



Recognition of prior learning: An assessment resource for VET practitioners

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DISCLAIMER as at March 2014: A number of changes are underway within the National Training Framework, including a transition to the new Standards for Training Packages to be implemented by the end of 2015. See http://www.nssc.natese.gov.au/training_packages.

As the transition to the new standards will vary according to each Industry Skills Council's timeline, these publications will continue to address the content of the previous Training Package model. It is anticipated that content related to the new standards will be incorporated into the publications as they become more widely adopted.

While every effort is made to maintain their accuracy, currency and usefulness, the publications are edited only once a year and may not remain current with changes implemented at state and federal level. The publications are accurate as at the date of publication shown on this page. If in doubt, please check the many websites referenced within each publication.

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VET practitioners

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Overview

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is an assessment process aimed at determining credit and recognising the competencies students have obtained in formal and informal education and the work environment.

RPL assessment enables individuals to forego training and move directly to having their competencies assessed, thus avoiding the need for unnecessary training that brings with it additional cost, time and effort.

Although it is not necessarily a quick or simple process, RPL aims to provide students who do not require learning with a flexible and faster way of having their skills and knowledge assessed against the competencies stipulated in training packages and vocationally accredited courses. Mature-age jobseekers or existing workers with accumulated life and work experiences are seen as primary students for RPL.

RPL can be used in two ways:

- as an alternative mechanism for gaining access to a course or qualification. A student may gain entry to a course or qualification using RPL as an alternative to possessing the prerequisites for entry based on formal education and training (for example, students who obtain places in a diploma course using RPL based on life or work experience when they have not completed the relevant prerequisites); and/or
- for the award of unit(s) of competency that form part of a qualification, leading to the partial or full completion of the requirements for that course or qualification.

The regulatory standards (the AQTF and the SNRs) set out the broad parameters within which RPL should be implemented to ensure that the quality of RPL assessment matches the quality of other assessment procedures. RPL may use different assessment methods, but they should be just as rigorous as conventional methods of assessing competence in the VET sector.

Definitions

Over the last decade RPL has been defined in a number of ways by practitioners, researchers and policy makers. Nationally agreed, accurate and current definitions of all terms can be found in the Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard (AVETMISS) publications.

It is defined in the *Australian Qualifications Framework First Edition July 2011* as ‘an assessment process that involves assessment of an individual’s relevant prior learning (including formal, informal and non-formal learning) to determine the credit outcomes of an individual application for credit’ (National Quality Council Training Packages glossary).

According to edition 2.1 of *AVETMISS Data element definitions* ‘**recognition of current competency** (RCC) applies if a client has previously successfully completed the requirements for a unit of competency or module and is now required to be reassessed to ensure that the competence is being maintained.’

Credit is another term that is sometimes confused with RPL. However, there is an essential difference. RPL is an assessment of individual competencies, while credit assesses courses/units/modules against each another to determine the extent to which there is a match.

Credit is defined in the *Australian Qualifications Framework First Edition July 2011* as ‘the value assigned for the recognition of equivalence in content and learning outcomes between different types of learning and/or qualifications. Credit reduces the amount of learning required to achieve a qualification and may be through credit transfer, articulation, recognition of prior learning or advanced standing.’

New streamlined RPL assessment processes

To recognise prior learning, lecturers must:

- ensure that students know that RPL provides an alternative pathway to course attendance;
- determine in consultation with students, the learning, skills and knowledge that they are able to demonstrate against the learning outcomes or competency outcomes of the course or qualification for which the student is seeking entry or the award of credit;
- determine whether any further evidence is needed to support the claim of competence and arrange for appropriate additional learning experiences or gap training where appropriate; and
- conduct an assessment that confirms competence.

In the past, many RPL processes have followed a fairly predictable pattern. Students, having been given written information about the evidence needed to have their skills recognised, have gone away and collected evidence, which they have then put together into a portfolio. To prove that their portfolio satisfied the evidence requirements, students themselves often mapped their portfolio against the unit(s) of competency.

