

# Recognition of prior learning and the problem of ‘graduateness’<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper considers one obstacle to implementing recognition of prior learning (RPL), which arises from the problem of defining ‘graduateness’. It cites research in which many respondents expressed reluctance to grant RPL for a whole or substantial part of a qualification, because they felt students lacked ‘something’ that other graduates had. In trying to give a voice to these respondents, and consider what this ‘something’ was, we used the notion of ‘graduateness’, despite the fact that this is a contested concept, means different things to different people, and has yet to be fully developed. Presenting the paper at this conference is an opportunity to explore further the concept of ‘graduateness’ and its relevance to RPL in discussion and debate with colleagues, recognising that it is through engaging with the VET research community of practice that the utility of such concepts is improved. In discussing these issues, the paper relates graduateness to communities of practice, and to Biggs’ model of *constructive alignment*. It questions whether all VET qualifications, should in theory, be able to be ‘RPLed’.

## Introduction

The underpinning assumption in this paper is that recognition of prior learning is intrinsic to lifelong learning policies in mass post-compulsory education and training systems, and that mechanisms to increase its implementation must be found, particularly as an access mechanism for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to learning pathways and qualifications. The central proposition that is explored in this paper is whether it is appropriate for whole qualifications to be awarded on the basis of RPL, and whether learning may be richer if students were required to incorporate learning in the workplace, institutional learning, and RPL, rather than a learning pathway that was exclusively situated within one context or learning environment. This last point must be qualified, as there are instances where a qualification should be awarded on the basis of RPL, where this is congruent with the learning outcomes of the qualification, and students have demonstrated they have met these outcomes.

In putting forward the case, I will consider a number of dimensions, including:

- what we mean by ‘graduateness’;
- the relationship between learning or competency outcomes, RPL and ‘graduateness’;
- the extent to which the over-specification of learning or competency outcomes can result in different outcomes for those who have ‘RPLed’ their whole qualification and those who have not;
- whether *all* VET qualifications should, in theory, be able to be ‘RPLed’; and,
- conclusions from all the above about how learning should be structured.

## Background

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<sup>1</sup> In 2002 a consortium led by Southern Cross University was commissioned by the Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board to research RPL in post-compulsory education and training in Australia. I was the principal researcher for the project. While this paper draws on this research, the views expressed are my own and should not be attributed to either the AQFAB or to my colleagues in the consortium.

In 2002, the Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board (AQFAB) commissioned a consortium led by Southern Cross University to:

- research RPL policy and practice in each of the four sectors of post-compulsory education and training in Australia (senior secondary school, adult and community education, vocational education and training, and higher education); and,
- develop national RPL principles and operational guidelines to promote the extent to which RPL was implemented, and to promote consistent practices across the sectors.

More than 150 stakeholders were interviewed, and approximately 620 people completed questionnaires on the project website. This paper addresses a small component of the research undertaken. We did not seek a statistically representative sample of interviewees or respondents to the website questionnaire; instead we interviewed key stakeholders in all sectors, and, through advertisements, email discussion lists, and articles and notices in relevant magazines and publications, invited those with an interest in RPL to tell us their views through the questionnaire. Of the more than 150 people we directly interviewed, at least 100 worked in educational institutions, and included VET, ACE, higher education, and a small number from schools. Most of these were involved in teaching, teaching support roles or education leadership roles (like head of department, deputy-vice chancellor etc). More than 620 people responded to the web questionnaires, and included teachers, administrators, students (mainly higher education students) and a small number of researchers. Consequently, the views reported in this paper do not claim to be representative of the views of all practitioners (particularly teachers) in all sectors. The project did employ other comprehensive methods through analysis of data on RPL, stakeholder interviews (through covering the major stakeholder organisations), and through research of sectoral and institutional policy frameworks and websites (Wheelahan, *et al.*, 2002). The discussion in this paper is consequently exploratory in nature, and is seeking to understand a part of what we were told in the interviews and through the questionnaires.

