be recognized and built upon (Michelson, 2000).

Enterprises work with colleges and universities to determine how workers can gain access to, or credit within, college courses. Thus industry is required to respond to the conventions laid down by the educational institution, rather than professional or vocational conventions. This may disadvantage the students whose learning is developed at the workplace or through informal learning, as this learning has to be expressed in a way that is palatable to the educational institution (Michelson, 2000).

A national survey conducted in the early 1990s by CAEL of each of the 3,694 accredited post-secondary institutions in the United States indicated that 86 per cent of the 47 per cent who responded were assessing prior learning. The majority of this activity was for undergraduate qualifications. The most common method of assessment was by examination, through CLEP, advanced placement examinations and DANTE examinations. Seventy-six per cent of the respondents awarded credit on the basis of assessment through standardized tests, with 42 per cent awarding credit through portfolio assessment, taking into account work and life experience (Mann, 1998; Fjortoft, 2001). Recent data regarding the take-up of RPL in the United States is not available. There is presently no means for identifying credits through federal government survey data other than those earned through instructional methods (Flint, 2003).

There is some resistance to RPL in academic institutions, particularly universities. In the early days of the implementation of RPL academics were not always accepting of the idea that a candidate for RPL could have developed the skills, knowledge and attributes that would take them three or four years to develop in a university, through life or work experience or by completing courses at another institution. Educational institutions that have no difficulty in filling their enrolments still resist the notion of RPL, as is the case in most countries. Change to these attitudes came about where there is increased competition for students and where government policies have led to funding incentives directed to broadening access to education (Evans, 2000).

As RPL (that is, credit for experiential learning) is customized to the individual, it is considered expensive and time-consuming. Mann (1998) suggests that not all learning matches what is taught in college courses, and some learning is difficult to document and substantiate. However, she argues that RPL is a valuable strategy for people who have not

been able to access further education because of a range of factors including time, distance, finances and opportunity as well as an effective process for avoiding duplication of training effort and therefore presenting some opportunities for saving time and resources for industry.

One key barrier to the implementation of RPL in the United States is the absence of outcomes-based curricula. Where institutions are not able to clearly articulate what it is that is taught in college courses, potential RPL applicants have difficulty in preparing an RPL application. Added to this, the potential for recognizing the learning undertaken in one college by another college is diminished where a clear expression of what is learnt is not available. The development of benchmarks for assessment and assessment policies is still in its infancy in the United States, although the American Association for Higher Education has instituted a series of conferences on assessment and quality, designed to address this problem.

RPL has now to respond to changes brought about by changes in demography and funding for education. For example, the increased participation of women, people from ethnic minorities, and migrants in the workforce will have an impact on the style of RPL offered and the education level at which RPL is offered. Added to this is the critical part that training will play in the development of the skills of workers, in response to skills shortages presently experienced in industry (Uhalde et al., 2003). Another factor that will influence the development of RPL in the United States is the increased cost of higher education and the need to introduce greater efficiency because of this factor, perhaps leading to more extensive use of RPL on entry to college courses. There is also a momentum in the United States toward the development of volunteer national occupational skill standards as a basis for employment. This movement may well change the acceptance of college qualifications and cause a stronger drive towards industry-based qualifications, or cause college curricula to better accommodate the requirements of industry. RPL may have a stronger role in securing pathways between these standards and college credentials (Evans, 2000).

Use of RPL to recognize workplace learning

(Provided by Maryanne LeGrow, Ph.D. Charter Oak State College)

Purpose

The Charter Oak State College (COSC) was established in 1973 by the Connecticut Legislature to provide an alternative way for adults to earn a college degree. The College is accredited by the Connecticut Board of Governors for Higher Education and the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, and functions under the degree-granting authority of Connecticut's Board for State Academic Awards. Charter Oak is a virtual college offering both online and video based courses, although degree candidates are free to enroll in courses at any accredited institution and are not required to use only Charter Oak courses to complete their degree requirements. Degrees are offered at both the associate and baccalaureate levels. About 70 per cent of the college's approximately 1,600 students are Connecticut residents; the remaining 30 per cent are residents of other states, the District of Columbia, or foreign countries.

