Thinking about RPL: A framework for discussion

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Introduction

The Australian Qualifications Advisory Board has commissioned a project to:

- research existing policies and practices relating to Recognition of Prior Learning in the senior secondary school, adult and community education, vocational education and training, and higher education sectors; and,
- develop cross-sectoral, national RPL principles and operational guidelines

The aim of this paper is to provide a framework for thinking about RPL, and to test our conceptions with the community of researchers at this conference. The outcome of our discussions at this session and with individuals throughout the conference will contribute to shaping the project and the resulting draft cross-sectoral national RPL principles and operational guidelines, which will be distributed as part of a broad consultation process with stakeholders in each of the four sectors of post-compulsory education and training in Australia.

This paper will discuss the rationale for the project, and will suggest a working definition of RPL. We will also draw from Australian and international literature and from our own experiences, and discuss issues including:

- what we know about who applies for and receives RPL
- the balance between process and outcomes
- factors that promote or inhibit the implementation of RPL
- the extent to which we do know and can know what is happening with RPL
Rationale for project

The AQF is committed to supporting the development of a range of pathways within and between sectors, including pathways based partly or wholly on recognition of prior learning. One of the key objectives of the AQF is to:

“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.” [http://www.aqf.edu.au/aboutaqf.htm#key](http://www.aqf.edu.au/aboutaqf.htm#key)

This is the second project concerning RPL that the AQF Advisory Board has initiated. The first was in 1996, and it examined RPL processes in the senior secondary school, VET and higher education sectors, by commissioning reports in each. The three reports were used to develop a composite picture of RPL policy, processes and practice in Australia (Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board 1997). In presenting the composite report to the Ministerial Council for Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) the AQF Advisory Board advised the Ministers of the need to monitor RPL policies and practice “to gauge progress with particular reference to the following objectives:

- readily available, transparent and consistent RPL policy and procedures within and across all sectors;
- RPL funding arrangements in all sectors which enable maximum cost savings for the taxpayer;
- parity of esteem for qualifications gained through (or partly through) RPL assessment; and
- ‘best practice’ RPL assessment models to be accessible within and across sectors.”

(AQFAB, 2002: 5)

In preparing the brief for this project, the AQF Advisory Board commissioned a scoping project on RPL in Australia, which reviewed recent literature and outlined the direction for future research (Ryan and Watson 2001).

This project builds on the 1996 report, and on the scoping report. It includes the adult and community education sector in recognition of its importance as part of post-compulsory education and training in Australia, not only in the delivery of credentialed education and training, but as a key mechanism used by increasing numbers of adults seeking re-entry to education, and by young people who need alternatives to school-based education.

Context for RPL and intent of policy

The expansion of post-compulsory education and training and the development of lifelong learning policy frameworks is driven by the development of the knowledge economy and society, the rapid pace technological change, and the globalisation of the economy. New policy contexts emphasise knowledge, skills and the flexibility of individuals to increase economic performance,
overcome unemployment and increase social inclusion (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 1998; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2001). Qualifications and qualification frameworks used by governments to promote lifelong learning, and encourage specific education and training goals (Young 2001), with the aim of improving links between learning and employment, in particular the hope that:

“qualifications reforms will improve the capacity of qualifications to signal the knowledge, skills and competencies of job applicants, thus reducing the costs of recruitment for employers and more generally enhancing people’s employability” (Young 2001: 5)

The main goals of reforms to qualifications arrangements include:

- “To encourage people to see qualifying as a process that starts in initial education and training and continues throughout their adult lives;
- To improve opportunities for mobility and progression between different types of qualifications (especially general and vocational) and between qualifications for different occupational sectors and
- To encourage formal learning, to promote links between it and informal learning and to improve opportunities for people to use their informal learning to gain recognised qualifications” (Young 2001: 4)

Articulation, credit transfer, recognition of prior learning are all intrinsic to lifelong learning and qualifications frameworks that aim to provide access, recognise learning and create opportunities. These issues do not revolve around efficiency and effectiveness, important as these are:

“Articulation is not a mechanical matter of formal recognition of qualifications, or of prior learning experience, necessary as these may be. It is also a learning concept, implying complementarity, continuous enhancement or development of competences, achievement and progression along a pathway that is personally meaningful and has a social recognition and status” (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 1998).

