Has RPL served its purpose?

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Abstract

Much of the literature attempts to explain and define RPL, drawing distinctions especially between RPL and RCC. Much of the discourse relates to defining an RPL assessment model. Regardless of the terminology, RPL is a form or purpose of assessment. Within the national training framework all forms or purposes of assessment require adherence to Standard 8.1 of the AQTF Standards for RTOs, especially the principles of assessment and the rules of evidence.

In the early stages of competency-based training and assessment the focus on RPL attempted to redress the focus on more traditional methods of assessment. As the CBA system matures and with increasing flexibility of the training system RPL as separate from other forms of assessment may have served its purpose.

The research suggests that RPL is not a particularly contentious or difficult issue with trainers and assessors (Smith, Lowrie, Bush & Loebegier 1997) with many assessors viewing RPL as part of the broader assessment process. In many instances it is suggested that in training organisations informal RPL processes are occurring and unrecorded with partial recognition embedded in good teaching and assessment practice (Wilson & Lilly 1996, Smith 1997a). These findings suggest that there is no uniform resistance to RPL per se but that there may be resistance to the processes developed specifically for RPL.

With the increased maturity of the CBA system and the increased confidence of assessors it could be argued that RPL as a distinct concept is no longer relevant. RPL should be incorporated into the broader framework of assessment.

Unfortunately, the recent introduction of the AQTF Standards for RTOs separates and distinguishes RPL from other purposes of assessment. Standard 8.2, which specifically relates to RPL (and by definition RCC), implicitly require additional or different processes than those already existing for assessment. This artificial separation between assessment and RPL confuses and detracts from the integration of RPL into the assessment system and from assessment being an integral part of training. This distinction between assessment and RPL can only continue to confuse and complicate the role and process of assessment regardless of where it occurs in the training cycle.

Introduction

This paper is based on the review of research presented in the NCVER paper (in press) *Giving Credit: A Review of RPL and credit transfer in the vocational education and*

training sector, 1995 to 2001, undertaken by Andrea Bateman and Brian Knight. The statistics contained here are those cited in the above report. This paper summarises the review of recognition of prior learning (RPL) and credit transfer in vocational education and training covering the period from 1995 to 2001. It provides an overview of Australian research and discourse, together with analysis of the national data for the period.

In addition some conclusions have also been drawn from the recent research report conducted by NCVER, University of Ballarat and CURVE, Canberra Institute of Technology in 2003, titled *Recognition of prior learning in the vocational education and training sector*.

Background

A significant amount of literature was generated throughout the 1990s, mostly as policy-related material such as national or state training authority frameworks or policies, guidelines for RPL assessment systems and training or promotional materials. Very little critical research studied the conduct and extent of RPL or the perceived benefits, barriers and issues or implications. Most of the literature was also written before the introduction of training packages and the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF). In general, the literature centred on defining RPL and how it is similar to or different from assessment.

The national data collection requirements specified in the AVETMIS Standard distinguish between RPL (an assessment) and credit transfer (an administrative process):

- Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is based on evidence which confirms that the student already has the required knowledge and skills. RPL involves an assessment or some other form of evaluation of the student's knowledge and skills. The AVETMIS Standard does not capture information about 'partial RPL' situations, such as the granting of RPL for units or elements of competency which form part of a larger unit of delivery.

- Credit transfer arrangements are based on completion of the same subjects with another VET provider (known as 'mutual recognition' under the AQTF), or of equivalent subjects at another education or training institution such as some other VET provider, a higher education institution or a secondary school. Credit transfer arrangements can also encompass overseas courses or subjects, such as those administered by the National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition (NOOSR). Each Australian state and territory has a reciprocal recognition authority to support mutual recognition arrangements within and across the various education and training sectors. The granting credit through credit transfer arrangements is essentially an administrative process (Bateman & Knight 2003).

Work undertaken by the NCVER (unpublished) indicates that, in practice, the distinction between RPL and an enrolment leading to an assessment and a pass is not clear-cut, and probably a more realistic view is to regard RPL as a form of accelerated progression. This is the practice adopted by some providers. Because of this, and the 'partial RPL' scenario

noted above, RPL figures reported in the national data collected under AVETMISS should be regarded as indicative only.

Statistical findings

The scope for this collection was all activity in the public VET system.

The statistics confirm that RPL and credit transfer are not relevant to all students. This is particularly evident when the type of VET program undertaken is taken into account. The rates for RPL and credit transfer are close to zero for students undertaking non-award and non-AQF programs, and very low for students undertaking AQF certificate I and II programs. Among students who are less concerned with AQF and equivalent qualifications, which includes many older students and those enrolled with community providers, RPL and credit transfer rates also tend to be lower.

On the other hand, the relevance of RPL and credit transfer increases with the AQF level: for diploma and higher level programs, around one in 10 students have obtained RPL and over one in five have credit transfer. Although qualification completions information is currently understated, it is also clear that these trends flow through into students obtaining recognised qualifications. All of this suggests that one of the primary objectives of RPL and credit transfer, namely, to assist students gain recognised qualifications without having to restudy for skills they already have, is being met through the current arrangements, at least to an extent.