In addition to credit earned through classroom and online courses, Charter Oak accepts credit from and facilitates a number of methods of Prior Learning Assessment for students to obtain credit toward college degrees. Nationally recognized standardized testing, some credit recommendations from institutions such as the ACE, and course credit from non-collegiate programmes evaluated by COSC under the auspices of the Connecticut State Board for Academic Awards are accepted toward COSC degrees. In addition, students who hold licensure or certification on the state or national level or

professional certification in a specialty may request assessment of the license or certification for college credit.

The most popular form of Prior Learning Assessment is via PLA Portfolio. The majority of individuals who earn portfolio credit through Charter Oak's programme are experienced mid-career adult students (average age 42 years) who intend to use it toward completion of a college degree. Assessment is also available to individuals such as fire and police officers to earn college credits required for advancement toward professional promotion without intending to use it toward a degree. For these individuals, the portfolio process is the same as for degree students and results in the same type of college credit.

Procedures

In the PLA Portfolio, students challenge specific college courses by submitting personal narratives and supporting documentation to explain where, when and how the knowledge was acquired and to demonstrate how their knowledge equals what is taught in the course being challenged. Workshops explaining the portfolio process are available on site and by video, a handbook is provided, and students work closely with an adviser who mentors their progress in writing narratives, assembling documentation, and constructing the portfolio.

- Portfolios must reflect an appropriate balance between theory and practice. Therefore, a portfolio must contain evidence demonstrating the student's understanding of the major theories, schools of thought, and principles underlying the specific course and the subject at large as well as evidence of the application of this knowledge in other settings. The narrative is a written statement, which serves as a bridge between the course description and the evidence. An effective narrative:
- Describes the student's relevant experience;
- Articulates the learning the student acquired through experience;
- Describes each piece of evidence the student presents, the authenticity, the learning;
- Explains the rationale for including each piece of evidence;
- Analyses the importance of the learning to the student's success in the subject and beyond; and
- Illustrates the student's understanding of the principles and major theories of the course under assessment.

Evidence must be direct, authentic, college-level and broad enough to warrant the award of credit. Portfolio evidence is whatever the student presents to demonstrate college-level learning. Depending on the subject, learning may be demonstrated by a combination of documents, products or performances. A portfolio may contain challenges to multiple courses in multiple areas of expertise. COSC does not limit the number of credits that may be earned through portfolio assessment.

Portfolios are independently reviewed by two faculty members who are currently teaching in regionally accredited institutions of higher education. In the event that their assessments do not agree, the portfolio is submitted to a third faculty member. Credit awards are submitted to the COSC Faculty Assessment Committee for final approval.

Groups of this type (i.e., fire, Emergency Medical Service, law enforcement personnel) tend to require course credit in specific amounts, not at specified levels or for

particular courses. In most cases credit need not be in their professional areas, and they therefore do not require academic advising.

Acquiring credit through portfolio development allows individuals to draw on personal and professional experience to document college-level knowledge without having to spend time in a classroom “re-learning” material they already know. In comparison to traditional means of acquiring college credit, the advantages include shortened time to reach goals; the convenience of working at home, by phone, fax, e-mail or postal system; ease of accessibility to advising via e-mail and phone; and significantly reduced cost.

At present, the primary difficulty from the student point of view is that many individuals who might attempt PLA portfolio assessment are put off by the fear of having to write a detailed narrative that analyses their non-classroom learning. Although completion of a college level English composition requirement is a prerequisite to being accepted for portfolio development, many potential students have not done any sort of formal written work in quite a long time. For those who are willing to try, there is available individual advising and mentoring that usually enables them to overcome the problem.

Conclusion

America has a rich history in the use of RPL and has influenced the take-up of recognition processes in many international settings. A variety of RPL practices have been developed to suit the requirements of groups of learners, particularly in community colleges, and individual States have instituted RPL practices and policies, in the absence of a national RPL policy.

RPL has a role in the United States to assist in addressing present and projected skills shortages. While it had its basis in the provision of an equitable system that provided greater access to education, RPL is challenged by the need to better respond to the needs of new groups of workers entering the workforce.

The movement toward outcomes-based curricula and the development of occupational skills standards will further promote the recognition of workers’ skills and increase opportunities for lifelong learning.

