



BRIEFING NOTE

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The City & Guilds Centre for Skills Development (CSD) is an independent, not for profit research and development body which is committed to improving the policy and practice of work-related education and training internationally. It is part of the City & Guilds Group.

This briefing note forms part of a series of notes produced by CSD on issues affecting the global vocational education and training sector. These notes aim to briefly summarise and compare existing research, policy and practice in different countries, and to use this to develop general principles as a starting point for debate among education stakeholders. For more comprehensive information on specific issues please refer to the further reading sections of the notes, or contact CSD directly.

RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING

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1. INTRODUCTION

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) – whereby skills and knowledge gained by individuals outside formal learning processes are assessed and granted formal recognition – has become an increasingly important topic within skills policy in recent years. It is seen as a tool for delivering a fairer, more efficient, more flexible and more inclusive skills system, and it is of increasing interest to developing countries wishing to make better use of their existing human resources. In practice, however, RPL has been problematic to implement. This briefing note examines the benefits and potential pitfalls of RPL and considers what may be necessary to develop a successful RPL policy, including in the context of the developing world.

2. WHAT IS RPL?

There is no consensus on an exact definition of RPL. As recently as 2008, at least four major public institutions in one country (Australia) were using different definitions of the term¹. The basic concept, though, is a process by which individuals' learning – wherever and however it has taken place – can be assessed and recognised. This might occur before or as part of a formal process of learning, it might lead directly to a qualification or to a promotion if taking place in the work environment, or it might be done for its own sake as a way of giving formal credit to a person's level of skill.

To allow for transparent recognition with applicability for further education and employment opportunities, and to allow for the clear and transparent development of evidence portfolios, RPL can only take place where there is an established framework of credit, qualifications and/or occupational standards onto which recognised skills and knowledge can be mapped.² This is arguably the most basic requirement of successful RPL.³

¹ Smith, H. (2008). RPL in Australian Vocational Education and Training: what do we know (about it)? Presentation to the 11th Australian VET Research Association Conference, Adelaide.

² The Learning Experience Trust (2000). *Mapping APEL: Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning in English Higher Education*

³ It has long been the case that individual institutions have allowed learners to receive exemptions from study based on prior study or experience. However, this briefing note takes RPL as meaning a broader policy approach looking to enable this type of recognition beyond and between institutions, employers and accrediting bodies, rather than an internal process exclusive to a single educational institution.



The concept of RPL is often confused with that of credit transfer, which is a purely administrative procedure. The key word to understanding RPL is assessment – it has been argued that RPL should be seen as simply a form of assessment, fundamentally no different from those that are included as part of regular programmes of learning. This idea – that RPL should be seen simply as one manifestation of a normal part of the process of certification – has important implications (see policy and practice recommendations below).

RPL can take place both in workplaces and in educational institutions. In the latter case, it has tended to occur mainly around enrolment time, though it can occur at any point during training should it become evident that assessment for relevant prior learning may be appropriate. In this case the process of RPL can overlap with other labels ('accelerated learning', 'early assessment') which can create confusion over how much RPL is taking place.

RPL is increasingly the recognised international term, though terms such as 'recognition of current competencies', 'skills recognition', 'recognition' or 'accreditation of prior experiential learning' may still be used.

3. WHY RPL?

While the principle behind RPL – that individuals deserve credit for their skills and competencies even if these have been gained outside formal learning – is not new, it is only since the early 1990s that the idea has gained widespread currency and been formally incorporated into public approaches to education and training. A number of policy drivers have played a key role in pushing RPL towards greater prominence:

- A concern with **equity**. RPL has been seen as a way to bring those who may have felt excluded from education back into learning pathways and into better jobs, and to boost motivation and self esteem. In countries with histories of repression and inequality, such as South Africa, this has been a central and explicit goal of RPL policy.
- An increasing focus on **employer needs**. RPL has been seen as a cost and time-effective way both to reach a better understanding of skill levels in an organisation and to demonstrate investment in staff.
- A dialogue of **choice**. RPL is seen as a key tool for delivering greater flexibility and customer choice in training and education systems.
- A concern for **efficiency**. In theory, RPL allows for the maximum utilisation of existing human resources by allowing for current skill sets to be codified and to serve as a step into further training or development. It also saves time and money by avoiding duplication of learning.
- The wish to promote a **positive learning culture**. By redressing the privileging of certain forms of knowledge (i.e., knowledge gained through formal learning processes), RPL can be said to encourage a culture in which learning is seen as an attainable and positive goal for every individual.⁴