Both interviewees and questionnaire respondents were asked: “What is your attitude towards a whole qualification being awarded on the basis of an RPL application in your sector?” Of the interviewees, almost all those we spoke to in higher education (HE) were opposed to this. Reactions were more mixed among VET interviewees: while many were in favour, there were also many who had reservations. Table 1 shows the views of teaching staff in the VET and HE sectors to this question in the web-questionnaires.

**Table 1: What is your attitude towards a whole qualification being awarded on the basis of RPL in your sector?**

	Support		Don't support		Depends		Not sure		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Teaching staff VET	28	23	35	29	46	38	11	9	<b>120</b>	<b>100</b>
Teaching staff HE	2	3	32	51	25	40	4	6	<b>63</b>	<b>100</b>

\*Of the 620 respondents to the questionnaire 208 were students, and across the four sectors, 138 were administrators, 215 were teaching staff, 15 were researchers, & 44 did not indicate which category they belonged to. This table reports only teaching staff in the VET & HE sectors.

The percentage of VET teachers in this group of questionnaire respondents who supported awarding a full qualification on the basis of RPL is relatively low (23%), given that RPL is a fundamental feature of VET policy. The Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) includes RPL specifically among its 12 principles, and stipulates that all VET students must be offered RPL at enrolment (ANTA, 2001: 18). RPL was established as one of 10 principles of the National Framework for the Recognition of Training (NFROT) in 1991, and also as part of the charter establishing the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) in 1995 (Wheelahan *et al.*, 2002). In theory, students should be able to ‘RPL’ a whole qualification, and assessment centres (such as VETASSESS in Victoria) have been established for this purpose. This policy is underpinned by a framework in which the process of certification is, in theory, distinct from processes of learning, and enshrined in the VET ‘mutual recognition’ policy, whereby all providers are required to recognise a qualification issued by another provider. I shall argue later that this distinction between certification and learning is a key tension in VET in Australia.

In contrast, in HE in Australia, qualifications are more likely to be identified with the institution in which they were gained, and under these circumstances one would expect most in that sector to be opposed to awarding a full qualification on the basis of RPL. It was explained to us in the interviews, that if students were to be awarded a qualification from *their* institution, they needed to undertake at least some study (usually between 30% - 50%) to do so. This would provide the institution with assurance that the student acquired the attributes associated *their* graduates. Given that this is so, and while a minority teaching staff (3%) supported awarding a qualification based entirely on RPL, the number who thought that it depended on the circumstances was surprisingly high (40%).

We asked teaching staff (through interviews and through the website questionnaire) if they integrated RPL principles into their teaching practice. This includes practices like allowing students to submit evidence from work, or a social or community context as part of the assessment process. This could be a *requirement* of assessment, or students may be able to *substitute* a work ‘product’ for the designated assessment. Almost 73% of teaching staff responding to the website questionnaire said they either frequently or sometimes included RPL in their teaching practice (45% said sometimes and 28% said frequently), with almost 21% saying that they never did.<sup>2</sup> RPL is used by teachers as part of a flexible and student-centred approach to learning, and it appears that they do not regard this practice as synonymous with processes of certification. This is indicative of tensions surrounding processes of certification, and the extent to which these are or should be independent of ‘inputs’ (teaching and learning).

### **What do we mean by ‘graduateness’**

In our project we used the concept of ‘graduateness’ to try to give a voice to what people told us in the interviews and through the questionnaires. It was explained to us that sometimes when a student was granted RPL for a whole qualification or for a substantial part of a qualification, that they lacked something that other graduates had. Sometimes this was explicit, for example, students were said not to have the same literacy skills as other students. Other times it was more diffuse, and was explained in terms of ‘the sum being greater than the parts’ – that is, aside from the specific

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<sup>2</sup> Information was missing for approximately 6% of respondents.

learning or competency outcomes for each subject, module, unit, course or qualification, there was 'something else' that graduates had. Through our discussion here I hope to explore the concept of 'graduateness' further and how it may be elaborated.