Part C. RPL compared

RPL and the workplace

The extent to which RPL is implemented in the workplace in the countries studied is dependent on a number of factors.

One factor is the role that industry bodies choose to take in designing and driving the RPL process. For example, in South Africa the industry Sector Education and Training Authorities have designed RPL processes for workers that are tailored to their needs and to the needs of enterprises, and while partnerships with educational institutions are not excluded from these RPL processes, they are not central to it. In Canada, the certification bodies for regulated professions have developed RPL practices for their jurisdictions and the Canadian Sector Councils have sponsored a range of initiatives to promote RPL at the workplace. In Australia and New Zealand Industry Training Boards and Industry Training Organizations have a substantial impact on the way that assessment (including RPL) is carried out, and assessment practices in these countries provide many opportunities for RPL to be applied in the workplace. In the United States, Industry has less of an impact on how RPL is played out, and it remains firmly in the domain of the educational institutions.

While occupational standards and outcomes-based curricula are becoming more common in the United States and Canada, RPL assessments are still typically carried out in relation to benchmarks that are not fully defined but rest on a sense of what a student should achieve should he or she complete part of a qualification. These benchmarks are not always tangible and are defined by academics for the purposes of academia. Where industry's skills development needs in these countries match courses conducted in colleges and universities the needs of industry are met through RPL processes. Where there is not a match substantial development work needs to be done in developing enterprise standards to facilitate assessment. The lines between industry and training institutions are not as clearly defined in South Africa, Australia and New Zealand, where, in the technical and vocational systems, at least, the benchmarks for assessment are units of competency.

A related issue is the structural integration of industry with education and training, through the implementation of national qualifications frameworks. The education and training systems in both Canada and the United States are decentralized and idiosyncratic, and while valuable partnerships between industry and education and training institutions are in place in these countries, these are based on State and provincial initiatives, with some notable national examples. Organizations such as CAEL in the United States, and Human Resource Development Canada have promoted partnerships between industry and educational institutions, often with RPL as their focus. However, as the awarding bodies it is the educational institutions that determine what skills and knowledge is valuable. In South Africa, New Zealand and Australia, the presence of national systems, which include national qualifications frameworks, allows industry to have a greater part in the awarding of national qualifications. It could be argued that this allows industry to have a stronger say regarding the shape that RPL takes and the extent to which it is implemented in the workplace, allowing it to have a clear workforce focus.

In considering a model of good RPL practice in the workplace, the following emerges:

Best practice feature	Strategies*
Clear rationale	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Workers understand the role of RPL in their career development-this is not always related to gaining credentials (e.g. see NZ – Seafoods ITO; SA – Construction Education and Training) Management recognize and use RPL as a business development tool, and provide adequate resources (e.g. Can. – Manitoba Hydro) Unions see RPL as an opportunity, not as a threat, and assist in shaping and promoting the RPL process (e.g. see Aust. – Worker Assistance Programme-Forestry industry)
Process development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Benchmarks are developed/used that allow the candidate to succeed, at least to some extent (e.g. NZ – Building and Construction) Assessment processes are valid for what is being assessed and fair for who is being assessed (e.g. Aust. – Sydney Opera House – Arts and Entertainment) Flexibility is built into the assessment processes (e.g. NZ – Hospitality Standards Institute) Rigour is maintained through the use of trained assessors (all of the examples require this) RPL is voluntary (e. g. Aust. – AOD workers) Industry is involved in the development and validation of the approach (e.g. SA – MERSETA) An infrastructure for the training and registration of assessors is established (e.g. Australia, South Africa and New Zealand)
Information to key players	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Champions are identified to promote RPL and to support candidates (e.g. NZ Seafood ITO) Information is appropriate in terms of complexity and language-the candidate has to be able to ‘see themselves’ in the process (e.g. Retail ITO)
Implementation should be cost and time effective, while being fair	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sufficient time is allowed Individual support is provided to identify skills (e.g. Can. – Midwives of Manitoba PLEA project) Skills not related to the benchmark should be acknowledged (e.g. SA – HWSETA) Holistic assessment should be used, to reflect the way skills and knowledge are applied in the workplace (e.g. SA – Theta) Collection of evidence should not be unnecessarily onerous and should not rely solely on documentation (e.g. Aust. – ATA-Bicycle mechanics)
Post-assessment is fair and equitable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessment decisions and the reasons for these decisions should be given as soon as possible (e.g. USA – COSC) There should be avenues for appeal (e.g. all SA models) Options for addressing skills gaps should be available, and counselling regarding options provided (e.g. NZ – Building and Construction)
Review processes should be representative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data about the process and its implementation should be collected throughout (e.g. see SA – CHIETA) Unions, management and candidates should be involved in process review (e.g. SA – CHIETA)

