

Engaging VET Practitioners Forum RPL – Done Well

Think piece

RPL: Yes, we are there!

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Overview

At the AVETRA conference in 2003 I presented a paper titled 'Has RPL served its purpose?' Over the past three years I have been tempted to draft an RPL paper with the title 'Are we there yet?' In light of the approach for this forum I decided to entitle this paper in the positive and acknowledge that we are there, and we do have the positive core of capabilities in VET people to deliver RPL effectively, but that the statistical collection standards (AVETMISS) and an outmoded view of what is RPL may in fact be clouding our VET RPL landscape.

Defining RPL

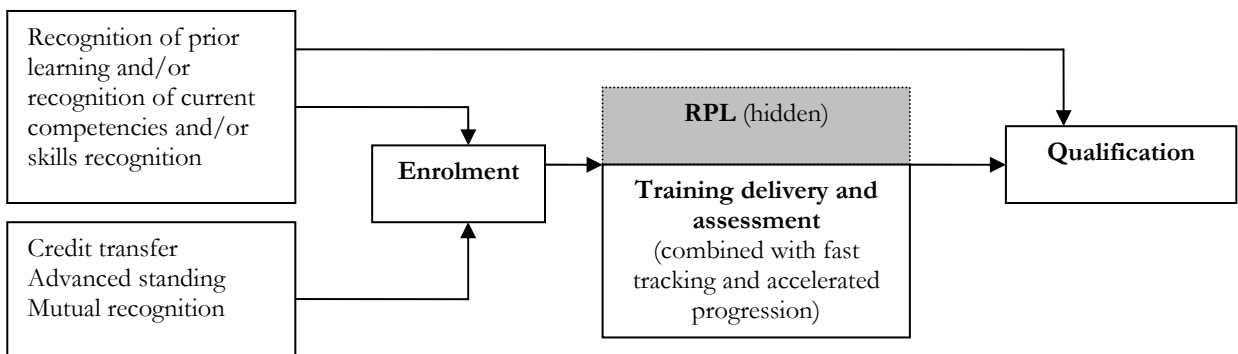
RPL in the current *AQTF Standards for RTOs* defines RPL as the:

...recognition of competencies currently held, regardless of how, when or where the learning occurred. RPL assesses the individual's prior learning to determine the extent to which that individual is currently competent against the required learning outcomes, competency outcomes, or standards for entry to, and/or partial or total completion of, a qualification¹.

RPL falls at one end of the assessment spectrum; that is RPL is an assessment data collection point that is not attached to training or has occurred prior to training. In terms of data collection, the AVETMIS Standard does not capture information about 'partial RPL' situations, such as the granting of RPL for outcomes which form part of a larger unit of delivery (Bateman & Knight 2003). In addition, assessments offered as various opportunities for skills recognition through processes referred to as accelerated learning, early assessment, fast-tracking and challenge testing, which are offered after tuition has begun are not captured (Bowman et al 2004).

The line between 'pure' RPL and other forms of assessment, sometimes referred to as 'fast track' and 'partial RPL' are not clear nor are they differentiated in the data collection. Bateman & Knight (2003) suggest that probably a more realistic view is to regard RPL as a form of 'accelerated progression' (p. 24). This form of accelerated progression is a practice adopted by many providers (Bateman & Knight 2003). Bowman, Clayton, Bateman, Knight, Thomson, Hargreaves, Blom and Enders (2003) attempted to articulate the 'hidden' RPL diagrammatically:

¹ ANTA 2005, *AQTF Standards for RTOs*, p. 17.



They acknowledged that:

A number of jurisdictions noted that strategies such as ‘fast track’ and ‘early assessment’ were more effective strategies for recognition than the traditional methodology of RPL assessment conducted up-front and prior to training (p. 47).

What does it look like?