RPL and credit transfer patterns for students in various access and equity groups are mixed. Some of the findings are encouraging, the slightly higher rate of RPL among students from non-English speaking backgrounds in 2000, for example, but others, such as the below average rates for indigenous students, lead to a more negative view.

Establishing the trends in RPL and credit transfer over time is problematic because of data limitations for earlier years. However, the information suggests that RPL rates grew initially and stabilised at around 4% from 1999 onwards, while credit transfer has been more constant, at around 2.5% of students.

Issues identified in the literature

It was not the intention of the review of research to revisit the literature beyond that of the data collection period addressed within this study. The main focus for the review of literature was to establish what Australian research or discourse has been undertaken on this topic since 1995. Much of the literature prior to this date has been well synthesised by Wilson & Lilly (1996) and Kenyon, Saunders & Gibb (1996a).

There is limited amount of research related to specific groups or to industry or enterprise RPL processes and assessments. Much of the research has been limited to state wide analysis of implementation (Gibson 1997, Potter 1995, Assessment Centre for Vocational Education 1995), case study analysis (MacDonald 1995), of RPL being included in more

extensive research related to CBT and CBA (Smith 2000, Smith, Lowrie, Hill, Bush & Lobegeier 1997, Smith, Hill, Smith, Perry, Roberts & Bush 1995), the effects on student outcomes (Smith, Brennan & Oczkowski 1998) and reviewing assessor judgments (Hummel 1995).

Much of the literature throughout this period focused on defining RPL, reviewing the purposes and models of RPL assessment, as well as the perceived benefits, barriers and implications.

Defining RPL

There is much debate to be found in the literature in terms of defining RPL. A chronological view of the literature demonstrates the various shifts in interpretation of RPL depending on local, industry or state policy as well as depth of understanding of competency-based assessment. Terminology include: RCC, recognition, skills recognition and up-front assessment. However, the recent introduction of the *AQTF Standards for RTOs* (2001, p. 9) negates the RPL/RCC debate providing a definition that encompasses both RPL and RCC. The recent research conducted by NCVER, University of Ballarat and CURVE (2003) note that state/territory variations are being minimised by the introduction of the AQTF definition.

Purposes of RPL

A key element in the literature is the emphasis on the purposes of RPL especially as it relates to training organisations. The range of purposes claimed throughout the literature can be organised according to the stakeholder involved; that is the student, the worker, the enterprise and the training organisation. In general, very little of the literature critically analyses how the aims of introducing and establishing an RPL assessment system has met the desired purposes either in training organisations or within industry.

Models of RPL

Much of the review and analysis of RPL pertains to determining the assessment process that best suits the needs of the organisation (training or enterprise) and the target group. Various principles and stages are said to apply however, very little of the literature addresses concepts or issues in model establishment or implementation that distinguishes RPL assessment models from a broader, flexible assessment model. Keating, Kelly & Smith (1998) continue this argument by emphasising that 'RPL can be seen as a logical subset of an assessment model' and therefore in their report refer to what was notionally called an RPL process as being an 'assessment model' (p. 20).

Perceived benefits

There has been very little research conducted that relate to the perceived or potential benefits of RPL. Much of the findings from the research are those that are gleaned from small-scale studies or case studies and tends to be anecdotal in nature (Pithers, 1999).

Wilson & Lilly (1996, p. ii) consider that 'much of the discussion about benefits lacks depth of analysis, with many of the promoted benefits assumed to be actual benefits'.

Perceived barriers

Much of the criticism within the literature of RPL related more to the various implementation models of RPL assessment and their related administrative processes and issues rather than the concept of RPL. Most of the literature acknowledged that there has been less than desired take-up of RPL and frequently the barriers are cited as being the reason for this.

One of the major criticisms of RPL and its implementation is the assessment process itself (Smith 2000, Gibson 1997). Anecdotal evidence across the literature suggests that candidates are in fact enrolling into subjects and undertaking an assessment shortly after, rather than applying for RPL.

Recognised within the literature is the issue of the timing of assessment provision within the RPL model and how this then relates to desired level of flexibility in training provision (Assessment Centre for Vocational Education 1995, Kenyon et al 1996b, MacDonald 1996, Wilson & Lilly 1996).

The issue of the cost to individuals and to organisations when implementing and establishing an RPL system is a contentious point across the literature with mixed opinions and findings.

Enablers

A number of researchers have attempted to identify the factors which enable an effective RPL process (Love 1995, Ballantine 1995, O'Connor 1995, SA TAFE 1995a, SA TAFE 1995b, Talbot 1997, Harrison 1995, WA DET 1995) however there has been little critical analysis of this issue across the literature. In some instances much of the information pertaining to enabling factors is gleaned from effective practice models and from strategies to redress the perceived barriers to RPL. Much of the information does not go beyond the RPL process and there is very little critical analysis of more macro influences.

