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Abstract

The RPL Skills Express Toolkit (RPLSET) constitutes a radical online approach to processing Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).

The tool takes a holistic approach to RPL that emulates closely practices in industry, in this case Hairdressing. In addition it mirrors the risk management processes that are common throughout most business, large and small.

Based on sophisticated mapping of the Hairdressing Training Package (WRH06), the tool contains a range of Projects, Skills and Activities that enable RPL candidates to make claims about their respective skill sets. The tool covers Certificate III, IV and Diploma in Hairdressing.

Candidates undertake self paced RPL electronically and are able to transfer their results via email to an assessor or RTO. A range of reports are included that enable assessors to identify specific outcomes and review a candidate’s progress across all relevant core Competency Units and Performance Criteria. Evidence from the pilot study suggests that this has streamlined the RPL process significantly.

The benefits derived from the RPLSET include better assessment validation, easier identification of gap training needs and more refined evidence requirements. Candidates can complete and submit for assessment at the time of enrolment.

This project presented challenges that are inherent in meeting the wide range of needs of all the stake holders and at the same time reflecting the complexities of the real workplace. This and the learning philosophy behind the development of RPLSET will be discussed in the paper.

While the initial toolkit has been developed for the Hairdressing Industry, it is adaptable to a wide range of disciplines and industries.

Brief overview of policy & current status of RPL in VET

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is defined in the AQTF 2007 User’s Guide to the Essential Standards for Registration as ‘... “An assessment process that assesses an individual’s non-formal and informal 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” (Department of Education, Science & Training, 2007a).

The AQTF Standards indicate that RPL is seen as assessment, and as such, the same standards must be applied to it as do to assessment; meaning the same standards of validity, reliability, flexibility and fairness need to apply. There is, by implication in Standard
2, Element 4, that RPL assessment must also meet learners’ individual needs (Department of Education, Science & Training, 2007b).

RPL has been the subject of government policy for many years, and since 2006 it has been the subject of a deliberate COAG funding strategy to address skills shortages and to underpin a genuinely national approach to skills recognition.

Historical data shows that there has been a very slow but steady increase in the majority of Australian states in the amount of RPL granted as a proportion of training delivery hours between 1996 and 2008 (NCVER, 2010). It must be noted, however, that trend data is not directly comparable, given that it is only more recently that there has been a more consistent definition adopted across the states, and only since 2007 that a clear distinction made at the point of data collection between RPL (granted) and RPL (not granted). National data does appear to show though that in the 2006 to 2008 period some states improved their RPL rates quite significantly, these being Queensland, Tasmania and the ACT (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

![RPL (granted) as % of Delivery 2006-2008](image)

Source: Historical time series of VET in Australia, 1981-2008, NCVER, 2010
As the largest VET deliverer, NSW has had only a modest increase in the proportion of RPL granted in the same period. In NSW, for example, in 2008 the average rate of RPL granted was 3.7% (Historical time series of VET in Australia, 1981-2008, NCVER, 2010).

TAFE NSW in the period 2006 – 2009 saw the percentage of RPL increase from 3.51% to 5.01%. In 2008 RPL as a proportion of training effort was an average of 3.95%, which is marginally above the NSW state average. However, the following year, 2009, saw an increase in the TAFE NSW average to 5.01%, and the most recent data indicates that between 2009 (June) and 2010 (June), there was a 25% increase in RPL effort across TAFE NSW (DET Data WareHouse @ June 2010).

Analysis of internal TAFE NSW data shows that there are quite significant differences between Institutes in the amount of RPL effort over the past couple of years. In 2008 five Institutes were significantly below the TAFE NSW average, and two were significantly above it. In 2009, there were still five Institutes below the average, and three significantly above it.