RPL may be of particular relevance in sectors where many workers lack formal qualifications. The care sector has been highlighted in this regard, and this is of particular relevance in many developed countries where demographic change is predicted to lead to strong rises in demand for skills in this sector.⁵

Potential pitfalls

While these theoretical benefits make RPL an attractive policy option in a number of countries, practical implementation has often proved difficult and take-up has frequently been lower than anticipated (though it should be noted that due in part to the conceptual overlap with other learning processes, significant amounts of

⁴ Deller, K. *Corporate RPL implementation: Lessons learnt*. Learnsys paper.

⁵ Bowman, K., C. Clayton, A. Bateman, B. Knight, P. Thomson, J. Hargreaves, K. Blom and M. Enders (2003). Recognition of prior learning in the vocational education and training sector. *Adelaide: NCVER*.



RPL activity may not show up in official statistics).⁶ Particular issues exist when introducing RPL in countries with significant informal economies (see section 5 below). Challenges encountered in introducing RPL have included:

- **Lack of demand from learners.** In practice, learners have often been found to prefer training courses even when they are eligible for RPL, because they value the learning process and the social interactions that accompany it. In the case of the care sector highlighted above, members of the workforce have also been found to prefer training courses over RPL as they wish to learn the theory behind their practice.⁷
- **Lack of awareness and low esteem.** Without a strong marketing effort, learners and practitioners often lack awareness of the option to pursue RPL. Where awareness exists, RPL has frequently struggled with an image problem whereby it is seen as an 'easy option' and not valued by stakeholders.
- **Complex processes.** RPL implementation has had a tendency to be beset by heavy bureaucracy. In some cases, this has meant that pursuing RPL requires precisely those communication skills – usually gained through academic education – that those who stand most to benefit from RPL often lack.
- **Inadequate support for evidence gathering.** The need for quality assurance has sometimes led to onerous requirements for collecting evidence in support of an application for RPL; without adequate support many candidates may struggle and become discouraged.
- **Confusing language.** As a process that makes use of qualification frameworks and standardised units, RPL can become filled alienating jargon. In some sectors this may be exacerbated by language difficulties.
- **Impact on practitioner workload.** This has been particularly acute where RPL has been introduced in such a way that it mainly occurs around the time of enrolment on programmes – which is already the busiest time of year for training providers.

4. WHAT MAKES FOR SUCCESSFUL RPL?

As a relatively recent policy tool, there are few examples of RPL initiatives that have been fully evaluated. Australia offers perhaps the best example, though results there have been mixed.⁸ Beyond the core requirement of an established framework of credit, qualifications and/or occupational standards, successful RPL requires:

- Buy-in from stakeholders and efforts to raise awareness among employers, practitioners and candidates
- Rigorous assessment processes to ensure quality
- Minimal bureaucracy and sources of support to help practitioners and candidates through the process
- Clear, jargon-free information
- Sufficient resources to administer the system, and investment in the skills of practitioners and assessors to ensure they are competent to deliver RPL
- Recognition of, and investment in, the skills needed by applicants to be able to access the RPL process. This is particularly relevant where applicants have had bad experiences of education or have low levels of literacy and numeracy. In educational institutions, the introduction of a separate module in preparing for RPL has been shown to be a good way to address these skills needs and to raise awareness of RPL⁹
- Autonomy for providers to develop their own system according to target group, needs and resources.

5. RPL IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Few developing countries have extensive experience of RPL, and relatively little attention has been paid to how RPL can be used within developing economies. In recent years some African countries – including Mauritius, South Africa and Namibia – have begun to introduce RPL policies, but extensive evaluation has yet to take place.

⁶ NCVET (2006). Recognition of prior learning: at a glance. Adelaide: NCVET.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Bowman, K.. et al (2003). Ibid.

⁹ Bowman, K.. et al (2003). Ibid.