Many registered training organisations (RTOs) are now realising that this methodology was both isolating and excessively demanding. In some cases, the language, literacy and analytical skills involved in these processes may have exceeded the knowledge and skill requirements of the modules/units being assessed or the AQF level of the qualification.

New streamlined approaches to RPL encourage assessment methods that reduce the previous reliance on paper-based evidence and give students the opportunity to gather evidence of their competence in a range of ways that better match the requirements of the unit(s). Increasingly, methods being used to gather evidence for RPL mirror assessment methods that are used in a training program. These include self-evaluation, interview processes and/or direct observation either on the job in the workplace or in a simulated environment.

Another important shift has been the introduction of far more interactive processes between the RTO and students so that RPL practices can be personalised to meet the needs of students, many of whom have had limited or distant experience of formal learning systems and their requirements. Mature-aged applicants, particularly labour market re-entrants and migrants, frequently need additional support to rebuild their confidence. Arms-length processes, such as evidence gathering for a portfolio, are isolating and do not always build confidence in people making tentative steps towards learning and work.

To make RPL a user-friendly assessment pathway, lecturers need to adopt a flexible and interactive approach, and provide information, advice and feedback to RPL students in the same way that they provide support and assistance to all students seeking to have their skills developed and assessed.

It is particularly important when students are not engaged in a structured learning program that they receive advice about what is required of them and that they not be constricted by inappropriately applied paper-based or knowledge-based assessment methods. The nature of the support provided may differ from that which is made available to other students, but the level and quality of that support will influence outcomes for students seeking RPL in the same ways as it influences other students.

In summary, the new streamlined processes, which vary in shape and form, all apply the principles of assessment to RPL and do not necessarily base their assessment on evidence contained in a portfolio. They also provide structured support for students to provide them with an experience of assessment that has been 'done well' and to meet the requirements of the regulatory standards.

These elements of effective practice and others are contained in the following general principles for RPL.

General principles for RPL

The following principles are intended to assist RTOs to implement and maintain good-quality RPL and assure the quality of assessments delivered through RPL processes. They should also help RTOs to demonstrate the quality of their service provision as indicated by the three quality indicators included in the regulatory standards, namely: employer satisfaction; student satisfaction; competency completion rate.

The principles draw upon the relevant regulatory requirements for assessment and our understanding of quality assessment practice. All RTOs and practitioners operating under regulatory standards and the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) should strive to work within these principles, which are a distillation of the requirements regarding the provision of assessment.

Table 1 – General principles for RPL

General principle	Comment
1. Information about RPL should be actively promoted and accessible to a diverse audience of students.	RPL should be actively promoted to all students enrolled in VET courses. Where possible, it should also be promoted as widely as possible through industry and community channels, to tap into the adult learning market.
2. RPL should recognise learning acquired in any context.	Provided that the learning is relevant to the competency outcomes stated in a training package and that it is still current.
3. RPL assessment should be conducted according to the principles of assessment and in conformity with the rules of evidence.	The principles and rules of evidence of RPL assessment are no different from those that apply to regular assessment processes, even if they are pursued through adapted methods. The principles of assessment are: validity, reliability, flexibility and fairness. The rules of evidence are: validity, sufficiency, currency and authenticity.
4. There is no one RPL model that is suitable for all qualifications and all situations.	The model of RPL that is implemented must be aligned with the outcome, goals and objectives of the qualification.
5. RPL processes should be timely, fair and transparent.	The delivery of RPL should be as expedient and well signposted as regular assessment processes, and students should be kept informed of their status at reasonable intervals.