The term 'graduateness' is used to a much greater extent overseas than is the case in Australia, particularly in the UK where the Higher Education Quality Council initiated a project in 1995 to define the qualities of 'graduateness' in HE (HECQ, 1995). It is mostly associated with graduates at degree level, whereas the debate in VET is more around generic skills or competencies, which are presumed to be transferable. DEST (2002: 12) explains that:

In the UK, there has been a general adoption of the use of 'attribute' rather than 'skills', in an effort to register a broader notion of 'graduateness' which encompasses knowledge, understanding, dispositions, attitudes and values, as well as skills. In Australia, the debate about terminology has been complicated as the development of graduate attributes has shadowed the development and adoption of the key competencies within the vocational education sector.

There is another concept which is closely related, and that is the concept of 'functioning knowledge' that individuals acquire through experience in a profession or occupation (Eraut, 2000). This refers to implicit learning and tacit knowledge, and RPL processes seek often to make this explicit for the purposes of making it count towards a qualification. Graduates from qualifications do not always have functioning knowledge (although they may have propositional knowledge) and this is one of the drivers for reorienting learning in both sectors (Boud, 1998).

The concept of 'graduateness' as we used it is in many ways a combination of generic attributes combined with differing degrees of functioning knowledge (we cannot expect new graduates will have the same level of functioning knowledge as those with many years experience). However, the notion of 'generic' attributes is itself problematic, and Stevenson (2003) argues that the concept does not recognise the contextual nature of learning, and that the notion that any knowledge or skill is or could be generic results in a divorce between knowledge and practice that impoverishes both. This is discussed further in this paper. Graduateness then, can be taken to mean the 'meta-thinking' or learning skills (with an emphasis on reflective practice) that people acquire *which is contextualised* in the occupations or professions in which they work or are destined to work. This underlines the importance of 'communities of practice' in which people learn and work. I define a community of practice here to include not only the workplace, but all that that contributes to constructing an identity for an occupation or profession, which includes professional bodies and also the qualifications that people undertake. This identity (of a profession or occupation) emerges from the interplay of all these factors, and the broader society.

The impetus for my thinking on this was not only what we were told in interviews with teachers in both sectors (and from comments in the website questionnaire), but more to the point, what I was told in meetings with enterprise providers, particularly large scale enterprise providers in the public sector. In interviews with a number of enterprise providers in one industry, it was explained that sometimes people who are 'RPLed' for a diploma or an advanced diploma, 'miss out' on the collegiate processes that lead to the development of leadership skills and qualities. While such individuals

may have all the competencies included in the diploma or advanced diploma, they didn't have what was needed to bring it together as a coherent whole, expressed as a deeper understanding of the issues in their profession, and the breadth of vision required to lead others.

There are three aspects to this issue: the first concerns the extent to which learning outcomes explicitly include the attributes sought. The second is the extent to which the over-specification of learning outcomes *narrows* learning, and results in differences between those who have 'RPLed' their qualification, and those who have not. The third questions whether all qualifications should, in theory, be able to be 'RPLed' in full.

### **RPL and learning outcomes**

In thinking about RPL and the problem of *graduateness*, it is necessary to consider the extent to which the learning outcomes against which individuals are assessed reflect the aims of the qualification. It is often the case that the learning outcomes for degrees and diplomas and advanced diplomas are incomplete. Teaching, learning and assessment activities address a broader range of learning outcomes or competencies than those formally contained within the qualification.