As several writers have noted, despite the push at government level, there has been an apparent reluctance to embrace RPL, as borne out by the national and state (Hewson, 2007; Knight, 2006; Hargreaves, 2006) and TAFE NSW (the largest VET provider in Australia) statistics. There have been many reasons put forward for the low take-up rate, and several suggestions for overcoming the perceived barriers.

According to research conducted by Hargreaves (ib id) there are a number of factors which, in some contexts, are deterrents to using RPL, including the need for better promotion, seeing RPL as a valuable learning experience in its own right, better support for students to gather evidence, use of experienced professional assessors, cost-efficient processes, promotion of practical case studies and strategies. Knight (op cit), claims there is a recurring theme in the literature about assessors needing significant expertise and supporting resources for cost-effective RPL services.

Hewson (op cit) reports on a colloquium of one hundred participants which canvassed reasons for the reluctance of TAFE NSW practitioners to embrace RPL. She states the main obstacles as being the lack of clarity about the nature of the competency units and evidence that needed to be collected and the methods of collection, which lead to practitioners not being confident to make professional judgements.

There have also been concerns raised by those responsible for auditing compliance to AQTF standards as to validity of e-assessments, which may include RPL assessments. Callan and Clayton (2010), in a report of research for the Australian Flexible Learning Framework, state there are tensions around maintaining reliability and validity of assessment but at the same time meeting flexibility and cost efficiencies. The auditors wanted to see evidence that the

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1 The internal TAFE NSW data, sourced from the NSW DET Data WareHouse, includes both RPL granted and non-granted, so is not directly comparable with national/state NCVER data – however, given that in 2009 RPL granted was 98% of all TAFE NSW RPL effort, it is reasonably comparable.
assessment is meeting student’s needs, the principles of assessment and rules of evidence and that the assessment is aligned to AQF levels. They emphasised the need, amongst other things, for independent validation from subject matter experts.

Misko, Beddie and Smith (2007) state that the evidence across all states and sectors in Australia suggests the complexity in the RPL process and the appearance of complexity have been major disincentives to students seeking RPL. They outline fifteen issues or challenges to be met to improve take-up rates of RPL.

As Smith and Clayton (2009) point out, RPL is important from the student’s perspective for a number of reasons, including that they gain a feeling of worth and self-confidence that encourages them to upgrade their skills and knowledge and possibly their level of qualifications.

**RPL Trends in Hairdressing in TAFE NSW**

The average of all TAFE NSW Hairdressing RPL effort as a proportion of delivery in 2008 was 3.62% (marginally below the overall TAFE NSW average) and in 2009 it was 4.74% (slightly lower than the TAFE NSW average – see Figure 2) (NSW DET Data Ware House @ May 2010).

![Figure 2](image-url)
The most recent data shows that Hairdressing RPL effort increased by 4.8% between June 2009 and June 2010, compared to an average across the whole of TAFE NSW in the same period of 25% (DET Data WareHouse @ June 2010).

Analysis of the main Hairdressing Certificate III (Trade and Non-Trade), Certificate IV and Diploma qualifications delivered in TAFE NSW shows varying rates of RPL effort since 2006. The Certificate III (Trade) qualification has seen the most significant increase in RPL effort between 2006 and 2009. However, there are only a few Institutes which account for the increase pattern, so the effort has not been consistent across the organisation.

Thus, from the perspective of assessors, students/learners, government policy-makers and auditors, there are very good reasons to develop quality, cost-effective, valid and user-friendly tools for conducting RPL. The RPL Skills Express Toolkit is designed with all these needs in mind.

**The RPL Skills Express – Hairdressing Project**

The project was funded under a DET NSW COAG RPL Program, beginning in 2007. Funding was won on a project brief outlining the development of a Recognition of Prior Learning process based on the Australian Qualification Training Framework definition of RPL at 2004. The brief described a process to capture all forms of learning that contribute to the capacity of a person to perform tasks demonstrating the necessary skills of the hairdresser job role.