For some VET practitioners, RPL is a framework in which a specific form of assessment occurs; for others it is an assessment at a point in time; and for others it is a purpose of assessment. However, if one takes the view that RPL is an assessment, which does not take place at the end of training, then RPL manifests itself in many guises. Therefore we experience RPL:

- close to enrolment
- just before training begins or on the cusp of training
- within a training scenario and negotiated with the trainer
- as part of a package of units of competency assessments (e.g. possibly as part of an EBA or wage agreement or re-skilling arrangements)
- as part of the development of an individual learning plan.

RPL in these various forms is given different names, such as:

- Recognition of Current Competencies
- Diagnostic or formative assessment
- Skills recognition
- Early progression
- Up-front assessments
- Challenge tests.

Ultimately, RPL is an assessment and needs to be included within the broader framework of assessment, and be bound by the same principles and rules of evidence and quality assurance arrangements as other assessments. As such RPL should have parity of esteem with other forms of assessment.

What are the enablers of success?

It is critical in the discussions of RPL to differentiate between the ‘concept of RPL’ and the framework or processes developed to address RPL. Most discussions of RPL centre on the processes of RPL rather than any apparent resistance to the notion of RPL.

RPL is practised effectively by many VET practitioners. Over the years a number of researchers have attempted to identify the factors which promote or enable an

effective RPL process. In the early years much of the information pertaining to enabling factors was gleaned from effective practice models and from strategies to redress the perceived barriers to RPL. Much of the information does not go beyond the RPL process and there is very little critical analysis of more macro influences (Ballantine 1995, Hummel 1995, O'Connor 1995, SA TAFE 1995a, SA TAFE 1995b, Talbot 1997, Harrison 1995, WA DET 1995, Wilson & Lilly 1996).

More recent research in this field aimed to synthesise the literature and current data (Bateman & Knight 2003), provide concrete examples or case studies (Blom, Clayton, Bateman, Bedggood & Hughes 2004), and look at the drivers and barriers to effective implementation (Bowman, Clayton, Bateman, Knight, Thomson, Hargreaves, Blom and Enders 2003).

Bateman & Knight (2003, p. 15 & 16) summarised enabling factors as being:

- Support of candidates through the process (Talbot 1997)
- Streamlined process, user friendly and efficient (SA TAFE 1997)
- Processes that are client focussed and provided support for applicants (Ballantine 1995, Hummel 1995, SA TAFE 1995a)
- Adjusted student enrolment and counselling procedures (Hummel 1995, Wilson & Lilly 1996)
- Maintain course standards processes to be inclusive of RPL processes (Wilson & Lilly 1996)
- Establish formal networks (Wilson & Lilly 1996)
- Ensure evidence of prior learning is consistent with assessments within training programs (Wilson & Lilly 1996)
- Ensure consistency across all training organisations (Wilson & Lilly 1996)
- Targeted marketing (Ballantine 1995, O'Connor 1995, WA DET 1995)
- Non-graded assessments to be used with RPL (Harrison 1995)
- Include self assessment in the process (Ballantine 1995)

This final report (Bowman et al 2003) provides an overview of enabling features (as it pertains to the all applicants who may be deemed 'disadvantaged') which are cited below (p. 39):

Areas for improvement	Possible actions
Promotion of RPL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct targeted marketing • Make links with community based organisations to disseminate information • Actively 'sell' the advantages to the clients
Process improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make processes simpler, less threatening and as user friendly as possible
Enhanced communication strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use plain English in written materials • Use other forms of communication methods to reduce the reliance on written documentation • Offer online option for remote applicants
Support for applicants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide opportunities for access to pre-interview processes • Provide access to disability consultants or counsellors • Coach candidates for process • Allow mentors or support people to be involved • Provide more encouragement • Provide specific support, e.g. language, literacy and numeracy
Support for assessors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide staff with the skills to assist with recognition for disadvantaged applications, including language and literacy • Utilise assessors and key support people in team to support the recognition assessment process • Provide clearer strategies for dealing with overseas experience/qualifications • Provide resources such as assessment kits

These enabling features were drawn from observations of effective practice of RPL and are a useful underpinning list for the *RPL-Done Well* forums convened by Reframing the Future.