The OECD (1998) says that there are too many historically derived restrictions in member countries on credit transfer, and recognition of other modes learning, including RPL and work experience. This project represents an explicit policy intention to increase the extent to which RPL is available and implemented, so as to create learning opportunities for as many people as possible. The policy goal is to develop learning pathways that are able to pick up everyone in the community. If they are to be effective, these pathways must include RPL.

**Definition**

Australian and international literature on RPL always begins with the vexed question of definition, and we are no exception. We first define what we mean by RPL and distinguish it from credit
transfer. We then discuss why we think RPL and credit transfer should be distinguished from each other, and from other forms of assessment.

We distinguish RPL from credit transfer as follows:

- RPL assesses the individual’s learning to determine the extent to which that individual has achieved the required learning outcomes, competency outcomes, or standards for entry to, and/or partial or total completion of, a qualification.
- credit transfer assesses the initial course or subject that the individual is using to claim access to, or the award of credit in, the destination course to determine the extent to which it is equivalent to the required learning outcomes, competency outcomes, or standards in a qualification. This need not confine credit transfer to credentialed courses within the AQF framework. The key distinguishing characteristic is that it is the course or subject that is assessed for equivalence, not the student.

This is similar to the definition used in the 1996 RPL report of the AQF Advisory Board:

“RPL assessment, however, may be distinguished from ‘credit transfer’, each being a distinctive process for gaining credit. Credit transfer is a process based on formal credit arrangements or protocols negotiated by institutions on the basis of articulated course content and independent of the individual applicant. By contrast, the RPL process involves a case-by-case assessment of the individual’s knowledge and skills, which may be derived from a whole range of learning experiences, including workplace learning and general life experience, to determine how much credit can be given towards the requirements of the desired qualification. Some of this learning may be formal, as in a short course but, unless a formal credit arrangement has been made, or protocols in place to negotiate credit, the only way to establish credit for this learning is through RPL assessment” (AQFAB 1997: 1).

RPL and credit transfer can both be used in one of two ways; for admission to a course or qualification, or for the award of credit in a course or qualification. RPL is used as an access mechanism when the normal education or qualification prerequisites are not present. It can also be used for the award of credit for partial or full completion of a course or qualification. Credit transfer is used as an access mechanism to determine the equivalence of prior studies compared to the normal prerequisites for entry. It can be used also for the award of credit for full or partial completion of a qualification.

There is ambiguity in the literature as to whether RPL is or should be confined to the attainment of credit in courses or qualifications, or whether its application is broader in scope. Kenyon, Saunders and Gibb (1996: 2) explain that: “Many people and organisations think RPL is a term which only applies to processes used by training providers, or with accredited institutional training.” They explain that RPL can be used for other reasons, including the determination of competence in the workplace, independently of the award of a qualification. However, this project is confined to the use of RPL in qualifications, although we recognise the broader role for RPL in the workplace.

Individuals may seek RPL for the following reasons:
• to gain entry to a course or qualification
• to seek credit within a course
• to seek recognition for their overseas qualifications, when these are not able to be certified as equivalent by NOOSR or other statutory authority, or when the overseas qualification must be augmented by evidence of further learning or competency to be deemed equivalent to the relevant Australian qualification

(Kenyon, Saunders et al. 1996; Keating, Kelly et al. 1998; DETYA 2001; Bateman and Knight 2001?)

Several scenarios follow, each of which illustrates an example of RPL or credit transfer, and an explanation as to why it is classified as one and not the other.

Example 1:

Scenario: A student commencing a Bachelor of Arts at a university in Melbourne seeks advanced standing on the basis of a Diploma of Community Services (Community Development) at a TAFE institute in Perth. The university does not have an articulation or credit transfer agreement with the TAFE institute. The student is asked to collect information about the competency standards, delivery plan and assessment for that course before a decision can be made about whether or not he will be granted the advanced standing.

Outcome: This is an example of credit transfer.

Reason: The competency standards, delivery plan and assessment for that course are being assessed to determine equivalency to subjects in the Bachelor of Arts. The student is not being assessed to determine the extent to which he can demonstrate whether or not he has met the required learning outcomes.

Example 2:

Scenario: A student in the Diploma of Arts (Professional Writing and Editing) at a TAFE institute seeks advanced standing on the basis of her professional experience. The student is asked to collect evidence that she has met the competency standards. She prepares an annotated resume, and a portfolio that includes examples of short stories and newspaper articles she has written, examples of desk-top publishing she has produced, and testimonials from supervisors about her responsibilities and tasks.