The dimensions of the project were defined by the need for an (AQTF) auditable process based on current research relating to the capture of formal, non formal and informal learning (Misco et al, 2007; Smith and Clayton, 2009), and by the experience of VET practitioner in both private and public sector Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) and the hairdressing industry of NSW’s peak body, the Professional Hairdressers Association (PHA).

The main components of the project methodology were:
- development of RPL Skills Express Toolkit (RPLSET) in partnership with the PHA, 3 TAFE Institutes and one Private RTO, representatives of which formed the steering committee
- engagement of a strong innovative design team
- A two-phase trial (including 55 candidates with diverse age and cultural backgrounds drawn from the four RTOs across NSW and Victoria)
- Feedback and review of the two phases, on an on-going basis involving all stakeholders, designers and external review panel
- Industry external review panel with Professional Hairdressers Association members separate to the steering committee
- Professional development of 150 teachers in:
Writing skills to develop integrated assessment activities for testing underpinning knowledge of projects suitable for electronic assessment and marking

- Establishing the amount and suitability of evidence required to meet RTO requirements
- Validation and benchmarking of activities and types and amount of evidence required to substantiate users claims
- Use of electronic RPL tool
- Established and evaluated best practice models used by RTOs when using RPL SET – Hairdressing

Educative process to raise RPL profile in industry through demonstration at various conferences, for example at Hair Expo – National Hairdressing Trade Exhibition – Hosted by TAFE NSW Sydney Institute.

The main outcomes of the project were:

- The RPL Skills Express Toolkit
- Increased number of qualified workers
- More highly skilled assessors who are willingly to risk manage some of the decision making in RPL
- Closer relationship between industry and RTOs
- Customised gap training – individual training plans provided by RTOs to candidates
- Cost efficient for industry and RTOs
- Increased awareness of RPL in parts of industry
- Positive outcomes for candidates
- TAFE and manufacturer partnership (Wella Australia) working to develop an evidence process for industry training that will meet the requirements of valid, authentic and reliable evidence when providing certificates of participation in industry training to their clients
- A standing committee hairdressing RTO

**The RPL Skills Express Toolkit – Hairdressing**

The resultant RPL Skills Express Toolkit (RPL SET) consists of:

1. A candidate driven electronic system helping in the evidence collection of all forms of learning and experience needed to be a hairdresser and mapping that evidence to the appropriate unit of competency
2. User and Assessor Guides supporting a best practice model in RPL along with the “how to use” the system
3. Case Studies
4. Professional development of assessors
5. Functionality that provides industry-focused, user friendly, efficient, meaningful reports to all stakeholders.
The RPLSET constitutes a radical online approach to processing RPL that can be used pre or post enrolment. The tool takes a holistic approach to RPL that closely mimics practices in the Hairdressing industry. It also mirrors the risk management processes that are common throughout most businesses, large and small. Based on sophisticated mapping of the Hairdressing Training Package (WRH06), the tool contains a range of Projects, Skills and Activities that enable RPL candidates to make claims about their respective skill sets. The tool covers Certificate III, IV and Diploma qualifications in Hairdressing.

Candidates undertake, electronically, self paced RPL and are able to transfer their results via email to an assessor or RTO. A range of reports are included that enable assessors to identify specific outcomes and review a candidate’s progress across all relevant core Competency Units and Performance Criteria. Evidence from the pilot study suggests that this has streamlined the RPL process significantly.

The benefits derived from the RPLSET include better assessment validation, easier identification of gap training needs and more refined evidence requirements. Candidates can complete and submit for assessment at the time of enrolment.

The toolkit provides a user-friendly interface for the RPL candidate. Sitting behind this interface is a sophisticated database that ultimately maps the candidate’s outcomes to units of competency and qualifications within the WRH06 Hairdressing Training Package.

A key feature of the electronic tool is that it is project based to ensure a holistic approach to RPL, with projects designed around job roles and workplace activities that are mapped to individual units of competency.