Effective practice examples

One of the key findings from the research conducted by Blom et al (2004) was that a 'one size fits all' approach to RPL is inappropriate in developing recognition processes. The following examples of effective practice that are customised to suit a particular situation emanate from the literature (Bowman et al. 2004) and from professional conversations with VET practitioners. In some instances they have been adapted.

Improvement areas	Examples
Promotion of RPL	A large public registered training organisation has developed a video informing potential students of RPL (which plays at enrolment time).
Process improvement	Registered training organisations are reviewing their formal RPL documents to ensure that they are simpler, and provide the applicant and the trainers with clear guidelines regarding process.
Enhanced communication strategies	One large public registered training organisation has developed a website in order to offer a 'one-stop shop' that provides a single, authoritative source of RPL information, not only for their students, but also for their staff (adapted from Bowman et al 2004, p. 19).
Support for applicants	One registered training organisation offers students the opportunity to enrol in a module, Preparation for skills recognition, to provide them with extensive support in preparing their RPL application. The module is additional to a student's program of study. A teacher is allocated to the module as a facilitator and support person, and the hours are counted as part of the teacher's annual load. Students learn skills of self-assessment as well as the skills and knowledge they need to understand VET, particularly in terms of the qualification for which they are seeking recognition. On completion of the module, students submit their completed RPL application and are granted recognition on the basis of it. The module itself is not assessable. This approach gives teachers the time to deliver the skills and knowledge required for students to successfully understand the RPL concept and the evidence requirements (Bowman et al 2004, p. 24).
Support for assessors	<p>One large public registered training organisation is developing an on-line system for assessors to use to manage the recognition process; it includes templates and standard letters.</p> <p>One enterprise registered training organisation has gone through their Training Package to identify what the critical pieces of evidence are that must be provided by learners to receive recognition. The RTO has established an approach that is based on candidates using a self-assessment tool to clarify the skills and experiences that they already possess. It is a similar approach to the Frontline Management Initiative Toolbox. They are asked to complete a checklist which asks them to consider 'Things I know', 'Things I do' and 'The documents that I have' (Bowman et al 2004, p. 25).</p>

Skills of assessors

Across the literature there are some discussions pertaining to skills and attributes of assessors involved in RPL assessments. Bateman and Knight (2003, p. 17) offer the following overview:

MacDonald (1996) does not differentiate between an RPL assessor and a 'normal' assessor and Wilson & Lilly (1996) by omission does not perceive the role as being an issue...Kenyon et al (1996a & b) however, considers that RPL assessors are different from other assessors, as they have to deal with evaluating evidence of prior learning, especially in terms of relevance and authenticity. Kenyon et al (1996) considers that RPL assessors in many instances take on a wider role including being an advisor and a co-ordinator.

The current *Training Package for Training and Assessment* provides the benchmark for assessors and by default for RPL assessors. In the competency standards, 'recognise current existing competence of candidate/s' appears as a purpose of assessment. In this instance it is clear that the requirements for RPL assessors are considered to be the equivalent of assessors.

Assessors involved in RPL need to be:

- Accepting of the concept of RPL
- Be highly skilled in their vocational field
- Have industry 'currency' and be conversant with the Training Package
- Be highly skilled assessors and assessment tool developers
- Have confidence in their judgements.

Conclusion

In terms of VET assessment activity I know from both my work as a practitioner as well as researcher and as an auditor that there are very many good examples of effective RPL practice across the VET sector. However to make these positive examples more obvious to the observer, I think the outdated view and interpretation of RPL has certainly served its purpose and we should move on to not just viewing RPL as another form of assessment but also to accept its many guises and manifestations. These new views point to a positive future for RPL.

To use some key words from the appreciative inquiry framework of the Reframing the Future *RPL-Done Well* forums, having **discovered** our existing capacities and strengths in practising RPL, let's **envision a future** where we achieve even more with RPL.

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