General principle	Comment
6. RPL assessment processes should be quality assured to the same level as training-based assessment.	The quality indicators included in the regulatory standards apply to RPL as well as to any other assessment procedure.
7. RPL policies, procedures and processes should be explicitly included in quality assurance procedures within institutions.	Quality service means that all students receive services that meet their needs, which involves the delivery of training/assessment appropriate to students' skill levels. Identifying skill levels of students should be part of the quality measures of training services.
8. RPL decisions should be accountable, transparent, and subject to appeal and review.	The outcomes and decision-making process of RPL assessments should be clearly explained to students, and mechanisms for appeal made available throughout a student's enrolment in a qualification.
9. RPL assessment should be structured to minimise cost to the individual.	Costs for RPL processes should take into account the particular resources, labour and time allocations required for each student, and be consistent with current VET fees and charges policy.
10. Institutions and providers should develop advice and information about RPL for employers of students/ potential students to promote RPL among employers.	Those who have gained skills through experience in the workforce should be made aware of the opportunity to have their skills recognised through RPL; the benefits of this should be promoted to employers.
11. Institutions and providers should include RPL in access strategies for disadvantaged groups.	RPL should be considered as part of a wider strategy for appraising and accrediting the skills of those who have been marginalised by the traditional training and assessment model: migrants, people with disabilities, women returning to the workforce, the unemployed returning to the workforce, etc.
12. Funding models should not impede the implementation of RPL.	RPL needs to be recognised in funding policies, to acknowledge its role as a growth area in VET provision.

A task-based model for RPL

As part of the 2006-2007 TAFEWA Trade Skills Recognition Project, a process for RPL has been developed that promotes holistic, task-based assessment, and which focuses upon relating assessment activities to actual job tasks. The intention of this model is to streamline and simplify recognition processes for prospective students. This process is described below and assessment tools developed to support this approach are available at www.westone.wa.gov.au/RPL.

Preparation/information provision to students

In planning for any assessment, lecturers need to provide adequate information before, during and after a training and assessment experience. They need to be fully aware of the needs of the student, any relevant workplace personnel and the requirements of the training package unit of competency or qualification.

Information is to be provided to students about the assessment process. It will give particular advice regarding how students can demonstrate their competence and any documentary evidence students may wish to gather to support their application. Each industry has unique documents that can provide evidence of experience and competence. **However, the focus of the new streamlined holistic assessment process is on demonstrated skills and knowledge and not on documentary evidence as the main source of evidence.**

Some examples of documentary evidence that can support the process include:

- licences;
- brief résumé or work history;
- certificates/results of assessment;
- tickets held (for example, forklift, crane);
- photographs of work undertaken;
- diaries;
- task sheets/job sheets;
- logbooks;
- site training records;
- pay slips;
- membership of relevant professional associations;
- references/letters/third-party verification reports from previous employers/supervisors;
- industry awards; and
- performance appraisals.

These items may be used to support students' claims to competency throughout the RPL process. However, they **must not** be seen as a sole or sufficient determinant of competence, which is more properly and effectively assessed through interaction, dialogue and the practical demonstration of tasks.

The task-based requirements for RPL are just as rigorous as the requirements for regular assessment. It is therefore essential that the methods and tools developed for implementing assessment meet the requirements of the training package, the principles of assessment, the rules of evidence and any industry-specific workplace requirements.

First, it is necessary to extract from the training package the job tasks involved in the demonstration of competence, and then to group these job tasks into clusters or 'skill sets'. These will form the basis of the content of the assessment templates to be used throughout the different steps in the assessment process (as set out below).

It is usually appropriate to cluster competencies into more holistic assessment tasks or task-based clusters to generate accurate evidence. Competencies that are conceived as separate in the training package might, for some students, be intimately connected in practice, and thus not easy to separate from one another. An approach that clusters units of competency where there is commonality in content prevents duplication of assessment, and can provide for a more realistic demonstration of competence. This requires looking at a whole picture of a particular job role as it happens in industry, and assessing holistically. This approach saves valuable time in the assessment process.

After reviewing all the information, the student may then decide not to progress with the formal RPL assessment process by not applying for RPL.

The steps

Once the preparatory stage has been completed, the following four steps towards RPL are recommended:

- Step 1 – Student's self-evaluation;
- Step 2 – Interview with lecturer;
- Step 3 – Demonstration/observation of tasks; and
- Step 4 – Provision of further supporting evidence.