The tool is structured into Project, Task and Skill levels. Examples of projects include ‘Haircutting’, ‘Colour and Lightening’ and ‘Perming’. To achieve each project, candidates are asked to perform a series of tasks, and within each task are a range of skill based activities. The projects, tasks and skill activities effectively test the candidates’ underpinning knowledge.

At the start of the program, candidates are asked to identify their current skills and the evidence that they have to support their claims. Candidates are assisted in compiling their portfolios of evidence ready to take to an assessor with the inclusion of examples of appropriate third-party evidence which are provided to the candidate.

Candidates are able to print the results of each project completed. They are also able to email their results to their RPL assessor or save the results to a memory stick for import into the assessor’s version of the tool. This enables assessors to examine a candidate’s outcomes without paper versions.

The candidate report is mapped to the WRH06 units of competency which enable the RPL assessor to design gap training and learning paths or issue qualifications.
For the RPL assessor, the Toolkit contains:

- Assessor CD ROM and assessor guide (This is now modified to a download system to meet the changes to training package requirements and to ensure security of the content)
- 2 case studies
- Feedback sheets
- Models of best practice as determined by trial with partners

For the RPL candidate, the Toolkit provides:

- Candidate CD ROM and user guide
- Advice on how to select an assessor and RTO and the level of support they should expect from an RTO
- It provides advice on terminology and forms of evidence that are suitable
- It offers 2 methods of submission of evidence (both can be used either pre or post enrolment):
  1. Complete the activities testing underpinning knowledge and submission of a 3rd part report, using templates provided, submitted either electronically or in person.
  2. Follow the evidence only pathway by using the templates and guidance to build a portfolio.

Benefits of the Toolkit

The Skills Express Toolkit is designed to provide all stakeholders with an RPL model that:

1. Provides the opportunity to collect formal, non-formal and informal learning:
   The tool provides the opportunity for all skills to be interwoven to build the candidate’s evidence. The sophisticated database accepts by elimination the requirement to demonstrate knowledge and skills. Scenario - a candidate wishes to up skill higher than their current trade qualification and is not sure what they will need to complete achieve a higher qualification. The User is asked if they have knowledge and experience related to services offered in the salon, if so, claim the skills. Claiming skills, for example CIII in Hairdressing becomes the evidence for meeting entry requirements of Certificate IV. It then provides opportunity for the candidate to claim skills mapped to Certificate IV units by completing activities demonstrating their underpinning knowledge and/or providing evidence against projects built on integrated clusters of units or a combination of both using templates provided in the evidence pathway. It also provides the candidate insight into likely gap training needs, pending the outcome of assessment by the RTO.

2. Is user friendly:
   Many recognition tools are designed to meet the need of the RTO and audit requirements with less thought about the average student’s ability to interpret
terms like “units of competency”, as applied to their job role or life experience. As Hargreaves (2006) notes, clear, concise and jargon-free language helps to overcome barriers to effective RPL. Often users need to supply multiple copies of evidence to satisfy similar requirements in a unit. The Skills Express Toolkit has two main components of the process, the user (candidate) and the assessor. It is written in simple English with as much academic language removed as possible. It is designed to be self managed by the candidate. It is not labour intensive. If units of competency have overlapping requirements once satisfied in one project the user will not be required to provide further evidence in that area. The database maps evidence to all appropriate units. It can be completed at home over any length of time because it can be used pre or post enrolment. The candidate is provided with a recognition portfolio at the time of enrolment - ready for assessment.