* The examples cited against each of the strategies are not exhaustive. All of the examples could be cited against many of these strategies.

National qualifications frameworks

It can be seen that where they exist NQFs have a central role in RPL, especially in Australia and South Africa. In the three cases of Australia, New Zealand and South Africa they contribute towards “outcomes-based qualifications” models in the TVET sectors, and

in the case of New Zealand and South Africa potentially in other sectors. They also include standards and qualifications for assessors, and recognition and quality assurance procedures that stipulate the role of trained and registered assessors.

As noted in the New Zealand and Australian cases RPL has merged into “good assessment practices” as the recognition frameworks for VET do not differentiate between learning achieved through formal and informal means. This also is the case in South Africa. However RPL is also being used as a platform for redressing inequalities in society.

NQFs have their critics (Young, 2003). Apart from their intrinsic structures they are seen by some as being captured by regulator requirements that will deny their enabling intents. At issue for this report, however, is whether they are an enabling or an inhibiting factor in the propagation of RPL and its good practice. The factors that generate RPL are mostly localized. They include the motivation of industry, union and provider personnel, and also the potential candidates. The institutional factors that influence its take-up include the recognition infrastructures and information systems, but as shown through the country studies the financing arrangements have a major impact.

In general it can be concluded that NQFs are a positive factor in the practice of RPL. They can establish common benchmarks and quality systems, which in the cases of the three relevant countries included in this study allow for the formal equivalence of qualifications recognized through RPL and formal course assessments. What they do not and cannot be expected to do is act as generators and promoters of RPL. This needs to occur closer to the action at the workplace and provider levels.

RPL and practice

RPL is just gaining momentum in South Africa, with the development of national policies. As in New Zealand and Australia, RPL in South Africa is viewed as part of a national assessment system, although it carries with it a weighty responsibility in terms of equity and access, more so in than in the other countries included in this study.

RPL has the longest history in the United States and it is to this country, and particularly to the developmental work undertaken by CAEL, that the other four countries owe a substantial legacy. RPL was formally introduced in Canada 30 years ago and its success has depended on some national initiatives and the commitment of the provincial governments to its implementation: hence its fortunes have fluctuated. While RPL has not been fully implemented in Australia and New Zealand, it has become an accepted feature of the vocational education and training systems.

In all of the countries studied, it is the technical and vocational providers of education and training that have more vigorously embraced RPL, perhaps because it is these institutions that have the most highly developed outcomes-based curricula, and because their courses are most closely aligned to skills development in the workplace, allowing the links between the workplace and what is taught in institutions to be acknowledged.

The barriers to the implementation of RPL are similar in each of the five countries. These barriers are at a systems level, an institutional level and an individual level. However, none of these countries have collected sufficient data about RPL outcomes to paint an accurate picture of how successfully RPL has been implemented, nor are there clearly defined benchmarks regarding how much RPL is considered desirable, and why. Given the amount of “informal”, undocumented RPL that potentially takes place in the five countries (for example, where RPL is not separated from traditional assessment), it is not possible to develop an accurate picture.

RPL practices are also similar in each of the five countries, although there is more of an emphasis on assessment by portfolio in the United States and Canada. The common features are the provision of information about RPL and the assessment benchmarks, the collection of evidence by the applicant (with varying amounts of support), assessment by people with expertise, decision-making and a review or appeals process (again, the extent to which this is offered varies across jurisdictions). Countries have a greater or lesser level of flexibility built into their RPL processes. The cost of RPL to applicants varies to a great extent across and within countries.