If the qualities of '*graduateness*' are the outcomes sought, these need to be made explicit. Students need to know the criteria they are required to meet. If there is a substantial '*hidden curriculum*,' then it is difficult for students to second guess this, particularly if they have not had much experience in tertiary education. This problem is not isolated to RPL: students from non-traditional backgrounds have lower pass rates in formal education and training programs than students who come from families with generations of experience in tertiary or post-compulsory education and training (Dobson, *et al*, 1998; Teese, 2000; Watson, *et al*, 2000). The problems of '*cracking the code*' in understanding the hidden curriculum are problems for students from disadvantaged backgrounds in all areas of post-compulsory education and training.

### **The over-specification of learning outcomes**

However, this issue or problem of '*graduateness*' cannot be resolved with the simple statement that learning outcomes need to be made more explicit (although this is important). The process of learning is more complex than the definitive specification of learning outcomes, although clear and explicit learning outcomes are essential to high quality learning. The over-specification of learning outcomes with increasingly detailed explanations of what the learning outcomes consist of, the contexts of performance, and the assessment approaches that are to be used, can narrow the learning that takes place.

Young (2001: 9) asks if the focus on criterion-based outcomes in qualifications narrows the kind of learning needed for people to become lifelong learners, and to become the kind of workers needed in a rapidly changing society:

“...it may ... also be useful to explore evidence of the extent to which an over-emphasis on qualifications (and in particular, the tendency for this to lead to a greater emphasis on the assessment of outcomes) can unintentionally inhibit the on-going learning that is not geared to

testing or assessment. If people are to become lifelong learners it is the learning that is not immediately tested or linked to qualifications that needs to be encouraged.”

Young (2001: 9-10) argues that the focus on specific outcomes assumes that “the outcomes of learning are already known...” However, the pace and “unpredictability of technological development and the emergence of new markets” means that the outcomes cannot always be defined in such a way as to lend themselves to detailed, precise, and prescriptive statements. He cites research that shows that “new kinds of learning may need to be encouraged that cannot easily be predicted in advance and may not be readily assessable for qualifications.” Further, that:

“It may be that the balance between control and risk will need to shift, with less emphasis on assessing pre-defined outcomes and more on enabling learners to explore new possibilities that cannot be predefined. In other words, supporting learning may not be equated with a greater emphasis on qualifications, unless qualifications are themselves defined in new ways with less emphasis on prior specification of outcomes and more on learning processes and the judgements of different stakeholders.” (Young, 2001: 10)

So where does this leave us? On the one hand we are saying that clear, explicit learning outcomes need to be defined so that students don't have to second guess the hidden curriculum, and on the other, we are arguing that the over-specification of learning objectives can narrow the scope of learning. What sort of learning objectives do we need and where does RPL fit in this context? Biggs (1999: 42) summarises this dilemma when he asks:

But can complex learning be specified in advance to the degree required by curriculum objectives? Is it not like the drunk who only looks for his lost keys under the street light? That is, what is interesting and important is what you can't see, not what you can.

The model Biggs proposes is called *constructive alignment*. Learning is, he argues, about what the *student* does, not the teacher. The real learning objectives are those that the assessment assesses, not what is written in the curriculum statements, or what teachers have in their head. If the assessment does not assess the learning objectives, then there is a problem, because students will work to the assessment. The assessment needs to be aligned with the curriculum objectives, and this requires the clear specification of those objectives. But these need not be narrowly defined, atomised outcomes statements that give rise to a ‘tick and flick’ culture. Tick and flick arises from behavioural objectives that were:

...born from an exclusively quantitative conception of teaching and learning, which meant that when objectives were defined it was in quantitative terms, in units of knowledge, while the assessment process amounted to counting the number of items acceptably performed. Teaching meant ‘teaching to the test’....The alignment was excellent, but what was aligned was a very narrow band of essentially low-level and fragmented activities. (Biggs, 1999: 42)

He argues that:

To make the objectives up-front and salient is not to exclude other desirable but unforeseen or unforeseeable outcomes. The most interesting research is that which yields the unintended and unforeseen. Thus, being clear about what we want in no way pre-empts us from welcoming unexpected outcomes from our students' learning. In fact, higher level activities are open-ended, as indicated by verbs like ‘generalize’, ‘solve unseen problems’, ‘develop a theory to explain why...’ Particular outcomes are here unspecified, it is only the process that is specified, and that allows for surprises in plenty. (Biggs, 1999: 42-43)

Developing open-ended learning outcomes that focus on the process of learning as well as the acquisition of particular skills, and then assessing against these outcomes, is one way of making sure that people who are RPLed for all or a large portion of a qualification have that ‘something else’ associated with graduateness.