The assessor’s tool allows access, electronic reading and allocation of skills claimed, and demonstrated by candidate against projects mapped to units of competency and qualifications. It catalogues Third Party reports and or other evidence against whole of projects/service

3. Reflects practices carried out in the Hairdressing Industry:
   All projects are named and designed based on services offered in industry, for example: cut colour and blow dry. Candidates would be familiar with the projects and can pace themselves through the activities, testing underpinning knowledge as they go

4. Meets the national principles of RPL and assessment:
   The process has been validated and trialled by three public and one private RTO. This included workshops of 150 teachers across NSW and Victoria, validating and benchmarking the suitable evidence and risk assessment

5. Assists candidates in streamlining their application and providing meaningful evidence in a timely manner:
   The use of activities and templates to collect evidence of underpinning knowledge and practical application set against a whole of service project provides a consistent quality of evidence without repetition

6. Assists assessors with reports of skills claimed and matching evidence ready for assessment:
   The reports generated identify if skills claimed by evidence provided through activities and Third Party reports have satisfied the requirements of the unit. The unit “satisfied” or “unsatisfied” report and the qualification report support the assessment process of the RTO in granting recognition or providing gap training

7. Provides examples of best practice for RTO:
   Pilot programs using the system have been evaluated and the best practice methodology identified and provided as examples within both the assessor and user manuals

8. Provided the opportunity for professional development of assessors in areas of benchmarking and validating the quality of evidence, professional judgement, and risk assessment in recognition

9. Lifts the profile of RPL within Industry through the partnership with the NSW employer group and other trainers

10. Is sustainable into the future:
The project’s sustainability is becoming more apparent as the tool becomes available and a word of mouth advertising program endorsing its use appears to be happening. Various funding sources have also provided a stimulus for its use, for example PPP funding related to up-skilling existing workers to CIV in Hairdressing.

11. Is transferrable to other industries:
The model has now been developed for Commercial Cookery, Beauty Therapy and a customized version for Safe Food Handling. Other industries have show interest; however, due to a lack of funding, further development is unlikely without a fee for service approach.

12. Is cost effective and efficient for all stakeholders:
Industry is provided with a timely and cost effective process for skills gap analysis and gap training. Employers can make use of this information for workforce development planning. For the candidates efficiencies occur through the streamlined collection of evidence, which can take place pre-enrolment. The RTO can use such pre-enrolment evidence at the time of enrolment and it is ready for the assessment process. This provides lead time for planning of gap training delivery and better utilisation of training funds. The assessor process in the tool provides real efficiencies in labour costs, since the process gives instant reports once the candidate information has been imported. The program behind the tool is used to bring atomised components of learning together through the use of targeted, succinct templates that identify the critical pieces of evidence needed to complete the qualification.

Challenges of the Project and the Learning Philosophy behind the Toolkit

This project presented the types of challenges inherent in meeting a wide range of needs of all the stakeholders and in reflecting the complexities of the real workplace. The project was conducted against a backdrop of an ever-changing VET environment. This environment featured the move to the process of continual improvement of Training Packages and the new Training Package development rules, updated quality assurance requirements, and an internal TAFE NSW restructure.

The lack of value placed by hairdressing industry on the informal and non formal learning provided in workplaces proved to be a critical challenge. Millions of dollars are paid to product houses for technical updates in the use of new products, techniques and fashion trends by the hairdressing industry for training that lies outside the AQF framework. The challenge was to educate industry to value the informal and non formal learning and the substantial contribution such learning can make to the achievement of formal qualifications.

Changing demographics, diversity and casualisation of the VET assessor workforce were also challenges. These factors raise concerns about consistency of good judgement in holistic assessment, about professional judgement and risk management in recognition assessment. The need to ensure all audit requirements are met while maintaining the rigour and
integrity of the qualification underpins the need for regular professional development and networking opportunities. Research shows high rates of casualisation and lowering of the minimum academic qualifications for VET practitioners, along with the changing work load of head and full-time teachers are factors that will contribute to teacher/assessor cohorts with limited knowledge of educational pedagogy (Black, 2009; Wheelahan, 2010).

The hairdressing industry has been slow to embrace the utilisation of information technology for anything other than salon management. This results in a large cohort of existing workers and employers who are not confident with digital equipment and often demonstrate poor IT skills. During the trials this challenge was supported by a “Help Desk” which participants could call for support on the installation of the program. This assistance ran for the length of the trial until RTO capability was built. Modification to the RPLSET included an auto run program.