Outcome: This is an example of RPL

Reason: The student is being assessed to determine the extent to which she has demonstrated that she has met the required competency standards

Example 3:

Scenario: A student is undertaking the Certificate 4 in Further Education at the local neighbourhood house. The student studied political science at a tertiary level in her own country, but that was some time ago, and she is participating in the Cert 4 to reintroduce herself to tertiary study, which she wants to do, particularly as English is her second language. Nonetheless, she believes she can demonstrate competency for several of
the standards, and wishes to pursue her application for advanced standing. She prepares a portfolio of
evidence, which includes a reflective component relating her life experience, particularly her experience of
migration to Australia, to demonstrate her learning in areas of cross-cultural communication,
problem-solving, team work, and knowledge of the Australian political framework.

**Outcome:** This is an example of RPL

**Reason:** The student is being assessed to determine whether she has demonstrated she has met the required
standards.

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**Example 4:**

**Scenario:** A student is undertaking the Certificate 2 in Retail Operations as part of his senior school
certificate and is seeking advanced standing for the competencies “interact with customers”, “work
effectively in a retail environment” and “apply point of sale handling procedures”. He has worked in the
local supermarket since he was 15 in a variety of roles, including at the checkout, stacking shelves and
receiving goods from the central warehouse. He has attended several inhouse short training sessions over
the last three years. In applying for RPL, the student attaches certificates of participation as evidence of his
involvement in the inhouse training. The assessor takes these into account in determining the student’s
claim, but does not rely on them solely in deciding whether or not to grant the RPL. The certificates testified
only to participation and not achievement of standards or outcomes, and the outcomes of the sessions were
not part of, or related to, endorsed standards or curriculum. The assessor interviews the student to discuss
his experience further, and asks him to discuss what he learnt from participating in the inhouse training, and
how this related to his capacity to do his job. The inhouse training proved to be very important to the
student’s skill acquisition, understanding and performance, and strongly contributes to his application.

**Outcome:** This is an example of RPL

**Reason:** The student is being assessed to determine the extent to which he has demonstrated that he has met
the required competency standards. Some of the learning the student has undertaken has been formal, but it
is still an RPL application because the inhouse training is not being assessed to determine equivalence, the
student is being assessed. The sessions are uncredentialed learning, outside a quality framework, and not
part of a credit transfer agreement. If the sessions were to be classed as credit transfer, then they would need
to be assessed to determine equivalence.
Example 5:

**Scenario:** A student has been awarded a Diploma of Information Technology at a private Registered Training Organisation. The diploma was awarded on the basis of recognition of prior learning, as the student had worked for many years in the warehouse in a medium-sized company, and had taken on increasing responsibility for supporting the IT infrastructure of the company as the technology was progressively introduced. The company had paid for him to attend the occasional external training program, as the need and opportunity arose.

**Outcome:** This is an example of RPL.

**Reason:** The student is being assessed to determine the extent to which he has met the competency standards. The training he has undertaken is not being assessed to determine equivalence.

Example 6:

**Scenario:** The student in example 5 is now enrolled in a degree course in information technology, and is seeking the award of credit on the basis of the completed VET diploma – the diploma that was fully awarded on the basis of RPL. There is no articulation agreement between the private RTO and the university, but the degree course co-ordinator meets with the RTO, to discuss delivery plans and assessment approaches, standards and outcomes. The degree course co-ordinator knows the competencies, because they are part of the national training package, and are used in all IT courses in VET.

**Outcome:** This is an example of credit transfer.

**Reason:** The IT diploma and the RTO are being assessed to determine equivalency, not the student, regardless of the fact that the student was awarded the IT diploma on the basis of RPL. The university has to decide whether they have confidence in the assessment of the RTO. The request for the award of credit is based on the completed IT diploma, not the original RPL application.

**Sectoral definitions**

RPL has been defined differently since it was established as one of 10 principles of the National Framework for the Recognition of Training (NFROT) in 1991, and as part of the charter establishing the AQF in 1995. The sectors define RPL differently, and their evolving definitions have not converged over recent years. These different definitions arise from the historical development and application of RPL in each of the sectors, giving rise to conceptual confusion. This confusion arises in part from conflating the different purposes of RPL. Smith and Keating (1997) argue there are two general ways in which RPL is used:

- as a learning process in its own right, with the focus on how the student is able to meet the learning outcomes;
- to determine current competency in the workplace.