### **Should all qualifications be able to be ‘RPLed’?**

The idea that a whole qualification can be RPLed is premised on the distinction between processes of teaching and learning on the one hand (‘inputs’), and certification (‘outputs’) on the other. If they are as conceptually distinct as this approach suggests, then how and where one acquired the inputs should not, in theory, matter. However, Young (2001: 9) explains that “Whereas qualifications as an instrument of policy tend to treat learning in terms of an input-output model, research evidence suggests that learning is considerably more complex than a simple input-output model assumes.”

The separation of learning from certification in outcomes based systems has resulted in ‘communities of practice’ declining in relative importance. Young refers to a move away from “shared practices of teachers and trainers” in different occupational and discipline areas, to one based on “agreed national criteria” (Young, 2001: 11). He explains that this was in part, due to government attempts to break what they regarded as the ‘provider culture’ of institutions, which were seen to be “out of touch with the needs of industry” (Young, 2001: 12). However, a ‘community of practice’ is more broadly defined as “the ‘communities of practice’ within which people learn.” This also refers to the occupations in which people learn, and for which they are destined. He explains that:

“Even if occupational and other boundaries are becoming as permeable as is sometimes claimed, the need for trust located in ‘communities of practice’ remains the fundamental social basis of learning and of the creditability of qualifications.” (Young, 2001: 21)

This insight has two implications: the first is that ‘stakeholder trust’ in qualifications is fundamental for their credibility, and this requires the learner participating in processes which are understood by stakeholders as intrinsic to achieving a qualification outcome. However, it would be unreasonable and unfair to learners to suggest that the *only* reason that they can’t RPL a whole qualification is because of the issue of stakeholder confidence in the end result, important as this is.

The second (and from a pedagogical perspective, more important) implication is that qualifying is a *process* and not a single outcome, and learning or competency outcomes that are distinct from the *process of learning* are unlikely to be as rich as they need to be. This is because it is *within the community of practice* that learning occurs, connections are made, and new knowledge created *by the learner and other stakeholders*. This is particularly relevant if we consider that, in many areas, the outcomes of learning cannot and should not be definitively and prescriptively predefined in advance, given the constant processes of change in work and in society. Learning, in this conception, is not just about achieving predefined outcomes that are parcelled up into distinct competencies, each of which is assessable, stackable and countable. It also about developing shared understandings within the community of practice – developing the qualities of ‘graduateness’ which includes functioning

knowledge, the capacity to contribute to the community of practice, cope with change, and use ‘meta-thinking’ or learning skills in context.

Stevenson (2002) explains that training policy has aligned training with industrial practices, in which job specific competencies are combined with ‘generic’ competencies that are thought to be ‘transferable’ across a range of contexts. In Australia these generic competencies are expressed in the Mayer Key Competencies. An example of how they are used is that a student who is deemed competent in communication skills in the Diploma of Community Services (Aged Care) receives credit for these competencies if they also undertake the child studies diploma. Sometimes, credit is given for ‘generic’ competencies in qualifications across industries. However, as Stevenson (2002: 5) explains:

“There is a growing recognition of the ‘cultural situatedness’ of activity—the ways in which knowing is derived from socio-cultural activity and its historical construction, and the ways in which the socio-cultural features of new situations are read afresh when individuals seek to address them on the basis of previous learning and other experiences in order to engage in successful activity.”