Step 1 – Student's self-evaluation

When students first apply for RPL, they are given a self-evaluation tool—such as a checklist or proforma—with questions/criteria based upon real job tasks written in plain English (not training package terminology) as interpreted from the training package unit(s) of competency. The self-evaluation tool gives students the opportunity to determine their level of experience and knowledge in the relevant industry. It also provides lecturers with an overview of the level of the student's background experience to help them determine if the student is likely to be a successful in the RPL process. It is also an important first step in identifying where the student may have gaps in training skills and knowledge. Information on sample self-evaluation tools can be found later in this publication.

If a written self-evaluation form is not appropriate for the task, or does not suit the particular needs of the student, he/she should be given the option of providing a verbal self-evaluation before a qualified lecturer. In some cases, a support person may also be used.

Step 2 – Interview with lecturer

If, according to the information provided in the self-evaluation, the student demonstrates potential for RPL, the next stage involves undergoing further evidence gathering via an interview. The purpose of this step is to determine whether the student is entitled to skip the training process and ready for assessment.

This component of the RPL assessment process provides an opportunity for the student and the lecturer to have a professional conversation about the student's required knowledge and skills. It may comprise a series of direct questions or could be a list of topics for discussion drawn from the list of required skills and knowledge. Discussion around topics may provide an opportunity for students to demonstrate a broader area of knowledge and experience and may elicit more information than direct questioning. Appropriate responses to questions or topics to be covered in the conversation should be included as these will support the lecturer in probing for more specific information.

It is preferable to conduct this interview in a workplace or work-related environment, so that the students can refer to examples or draw upon their environment to further support the verbal expression of their competence.

Lecturer's instructions should indicate which questions/topics are critical to the assessment. An appropriate recording mechanism should be included—such as a purpose-built form and/or a digital recorder—to create a reliable record of the interview for later reference.

The RPL interview – Christine Cooper, Challenger Institute of Technology

Whenever possible, it's best to conduct the RPL interview at students' workplaces. This is because it's easy for them to illustrate their statements with handy documents and processes. Students are usually more relaxed in their own environment and are more forthcoming with their stories. The lecturer can see what they are talking about and may be able to move around the worksite with the student to see different aspects of their work.

The style of interview is also important. A rigid question bank is very limiting in eliciting comprehensive responses, so it may be better to use a list of topics targeted at aspects of the student's work. An example in horticulture is to ask the council parks and gardens manager to talk about 'street trees'. This very open topic brings in information about tree species and their particular problems, safety issues, pruning requirements, specialised equipment and machinery, working with contractors, relationships with ratepayers, budgeting and financial management, and much more. If any aspect is omitted, the lecturer can prompt with direct questions.

Experience has shown that this style of topic-based interview has allowed students to tell their story with personal experiences, rather than use 'textbook' style answers. The conversational nature of this kind of interview helps students to relax and encourages them to illustrate their story with relevant items from their portfolio of evidence – some of which they may not have thought to provide otherwise.

It is very difficult for the lecturer to take comprehensive notes, ask questions and listen at the same time. To overcome this problem, it is a good idea to use a digital recorder to record the interview. These are small, unobtrusive and easy to carry around if you conduct the interview on the move. The interview can then be stored by the lecturer on computer or CD. The lecturer needs to remember to ask students for permission to record the interview and to remember to turn the recorder off if the student is discussing anything that may be sensitive or have security issues.

Recording the interview means that if lecturers are unsure after the interview that all aspects have been covered adequately, they can easily check and arrange to reassess those topics. It also provides a good source of evidence if there is any dispute about the outcome of the RPL process.

An interview conducted in this manner is an informative and enjoyable experience that provides lecturers the opportunity to network with industry and communicate the RPL concept to others. It can often encourage others in the workplace to enrol in RPL. It shows the professionalism of the well-prepared RPL lecturer and the connection of the VET provider to the real workplace.

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Step 3 – Demonstration/observation of tasks

If the interview demonstrates the student's verbal and theoretical knowledge to a sufficient standard, the next stage is to observe and assess the student's performance in practice, through the observation of practical tasks performed either in the workplace or in a simulated workplace environment.