For this reason, RPL has sometimes been distinguished from Recognition of Current Competency (RCC), as the latter denotes what the individual is able to do now in the workplace, and not on
prior learning which may or may not still be relevant. Thomson, Saunders and Foyster (2001) define RPL as recognition of prior learning, including prior credentialed learning, whereas RCC is assessment undertaken to determine current competence.

The distinction between the RPL and RCC was said to become less meaningful with the system-wide introduction of competency based training in the VET sector, as all assessment must now be directly against industry-derived competencies in nationally endorsed training packages, with assessment taking place in the workplace or in a simulated work environment (Kenyon, Saunders et al. 1996; Wilson and Lilly 1996; Keating, Kelly et al. 1998; DETYA 2001; Bateman and Knight 2001?). This does not solve the problem for the other sectors, and may not completely solve the problem for the VET sector.

This led to calls to subsume all forms of credit – that is, RPL, RCC and credit transfer, under the one heading of ‘recognition’. The issue is not when or how someone became competent, it is: are they competent now? All processes are, in some way or other, a process of assessment. Collapsing the various distinctions under the one heading was seen to have the following advantages:

- it enables RPL processes to be incorporated into current learning programs, and incorporated into learning and assessment more holistically;
- by removing the distinction, it enables parity of esteem between qualifications derived from RPL or from undertaking training courses, or some combination of these. (Kenyon, Saunders et al. 1996; Wilson and Lilly 1996; Keating, Kelly et al. 1998; DETYA 2001; Bateman and Knight 2001?)

ANTA (2001) now defines RPL as:

“...recognition of competencies currently held, regardless of how, when or where the learning occurred. Under the Australian Quality Training Framework, competencies may be attained in a number of ways. This includes through any combination of formal or informal training and education, work experience or general life experience. In order to grant RPL, the assessor must be confident that the candidate is currently competent 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.”

This definition differs to that in the higher education sector. The AVCC’s new guidelines defacto define credit transfer and RPL in a similar way to our definition. In 1993 the AVCC adopted guidelines on recognition of prior learning which defined credit transfer as credit granted for credentialed learning at either higher education or TAFE (and not all VET providers). The 2001 guidelines extend the definition of credit transfer to include all credentialed learning in VET or higher education (AVCC 2001). RPL is therefore residually defined, as advanced standing falling outside the scope of credit transfer. The AVCC recognises that further work on developing RPL policy is required (AVCC 2001). Our definition is broader, as it can include formal programs of learning outside the AQF, as long as they are subject to institutional agreements and protocols.
granting graduates advanced standing in the destination course upon successful completion of the initial course. As programs are developed that fall outside the AQF, particularly vendor certificates, all sectors will need to consider how to assess and credit learning in courses and programs such as these. Ryan and Watson (Ryan and Watson 2001) point out that this is an issue for the sectors. While recognition of these sorts of courses are currently excluded from the AVCC’s definition, pressure will be exerted to consider how they fit, particularly as the influence of work-based and (to a lesser extent) work-integrated learning in higher education challenges notions of what a degree is. Work-based learning results in a negotiated curriculum between the student, employers and the university (Boud 1998), where the learning outcomes are not fully elaborated and specified in advance. This opens up the way for much more widespread implementation of RPL in higher education, as the learning outcomes are much more tailored to the individual.

Definitions of RPL are undergoing renewal in the school sector, as the senior secondary school curriculum is reshaped to cater for a wider range of learning outcomes and pathways to post-school education. The 1996 AQF report (AQFAB 1997) stated that the schools sector generally distinguished RPL from credit transfer. The introduction of VET in schools based on endorsed training packages will bring that component of delivery into the VET sector definitions of RPL, in compliance with the principles of the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF). However, the Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia is proposing to introduce a specific RPL policy as one of five policy instruments establishing the recognition policy framework in that state (Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia 2001). The introduction of the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning may have implications on RPL definitions and policy in that state.

While the ACE sector cannot be said to have a nationally agreed definition of RPL given vastly different arrangements that exist between the states, the sector itself is premised on adult education principles and recognising and valuing the full range of learning that adults engage in, regardless of context. This project may help the sector to articulate a sector-wide definition and approach to RPL, to assist the sector to broker further education and training arrangements for those engaged in community-based learning, and to provide opportunities for credentialed outcomes for programs delivered within the sector. The ACE sector also offers credentialed VET programs, and in these instances, must comply with AQTF requirements.