In a forthcoming paper, Stevenson (2003: 13-14) argues that:

“The learning goal then should be one of building and linking concepts / knowledge-that and skills for dealing with plural, diverse experiences, together with the capacity to make judgements about which concepts and skills are more appropriate for which situations with which characteristics.”

In stating that learning cannot be decontextualised from the context in which it is acquired, Stevenson (2003: 14) cites Beach in arguing: “that generalization should be a process of continuous re-contextualisation, rather than one of de-contextualisation.” Stevenson (2003: 16) explains the interdependent relationship of ‘general’ and ‘specific’ knowledge in the following way:

“...we need to reject the idea of the superiority of abstracted, generalized declarative theoretical knowledge over the capacity for specific, contextualised, skilful, practical action; and we need also to reject the idea that specific, contextualised, skilful, practical action, in one context, automatically generalises to new content, situations and contexts. Rather, what is needed is learning directed at highly linked forms of understanding.

While not attributing this conclusion to Stevenson or other situated-learning or socio-cultural learning theorists, I think that Stevenson’s point about the interdependence of general and specific knowledge explains why learning should occur across many sites, with no one site being privileged, and explains why ‘RPLing’ a whole qualification cannot be insisted on in all contexts and in all instances. The achievement of qualifications should involve multiple contexts which recontextualise knowledge and practices. This includes work-based or work-integrated learning (or another relevant social context), institutional learning (internal or external), and RPL processes that emphasise the development of reflective practices, and explicitly require the learner to try to integrate their past experiences with their present. Learning in one site enables learners to use this lens in examining the learning they are undertaking in another site, and none is really dispensable. It also brings together all elements of the ‘community of practice’ – the workplace (or other context, for example neighbourhood house or other community setting), teachers, and students.



There is another reason why I think that institutional learning should not be completely dispensed with in the interests of ensuring situated learning, one which is relatively ignored in much literature: within a community of practice power relations are inherently unequal, and not all interests are identical. There is not always a common perspective shared between teachers and trainers on the one hand and workplaces on the other. The power relations of workplaces means that students do not always get the opportunity they need to explore alternative practices and knowledge, and participating in some institutional based learning may help to provide this opportunity. Of course, power relations in institutions are also unequal, and students must negotiate with, and create their own space in institutions in a different way compared to the workplace. But these different sites provide students with the opportunity to creatively use the different contexts in which they find themselves.

Paradoxically, understanding the relationship between competencies, qualifications and RPL and the limits that exist may help to increase the extent to which RPL is implemented. This is particularly so if RPL (or similar reflective processes) are regarded as intrinsic to *all* qualifications, where this is relevant to the qualification's outcomes. The qualities of 'graduateness' are constituted by communities of practice, and it is through learning to become a member of the community of practice that one acquires the attributes of graduateness. Qualifying is a *process* and not simply an outcome, implying that one cannot draw sharp lines between processes of certification, and of teaching and learning.

However, we should not exclude the possibility that there are people who have that 'something else' associated with graduateness even if they do not have a formal qualification, and that mechanisms need to be in place to recognise that learning. Moreover, sometimes all that *is* necessary is straight skills acquisition in a particular area. A student who wants or needs to be certified for something just in time and just for now (like for example, their skills in using a particular software package) should not be required to demonstrate the 'something else' each and every time they seek certification. It depends on the objectives of the qualification, and the assessment should reflect these objectives.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper I have tried to, through using the literature, think more about what we learnt through our interviews and through responses to the website questionnaire, in particular, what underpinned the reluctance to RPL whole qualifications. The notion of 'graduateness' as I have defined it here is perhaps unsatisfactory, and needs further elaboration. However, we cannot ignore what people tell us, simply because our conceptual schema doesn't accommodate what they say. It means we have to rethink our concepts and add to them. This paper has not attempted to pose definitive answers, but to raise issues for debate and further research. The findings are limited, as the numbers who we spoke to and who completed the questionnaire, do not constitute a representative sample.

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