Sustaining the process and the professional development of the practitioners is a challenge. From the initial concept of RPLSET the goal was to embed change, building acceptance of recognition, including the importance of informal and non formal learning, and using evidence-based methodology in preference to observation. The trigger for change was to be the RPLSET system funded through the COAG project. The willingness of industry and VET practitioners to embrace the system meant that it had to provide benefits for all stakeholders in real terms.

RPL SET has provided the trigger for change, but maintaining and enhancing the capability of practitioners is the challenge. A review of the process some twelve months after completion of the trial and with more tools in place indicates there is a need for on-going professional development. One of key strategies for building professional judgement in VET is professional development (McKenna and Mitchell, 2006). As a result of the project the Industry Skills Unit has established a community of practice whose members are promoted on the web site (www.rplset.com.au) as users of the system. There is a standing committee for recognition process and practice with representatives from a private and three public RTOs and the NSW employer group facilitated by the Unit. There is a mentoring process available which offers advice relating to assessment and the use of RPLSET. However this is not seen as a replacement for the formal process of professional development in validation, benchmarking and moderation, which should be visited annually to ensure quality process, are undertaken and embedded as the norm.

The uptake of the tool has predominantly been by qualified existing hairdressers wishing to upgrade skills often for employment reasons, and has been promoted by RTOs under provision of Federal government’s Productivity Places Program funding. The industry has a culture of measuring success of employees by their work performance with little formal acknowledgement of the high level skills of high performers.
To build sustainability partnerships are being established with Wella Professional and Racoon Hair Extension and the Industry Skills Unit - where the informal learning provided as part of the technical updates completed by the trainers and technical advisors across Australia will be mapped to WRH06 Version2. Certificates provided at the end of the sessions are to be remodelled to clearly state the outcomes of the training undertaken, providing strong evidence that can contribute to the formal achievement of a qualification. The outcomes of this project benefits industry by better utilisation of training dollars spent in the up skilling staff, as all learning will be accounted for through recognition. It promotes a closer working partnership between industry manufacturer, suppliers and the VET sector. It provides for higher level of satisfaction for the candidate as they will be able to provide valid reliable and authentic evidence.

Conclusion

As previously mentioned, Misko et al (2007) in their country background report prepared for the OECD outlined fifteen major issues and challenges relating to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning in Australia. Whilst some of them remain outside the realm of any particular tool or approach, ten of the key challenges are met successfully by the RPLSET. These include:

- Powerful process to assist student career planning
- Development of more learner-centred program
- Contribution of employees to the business, particularly in the context of addressing skills shortages
- Particular benefit to mature-aged people seeking to improve their employment prospects
- Helps counter the growing concern about maintaining our knowledge and skill base in the face of an ageing population
- The need for direct support throughout the process
- The need for a simpler and more streamlined process
- Reduces the disincentive of high administrative costs for candidates and assessors
- Overcomes the difficulty of validating informal and non-formal learning
- Good processes and procedures for appropriately collecting, storing and analysing information related to RPL

The project has resulted in a very useful RPL tool, with evidence of increasing adoption by industry. The sustainability of the project will be achieved by ensuring it stays at the forefront of industry’s mindset. For this to happen it must be championed and built on by major industry players and stakeholders so it is not seen as an academic process (to achieve
a qualification only) but becomes part of the normal process of being a hairdresser. The portfolio of evidence of achievement and learning could contribute strongly to the recruitment and promotion process within the industry. Where someone claims skilled tradesperson status, this can be substantiated; where existing hairdressers working at an AQF level of 4 but without a formal qualification, this can be acknowledged publicly by achievement of qualifications.

Industry, individuals and the skills base of the economy all gain from good RPL practice.
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