**Do we need to distinguish between RPL and credit transfer?**

Bateman and Knight (2001?) summarise the arguments for not differentiating between RPL and other forms of assessment processes. They favour the broad notion of ‘recognition’, for reasons explained in the previous section. They do suggest that distinctions be made, but between assessment on the one hand (including RPL) and credit transfer on the other. This is because credit transfer “is essentially an administrative process” (Bateman and Knight 2001?: 6), a consequence of the ‘mutual recognition’ arrangements in VET, whereby one RTO is required to recognise and provide full credit for assessments conducted by another RTO.
We would suggest that while credit transfer may be an administrative process within sectors, particularly the VET sector, it still involves an educational judgement. In VET the educational judgement is enshrined in policy frameworks which impute equivalence for the same competency outcomes or qualifications, regardless of the context in which the assessment occurred. The nature of educational judgement becomes clearer when considering credit transfer decisions across sectors. Explicit decisions about equivalence need to be made, and these are reflected in institutional credit transfer arrangements and partnerships. This will remain the case unless Australia develops a credit accumulation model with agreed values for units of credit between and within sectors. Credit transfer is operationalised as an administrative process, with students only required to produce evidence of prior credentialed learning, but the decision is an educational one, where equivalence of outcomes is assessed.

Different educational judgements are being made in the case of RPL and credit transfer. In the former, the assessment is whether the student has demonstrated learning that is equivalent to the outcomes required; in the latter, it is the course which is assessed for equivalence.

We argue that the distinction between RPL and credit transfer should remain for several reasons.

The first, and most prosaic, is so we can know what is happening, and encourage the widespread take-up of RPL. Several authors make the point that the promoted benefits of RPL are assumed to be actual benefits, but that very little research has been conducted to determine if the claims have been realised (Wilson and Lilly 1996; Pithers 1999; Ryan and Watson 2001; Bateman and Knight 2001?). If we are required to report, count, are funded, and held accountable for something, it starts to matter a lot.

This leads to the second reason why it is important to maintain the distinction between RPL and credit transfer. The Australian and international literature shows that the take-up of RPL has been relatively low, and that it has not acted as a mechanism social inclusion for disadvantaged groups in tertiary education, despite the principles of access and equity which underpin RPL in the Australian policy contexts. UK studies, and a long-term European study, has found that RPL is used most by relatively privileged students compared to disadvantaged groups, and most activity seems to be occurring in post-graduate courses (Learning From Experience Trust 2000; Cleary, Whittacker et al. 2002; Whittacker, Cleary et al. 2002). The European Social Inclusion through APEL (Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning) project considers that there has been a relative decline of APEL activity in the further education sector, while it seems to be increasing in higher education (Cleary, Whittacker et al. 2002). They make the point that this does not mean it is not happening in FE, just that it is not happening in a way that enables it to be reported. The most recent analysis of VET data has shown students from specific access and equity groups are less likely to be granted RPL than other groups of students (Bateman and Knight 2001?). Other researchers have also indicated that the take up in Australia is relatively low overall (Wilson and

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Lilly 1996; Keating, Kelly et al. 1998; Pithers 1999; Thomson, Saunders et al. 2001). Yet this is clearly an issue for non-traditional groups, as was made clear by the submission to the Nelson enquiry into higher education by the Australian Indigenous Training Council (Andersen 2002).

**Factors inhibiting the development of RPL**

Why has RPL not lived up to expectations in terms of how many people use it, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds? The literature suggests that the factors that inhibit the implementation of RPL include:

- staff concerns about quality assurance; equivalence of assessment and validity and reliability, and, ‘appropriate’ subject areas for which RPL should be granted (vocational vs. academic);
- the time consuming nature of RPL, not only in assessing, but also in providing advice and guidance;
- the difficult nature of assessing RPL, as it requires experience and expertise;
- it can be expensive and not cost effective, particularly as most processes are one-on-one;
- it challenges the status quo about accepted concepts of teaching and learning, particularly the extent to which students must be engaged in formal processes of learning and assessment in order to reach the required standards;
- funding varies by state and jurisdiction, but in some areas every approved RPL assessment results in income lost to the institution;
- if a significant number of RPL applications are granted, this can result in smaller class sizes, making them financially unviable to run;
- the processes are viewed as overly bureaucratic;
- some professional bodies are resistant to RPL, and have stipulations as to the maximum that can be granted; and,
- it easier to enrol students and assess them, rather than go through the RPL process. The literature suggests that there is a large degree of ‘embedded’ RPL. This is one of the key areas we will be looking at in this project.