Practical tasks provide the opportunity for the student to demonstrate the application of skills and knowledge of a qualification. These practical assessments must be designed to reflect job tasks and be developed using the units of competency. Developers will need to refer to the training package for specific industry requirements. To assess in actual workplace situations, processes will need to be put in place to enable lecturers to gain permission to access workplaces. A list of resources required for the practical tasks also needs to be included. Observation and questioning on the job will speed up and streamline the assessment process.

As stated earlier, in some cases it might be more effective to group separate competencies into certain task-based clusters. For instance, in assessing a student for the hospitality package, the lecturer might cluster the following competencies into a single, multi-stage task (such as the preparation of a banquet); work with colleagues and customers; work in a socially diverse environment; follow health, safety and security procedures; follow workplace hygiene procedures; organise and prepare food; present food, etc.

Observation checklists should be used to provide a record of the practical assessment. Checklists must provide opportunity for sufficient detail of the on the job assessment to be recorded. This documentary evidence provides sources of evidence to external sources (for example, auditors, fellow lecturers) that support the lecturer's judgement. For information on sample demonstration/observation tools in this publication.

Step 4 – Provision of further supporting evidence

To complement the record of Steps 1–3, students might provide further documentary evidence to support their competency profile as demonstrated in the prior stages of assessment. The types of documentary evidence that may be provided to further support the student's claim to competency are the same as those listed at the preparatory stage above, for instance, third-party verification reports, job logs or photographs of work undertaken. Information on useful templates can be found later in this publication.

Developing RPL assessment tools

In accordance with the regulatory standards, RPL assessment tools must:

- be designed in accordance with the principles of assessment and the rules of evidence;
- meet the requirements of the relevant training package or accredited course;
- meet workplace and, where relevant, regulatory requirements; and
- be systematically validated.

They should also incorporate the assessment of employability skills and be included in moderation processes in the same manner as regular assessment processes.

Principles of assessment and rules of evidence

Assessments are required to conform to the principles of assessment. Lecturers must ensure that their assessment methods result in outcomes that are:

- valid (assess what they say they do);
- reliable (other lecturers would make the same judgement with the same evidence);
- flexible (student's needs are taken into account in terms of the methods, the time and the place); and
- fair (for all students with avenues of appeal open to them).

Evidence gathering needs to comply with the rules of evidence, for instance, assessment methods and accompanying lecturer-designed tools must ensure that evidence is:

- valid (covers all requirements of the unit of competency);
- sufficient (enables lecturers to make a decision about competence over time and in different situations);
- current (competent performance is contemporaneous); and
- authentic (is the student's own work).

Evidence matrix

An evidence matrix may be developed to demonstrate how units of competency are assessed within the RPL assessment tool. The components of the units of competency are to be crossmatched in this table with the corresponding component of the assessment tool (self evaluation, interview questions and practical tasks). The evidence matrix validates the assessment process against the qualification. Information on sample evidence matrices can be found later in this publication.

Developers are to include records as required to provide evidence of the assessment process.

Industry consultation and validation

To deliver outcomes relevant to the context of employment, assessment tools are required to be developed in consultation with the relevant industry. This is the case both for paper-based tools such as checklists and questionnaires, and for the development of simulated and actual workplace assessments.

RTOs should consider forming partnerships with local enterprises who might provide access to a workplace or equipment, authentic workplace documents or advice on how to create a realistic simulated environment.

Employability skills

To ensure that RPL assessment processes are responsive to the needs of industry, it is also necessary to incorporate into the assessment tools the eight employability skills contained in the *Employability Skills Framework* (communication, teamwork, problem solving, self-management, planning and organising, initiative and enterprise, learning, and technology), as specified in the relevant training package.