Barriers

The countries that have been examined in this report are at the international forefront of the development of RPL. The United States was possibly the first country to develop the concept and practice. New Zealand and Australia have institutionalized the practices for well over a decade. Canada also has a long history and is at the forefront of conceptual developments. South Africa has invested heavily in the concept and its practice.

In all countries, however, recognition of learning through RPL and its various forms account for a small proportion of formal recognition through qualifications systems. To a large extent this is to be expected as the workplace and community life are not linked to qualifications systems and cultures. This has been the role of the formal education and training sectors and providers. Nevertheless, RPL offers major advantages for countries in the more efficient use of educational resources and their agendas of lifelong learning, industry in the development of workplace training and skills cultures, providers in the efficient delivery of courses, and individuals in savings in investment in learning, and personal and financial rewards. Therefore, it is likely that the patterns of take-up of RPL are as much to do with the barriers to it as they are to the benefits that it brings. These barriers are institutional, organizational, cultural and individual.

Institutional

Institutional barriers typically include course and qualifications structures and rules, awarding rules, and financing arrangements.

- At a fundamental level general and vocational qualifications are built upon different domains of learning. In some countries these differences are formalized in the form of competency-based curriculum and qualifications. Such qualifications are explicit in their location of learning in the applied, and even workplace practice, domains. Most competency-based systems that derive directly from regulated and semi-regulated occupations include specific input requirements in the form of workplace experience (e.g. Australia, United Kingdom), although some do not (e.g. Mexico). Countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia that no longer have a middle institutional path between universities and technical and vocational colleges (Further Education in the United Kingdom, and Technical and Further Education in Australia) tend to lack an intermediary between the two domains of cognitive and applied learning. In the United Kingdom, as Young (2001) has suggested there is a tendency for general vocational qualifications to drift towards the academic and the generic. These difficulties are most apparent in Australia and New Zealand, and there are some signs of difficulties in South Africa.
- Awarding rules and practices tend to be institutionally specific. They are mostly built around course participation and completion. Hence assessment systems are either not readily accessible to people seeking RPL, or the financing of the assessments is not separated from the financing of courses. In most countries public financing is based upon taught or student contact hours (New Zealand), and few countries have

systematized financing for RPL. For this reason, full fee courses tend to be more flexible in the use of RPL.

- Awarding of qualifications or credit towards qualifications is mostly in the hands of providers or awarding bodies, some of which delegate the responsibility to providers. Thus, while countries such as Australia and South Africa have institutionalized the recognition of learning, including workplace learning, outside of formal course enrolments, the associated assessment practices are mostly institutionally based. Where assessments can be undertaken in the workplace there have been endemic problems of quality control (Schofield, 2000).
- RPL tends to exist outside of the main institutional arrangements for education and training, which continue to be based upon the primary supply side function of delivery of “taught hours” or “student contact hours”. For example, in Australia the mechanisms exist for implementing RPL, but the key barrier is funding arrangements (Selby Smith and Ferrier, 2002). The costs of RPL for most providers are substantial and government-funding arrangements serve as a disincentive to provide recognition services and an incentive to provide training services, even if the person is already competent.

Organizational

Organizational barriers are the practices of awarding and funding bodies, and education and training providers that prevent individuals from accessing and getting through the arrangements that are in place for RPL.

Raffe (2003) has used the term “institutional logic” to describe the tendency for the structures of qualifications systems and the behaviour of education and training providers to subvert the “intrinsic logic” of innovations designed to achieve seamlessness, including the recognition of informal and non-formal learning. Institutional logic within organizations would include the procedures and rules for awarding qualifications that are based upon course enrolment and completion. RPL mostly has been crafted on to these procedures and rules. Also some training providers find it very difficult to accommodate the student who receives RPL for part of a programme. This has been the experience of New Zealand, Australia, South Africa and Canada. This is especially where an apprenticeship is involved, as the length of the apprenticeship is dictated by the industrial based apprenticeship contract. Thus the provider’s duty of care/training agreement is set within this time period and it is necessary to provide a programme for the apprentice.