(Wilson and Lilly 1996; Smith and Keating 1997; Learning From Experience Trust 2000; Ryan and Watson 2001; Bateman and Knight 2001?)

Smith and Keating make the following comment about the VET sector, which is equally relevant to the other three sectors (Smith and Keating 1997: 173).

"So while the VET system as a whole gains from RPL, individual providers may feel they have something to lose. On the other hand, providers can find that enlightened RPL policies can increase student demand."

Smith and Keating (1997) explain that there are risks in RPL for institutions and for students which may affect the extent to which it is implemented. The institutions risk their reputation if they make an error in judging someone competent, when in fact they are not. There may also be significant health and safety consequences in many professions and occupations from a ‘false positive’
assessment. They risk being regarded as hostile to students if they do not grant RPL when it is due. Students risk their educational progress if they are falsely certified as competent if they are not, and do not subsequently have the skills they need for progression. An over-zealous assessment that does not grant the student RPL when it should be runs the risk of demoralising and demotivating students.

However, we wish to suggest that there may be additional reasons which have not been canvassed adequately in the Australian literature, but which is emerging in the international literature. That is, the failure to distinguish between RPL as a process and RPL as an outcome may result in less take-up than would otherwise be the case, particularly by students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

**Distinguishing between RPL as a process and RPL as an outcome**

The intention of incorporating RPL as part of a broader assessment process was to incorporate it holistically into learning and assessment, but paradoxically, the result has been insufficient attention paid to the process of how prior learning can be included. All best practice models of RPL point to the importance of support and advice being available to candidates. This is clearly identified as one of the stages in the RPL process. Recognition is made of the importance of ensuring that students from disadvantaged groups are not further disadvantaged by the use of assessment instruments that rely heavily on documents and high levels of literacy, when these are not intrinsic to the learning or competency outcomes. Much literature focuses on ensuring the assessment is valid and reliable, to ensure, for example, that students are not being assessed on their capacity to read and understand the RPL literature (Kenyon, Saunders et al. 1996; Wilson and Lilly 1996; DETYA 2001; Thomson, Saunders et al. 2001; Bateman and Knight 2001?).

However, the literature mainly focuses on supporting students through the assessment process. The presumes a relatively straightforward process of ‘translation’ between the student’s prior learning, and the learning outcomes or competency standards against which they are being assessed. However, personal learning is not neatly packaged and compared to academic or course requirements (Davison 1996).

Relatively little attention has been paid to this process of translation, and we are suggesting that it is necessary to distinguish between RPL as a process and RPL as an outcome.

Eraut (2000: 12) distinguishes between three forms of non-formal learning: implicit learning, in which “there is no intention to learn and no awareness of learning at the time it takes place….”; reactive learning, which “is used to describe situations where the learning is explicit but takes place almost spontaneously in response to recent, current or imminent situations without any time being specifically set aside for it”; and, deliberative learning, in which the learner puts aside time specifically for that purpose. The degree to which individuals are aware of their own implicit learning varies, and "factors affecting the capability to tell were linked to people's prior experiences of talking about what they knew" (Eraut 2000: 17). Articulating reactive learning “in

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2 He rejects the term ‘informal’ learning because of its connotation in many contexts that have little to do with learning, and favours the term ‘non-formal’ learning as an alternative.
explicit form could also be difficult without setting aside time for more reflection and thus becoming deliberative” (Eraut 2000: 12). He questions the role of the researcher (or assessor) in assessing what students can do and know. To what extent is the role of the researcher (or assessor) to articulate what students can do or know, and what is assessed? Is it what the researcher or assessor infers the students do or know (particularly underpinning knowledge in assessing competencies)? Eraut (2000: 17) says: “Can a skilful researcher [or assessor] communicate what their respondents cannot and does that suggest that the researcher is a good novelist, a potential poet or an expert in knowledge elicitation?” Assessing tacit knowledge is particularly difficult, requiring interrogation and interpretation to ensure the full extent of the knowledge is recognised.

Focussing only on the assessment may well limit the extent of RPL which can rightfully be claimed, because people may:

- be unaware of what they know and the extent to which they know
- not have the language to describe what they know, particularly if they have not had much experience in the telling
- not be able to move from the discourse of their everyday practice to the discourse required to substantiate their claims.