These employability skills and their facets are now built into most training packages, and assessment tools should incorporate assessment of these employability skills alongside the assessment of mandatory units of competency. As the *Employability Skills from Framework to Practice, An Introductory Guide for Trainers and Assessors* states:

Where employability skills are explicitly embedded within a unit, they should be assessed within the context of that unit – not assessed separately. This holistic approach of combining technical and employability skills is more relevant and closely aligned to real job expectations and practices. Employability skills are most appropriately assessed in direct relation to the criteria, knowledge and skills described in units of competency.

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Moderation and validation

To ensure the overall quality and consistency of RPL assessment practices, it is necessary to submit the RPL assessment to the same process of self-auditing, moderation and validation as all other assessments.

With respect to RPL, it is important that assessment conducted as part of RPL is moderated alongside samples of regular assessment processes to ensure consistency and parity of assessment across all instances of assessment, whether undertaken at the end of a course of training or as a result of RPL application.

These processes should aim to ensure the transparency, accountability, consistency and improvement of RPL in terms of the provision of information, the preparation and assessment of students, and the delivery of assessment outcomes, and their parity with regular assessment procedures in terms of confidence and rigour. For further information, refer to the Department's 2013 publication *A guide to continuous improvement of assessment in VET*.

Assessment tool templates and examples

In 2006 a Trade Skills Recognition project was completed producing a series of tools and templates supporting the task-based RPL model in this publication. Examples of the industry-specific (Carpentry and Joinery; Automotive; Bricklaying/Blocklaying) tools developed in this project entitled 'Trade Skills Recognition Project 2006' are available from WestOne Services at www.westone.wa.gov.au/RPL.

The examples and templates which may be useful for lecturers in following the steps described in the task-based RPL model in this publication are available from WestOne Services at www.westone.wa.gov.au/RPL.

Useful links and resources

Useful links

Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF)

www.aqf.edu.au

Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF)

www.nssc.natese.gov.au/vet_standards contains information and publications, including the following:

AQTF Essential Conditions and Standards for Continuing Registration

AQTF Essential Conditions and Standards for Initial Registration

AQTF Users' Guide to the Essential Conditions and Standards for Continuing Registration

AQTF Users' Guide to the Essential Conditions and Standards for Initial Registration

Employability Skills: From Framework to Practice – An Introductory Guide for Trainers and Assessors

Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA)

www.asqa.gov.au

The national regulator for Australia's vocational education and training sector, this government authority regulates courses and training providers to ensure that nationally approved quality standards are met.

Western Australian RTOs which deliver courses interstate or overseas are required to register with ASQA.

Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education (DIISRTE)

www.innovation.gov.au

Responsible for policy, national strategies and Commonwealth funding for all education and training sectors.

National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER)

Australia's principal provider of VET research and statistics which informs policy and practice in Australia's training system, including the following:

- How to become AVETMISS compliant
<http://www.ncver.edu.au/content/compliancefaq.htm>
- AVETMISS 6.1 for VET providers: what's new and why?
www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2401.html
- Booth, R et al 2002, *Maximising confidence in assessment decision-making: Resource kit for assessors* <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/780.html>

training.gov.au

<http://training.gov.au>

is the database on Vocational Education and Training (VET) in Australia. It is the official national register of information on training packages, qualifications, courses, units of competency and registered training organisations (RTOs) and has been developed for experienced training sector users.

Western Australian Department of Training and Workforce Development

www.dtwd.wa.gov.au

This site contains information about training and workforce development as it applies to Western Australia, and links to training courses available in Western Australia as well as to ApprentiCentre and the Careers Centre.

Useful resources

Department of Training and Workforce Development publications

A guide to continuous improvement of assessment in VET

Apprenticeships and traineeships: Good practice guide for registered training organisations

Clustering units of competency: A guide on how to cluster for delivery and assessment

Designing assessment tools for quality outcomes

Guidelines for assessing competence in VET

Professional development framework for vocational skills in VET

Reasonable adjustment: A guide to working with students with disability

Staying the course: A guide to working with students with mental illness

Troubleshooting guide: Assessment in VET

For electronic (PDF and Word) copies go to www.vetinfonet.dtwd.wa.gov.au



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