Funding arrangements

States and territories registering/accrediting bodies across Australia have developed various policy and practices related to RPL. Associated with this is the issue of funding and resourcing RPL. However, there is very little critical analysis of the various RPL practices and funding arrangements and their influence on the extent of RPL. The recent report by NCVER, University of Ballarat and CURVE attempted to address this issue.

Discussion

Although there is 'not a universally agreed understanding about the use of RPL' (Thomson, Saunders & Foyster 2001) the research indicates that the understanding and application of RPL is evolutionary. The term 'recognition' has been recommended in recent years as an alternative by a number of researchers (Kirkwood and Kearney 1998, Wilson & Lilly 1996) to minimise confusion. This term was also used in the recent DETYA publication (2001). However, Smith et al (1997, p. 6) considered that this option is 'unsatisfactory' but posed no alternative.

Keating et al (1998) in their research report regarding the development of an assessment model considered using assessment and RPL in juxtaposition; however, on reflection decided to omit the term RPL and refer only to assessment. Keating et al (1998) considered that RPL was a sub-set of the assessment model and considered that the assessment model should be both flexible and broad enough to accommodate evidence gathering procedures and decisions normally related to RPL.

Assessment in a competency-based context in the Australian VET has a well-established process based on defined standards. The definition of competency-based assessment is well accepted and Gillis & Bateman (1999) extend this to include:

- A clear purpose

- Identifying the evidence required

- Using appropriate evidence gathering methods

- Interpreting the evidence and making a judgement

- Recording the outcome

- Reporting to key stakeholders.

This assessment framework allows for the provision of all purposes of assessments. It is therefore considered that 'assessment' should be seen as an encompassing term for all purposes and contexts of assessment.

Within the national training framework all assessments require adherence to Standard 8.1 of the AQTF Standards for RTOs (ANTA 2001), especially the principles of assessment (validity, reliability, fairness and flexibility) and the rules of evidence (validity, currency, authenticity and sufficiency).

Unfortunately, the recent introduction of the AQTF Standards for RTOs (2001) separates and distinguishes RPL from other purposes of assessment. Standard 8.2, which specifically relates to RPL (and by definition RCC), implicitly requires additional or different processes than those already existing for assessment (within training). This

artificial separation between assessment and RPL confuses and detracts from the integration of RPL into the assessment system and from assessment being an integral part of training. This distinction between assessment and RPL can only continue to confuse and complicate the role and process of assessment regardless of where it occurs in the training cycle.

In the early stages of competency-based training and assessment the focus on RPL attempted to redress the emphasis on more traditional methods of assessment and it was intended that RPL would be a purpose of assessment to be included in the mainstream of assessment within the training system (Gibson 1997).. Assessment methods such as evaluation of qualifications, portfolio of work, referees' reports and work history were seen as RPL evidence rather than part of a mix of evidence (Rumsey 1994). However given recent developments in assessment, assessment tools take a more holistic view of the collection of evidence and emphasise that assessment is not a once off event but rather the continuing collection of evidence and the making of a judgement.

As the CBA system matures and with increasing flexibility of the training system RPL as separate from other forms of assessment may have served its purpose. Keating et al (1998) recognised this maturity of the training system and noted that 'Australia has been amongst the first nations to adopt a competency-based training system' and is 'more advanced than most if not all other countries in its approach towards the recognition of skills in the workplace' (p. 26). They argued that the lexicon and debate surrounding CBA, RPL and RCC suggest a 'high degree of conceptual activity' (p. 26).

The research suggests that RPL is not a particularly contentious or difficult issue with trainers and assessors (Smith et al 1997) with many assessors viewing RPL as part of the broader assessment process. The lack of information or mixed findings suggests that trainers and assessors are coping with the concept of RPL assessments but may be more negative about the processes involved. In many instances it is suggested that in training organisations informal RPL processes are occurring and unrecorded with partial recognition embedded in good teaching and assessment practice (Bateman & Knight 2003, Smith 1997a, Wilson & Lilly 1996). These findings were also substantiated by the recent NCVER publication (2003). Therefore it could be suggested that there is no uniform resistance to RPL per se but that there may be resistance to the processes expected by the AQTF and developed by RTOs specifically for RPL.

Conclusion

With the increased maturity of the CBA system and the increased confidence of assessors it could be argued that RPL as a distinct concept is no longer relevant.

MacDonald (1995) proposed that in the long term RPL should 'become embedded within a wider framework' which might be encompassed by the term 'assessment' and be simply viewed as one of the mechanisms by which candidates can demonstrate competence.

Therefore the following is proposed:

1. Promote the term assessment to ensure that all purposes of assessment (including RPL) are clearly placed within this framework. RPL should be seen as a purpose of assessment with an important role in the training cycle, especially as a precursor to training. RPL is bound by the same principles and rules of evidence and quality assurance strategies as other assessments.

   At a training organisation level, RPL should be included within the broader framework of policies and procedures for assessment. This would then integrate RPL within the broader concept of assessment and ensure that it maintains equivalent credibility and quality assurance strategies to other assessments.

2. Incorporate RPL into the broader concept of assessment within the *AQTF Standards for RTOs* and ensure that assessment is provided to clients at all stages of the training cycle.

Acknowledgments

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