All three of these possibilities are more likely to disadvantage students from non-traditional backgrounds in post-compulsory education.

Northedge, (2001: 308) argues that ‘knowledge’ is not a static, timeless ‘thing’, but is constituted by ‘flows of meaning’ within discourse communities, and is “produced between knowledgeable people when they communicate with each other.” He describes three ‘discursive worlds’ – the everyday, of professional or vocational practice, and academic (or other education or training) discourse, each of which works in different ways, particularly in regard to what is taken for granted, and what is subject to debate. The process of RPL requires students to mostly translate their professional or vocational practice discourse into the academic (however we define that in each sector).

He describes an academic discipline “an example of a discourse community of a particularly systematic and committed kind. It is a community which discourses primarily through writing.” (Northedge 2001: 308). “For students with little experience in academic communities, the struggle to develop an effective voice through which to ‘speak’ the discourse, whether in writing, or in class, can be lengthy and difficult” (Northedge 2001: 313). This may seem to apply only to higher education or more ‘academic’ kinds of learning in senior secondary school. However, this observation need not be limited to formal learning contexts like these. It is equally relevant to VET. Our ‘discourse community’ speaks in terms of the concepts and theories that underpin learning, the policy frameworks established to operationalise the VET sector, and the specific language of competency based training. Students need to understand competency standards, elements of competency, performance criteria, evidence and range of variables. We have to, or should explain this, because students have to know how much evidence is enough, what sort of evidence they should present, over what time period and contexts, and so on. They often have to know about codes, and institutional processes. The extent to which they are not required to understand this, increases the responsibility of assessor in making the translation on behalf of student.
The process of ‘translation’ from the non-formal and experiential to the formal and academic may be much more problematic than we have supposed, particularly for those unfamiliar with participating in formal education and training programs (Davison 1996; Mattner 1997; Cleary, Whittacker et al. 2002; Whittacker, Cleary et al. 2002). It is not just about literacy and numeracy in English, it is about literacy in our discourse. A study of UK higher education institutions (Learning From Experience Trust 2000) found that a significant number offered students the opportunity to participate in a subject or module to prepare their RPL application. Of those who offered such a unit, two thirds gave students credit for participating in the subject or module as well as the credit they were claiming through the RPL process. This is because the process of reflection involved enabled students to use what they were learning now to reflect on their past experiences and to consider it in a broader context. It may be that in Australia our emphasis on outcomes, particularly through offering students the opportunity to RPL at the beginning of a course, may be selling students short. We may consider it useful to develop competencies or learning outcomes that require students to engage in reflection as part of managing their own learning, career directions, and in becoming lifelong learners. Apart from anything else, it would have the advantage of being funded provision, and involving students with others in peer processes in considering these issues.

**Conclusion**

This paper has offered as a contribution to discussion to help shape the national project on developing cross-sectoral RPL principles and operational guidelines. We have discussed the rationale for the project, and contextualised it within reforms to qualification frameworks and lifelong learning policy agendas. Our definition of RPL distinguishes between RPL and credit transfer, with the former an assessment of the student’s knowledge, skills, and competences, while the latter assesses the course or subject which the student is using to claim access into, or credit in, a course or qualification. This differs from the varying sectoral definitions, and we have suggested reasons why we think these distinctions should remain. If we do not name something, monitor and fund it, then it is unlikely to get the attention it deserves. This is particularly important because the take-up of RPL is relatively low, and it has not acted as a mechanism for social inclusion for disadvantaged groups, as was expected. Other impediments to implementing RPL were discussed, all of which have received considerable coverage in the literature. We have included for discussion the notion that it may be useful to distinguish between RPL as a process and as an outcome. This is because students may not realise the extent of what they know, or have the language to articulate that. Students need time and support to translate their knowledge and skills into the educational or training discourse. Offering and assessing RPL early in the process, while beneficial for many students, may result in less RPL being claimed than would otherwise be the case. Providing students with a structured program in which to develop their RPL application may provide students with the skills to speak the discourse, and to use that language to reflect on their past learning as part of the process of translation.

We would welcome comments on this paper, and other issues relating to RPL that we have not raised. Comments should be addressed to:
References


Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee (2001). Cross-sector Qualification Linkages between Higher Education and VET. Canberra, AVCC.