- The frequent experience of credit transfer and RPL innovations has been that organizational barriers are multi-level – institutional management, department and practitioner. Often it is not in the financial interest of providers to give RPL, especially if the financing arrangements do not cover RPL assessment procedures. To be done properly RPL requires a considerable amount of time that needs to be funded in some manner.
- The organizational barriers for people that have considerable work experience but little formal education can be significant. Most people work in small enterprises that would not have any training programmes that incorporate RPL. Therefore, they are required to seek RPL through an external organization, which in most cases is a provider or an awarding body. While some countries such as Australia have established “assessor only” providers of VET, there are few of them, and they tend to be accessed by organizations such as trade unions that are conducting training programmes. Although a number of countries do have established bodies to support workplace training and the recognition of skills (South Africa, Australia, New Zealand), in some cases these bodies are not awarding bodies, as governments view

this as a conflict of interest. Industry associations are important players in vocational training, but as recognition or awarding bodies that mainly deal with companies and providers.

Cultural

There can be both supply and demand side cultural resistance to RPL. Australian and South African experiences have located a lack of faith on the part of some teachers in the process (unless I teach it, I don't know that they know it), overly rigorous assessment processes, processes where there is not enough rigour, lack of infrastructure to support RPL, eg. funded time for assessments, not enough time to meet the needs of RPL applicants, cost of administration (DEET, 2001). Added to this is the problem that trainees/students often do not participate in RPL because they feel that they might be missing out on what is covered in a training programme, or have little confidence in their skills.⁹ Additionally putting together an RPL application can be time consuming. Demand side barriers can be a suspicion on the part of both students and employers that qualifications gain partially or wholly through RPL lack some legitimacy.

Individual

Possible the main barrier to RPL is the behaviour of the individual. RPL like formal qualifications systems acts within a market. The supply of RPL is controlled by infrastructure and behaviour of awarding and recognition bodies. There has been a considerable amount of investment in countries like Australia and New Zealand to establish a more diversified and flexible supply, including the capacity of enterprises to award qualifications or statements of attainment. In these countries awards and statements can be based upon "assessment only" rather than being confined to course enrolment and completion. Some countries (South Africa) also have invested in the financing of RPL and other measures designed to remove or reduce the disincentives for providers and other bodies to award RPL. However, less attention has been given to the demand side. While most countries have attempted to encourage individuals to invest in continuing education and training and lifelong learning, less attention has been given to how individuals can be encouraged to access RPL opportunities as a means of advancing their learning.

- People with high levels of education are more likely to invest in further education and training. Conversely, people with weak education histories are often reluctant to engage formal education systems, and especially formal assessment arrangements that are built into RPL procedures.
- Individuals that might access provider or externally based RPL systems frequently find it difficult to gain information about these systems. On the other hand, work based RPL systems are more prevalent in large enterprises and in regulated occupations. In these cases there is a tendency for tacit or explicit expectations of a time served element to be built into the awarding procedures.
- Some of the examples from the country studies show that when RPL is linked to industry needs (e.g. Building and Construction and Seafoods industries in New Zealand, and Midwives in Canada), especially in times of change or crisis, there is a potential for RPL to be used as one of the strategies to address these situations.

⁹ Based upon student/trainee interviews during audits of training providers undertaken by one of the authors.

Lessons and issues

The successful implementation of RPL is facilitated by:

- a high level of commitment by policy makers, which is taken up by practitioners and their institutions, and the availability of clear benchmarks;
- an RPL process that does not hinder access:
 - which is promoted to applicants in such a way that they can see where their learning fits within the system that they are hoping to penetrate; and
 - which offers flexibility and reliability;
 - as well as rigour, and funding models and pathways that ensure that participants do save time and money; and
- the presence of strong links between the education and training sector, and industry.

These features are present in many of the good practice examples of RPL found in this report but were not necessarily evident at a systemic level.

Issues that need further exploration are:

- how knowledge is understood, valued and viewed by the stakeholders in the RPL process: whether cohorts of people, especially those whose skills are derived from workplace and life experience, suffer disadvantage because they do not know how to successfully engage with the organizations that award credentials;
- what level of RPL is desirable: what is a “successful RPL system” in light of the amount of unrecognized skills within a community;
- how RPL can be funded to facilitate more extensive take-up of RPL, and whether the cost of RPL is actually the barrier that it is perceived to be in much of the research (a perception that has not been fully tested).

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