In theory, RPL has particular attractions for developing countries. Underdeveloped educational infrastructure and high levels of self-employment mean that stocks of unrecognised but actively employed skills may be relatively high. It could also be argued that the **social justice** arguments for RPL – delivering recognition and credit for people whose achievements have been marginalised and ignored – are all the more pertinent for countries with high levels of poverty. This may be more so where political issues have led to further marginalisation: in South Africa, for instance, addressing the injustices of the past is a central and explicit goal of the introduction of RPL.¹⁰

Developing countries face particular challenges to the successful introduction of RPL, however. The most obvious is that RPL presupposes **a sophisticated and comprehensive educational system, a clearly defined qualifications framework linked to occupational standards, and a sufficient resource capacity** to administer the system and ensure quality. It is notable that the three African countries mentioned above are among the richest on the continent, with relatively developed educational infrastructures. The need to lay substantial groundwork before introducing RPL may, however, be seen as an opportunity to maximise its potential impact rather than a hindrance. It has been argued, for instance, that over-hasty introduction of RPL in Australia is partly to blame for the low take-up of the option, confusion around its purpose and scepticism about its value.¹¹ In this respect developing countries can learn from the experience of RPL initiatives elsewhere.

A second issue for developing countries is **how to make RPL work for that part of the population to whom it in principle has the most to offer** – the marginalised and poor who may not have been able to access formal education. In most developing countries the large majority of this group work in the informal economy (if they can work at all), closing off the possibility of offering RPL through employers. The challenges involved in identifying where skills exist, communicating to potential candidates the concept and value of RPL, and then administering the process, are immense. The situation is further complicated by the fact that in many countries, assessment procedures would have to take extra account of low levels of literacy and numeracy among potential candidates.

As mentioned above, RPL is expensive, even if it ideally should be less expensive than administering training. In developed countries RPL has tended to incur **costs for the learner**, but this may not be feasible for those in developing countries on very low incomes. Examples of good practice have shown how costs for learners can be reduced, including through streamlining processes, using online support and conducting workshops to help applicants through the process,¹² but again many of these may presuppose levels of infrastructural development that do not apply in poorer countries. In Namibia, ensuring that fees for RPL services do not create barriers for candidates is a key principle of national policy on RPL, as is the establishment of clear indications of who will be required to pay for what, and when.¹³ Conversely, there is some evidence that a nominal charge may help adult learners value the process and motivate them to see it through to completion.¹⁴ There is scope for further research to establish the impact of user charges on take-up of and attitudes towards RPL.

If RPL is seen as a tool for capacity building, it has been argued that the emphasis should lie even more on using it as a way to bring individuals into further education and training.¹⁵ This may, however, require **a change in culture and mindset**: in a number of RPL initiatives in developing countries, outcomes were linked to occupational standards rather than curricular structures, leading to a lack of connectivity with further education and a mindset that receipt of a certificate of recognition is an end rather than a means to further development.¹⁶

¹⁰ South African Qualifications Authority (2002). *The Recognition of Prior Learning in the context of the South African National Qualifications Framework*. Pretoria: SAQA policy document.

¹¹ Smith, H. (2008). *Ibid.*

¹² Bowman, K. et al (2003). *Ibid.*

¹³ Government of Namibia (2010). *National Policy on Recognition of Prior Learning*.

¹⁴ Collett, K. and C. Gale (2010). *Training for Rural Development*. London: City & Guilds Centre for Skills Development.

¹⁵ Gillis, T. and R. Moore (2002). *Capacity Building and the Recognition of Prior Learning in Southern Africa*. Presentation to the *Biannual International conference of the Association for the Study of Evaluation in Education in Southern Africa*, Johannesburg.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*



6. POLICY AND PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy makers

- Countries looking to introduce RPL should ensure they have a functional and effective framework of qualifications and learning credit, with widespread recognition by employers, before embarking on full-scale introduction of RPL.
- Before rolling out RPL, steps should be taken to ensure that the concept is well understood and that connectivity with national occupational standards and qualifications frameworks is well established.
- Policy makers' focus should be on informing learners and providers about RPL and empowering them to find the most appropriate approach for their individual circumstances.
- Adequate provision should be made to support providers and ensure that RPL processes do not create excessive burdens.
- Policy should include a clear set of measurable goals which are intended to be achieved by RPL.

Practitioners

- RPL should be made available to candidates at any time during their training, as well as at enrolment time.
- Record-keeping methodologies should be adapted to take account of the fact that RPL processes may occur at any time in the learning process and may be conflated with other learning processes.
- Language around RPL should be as simple as possible, especially for potential applicants.
- Practitioners should clearly understand the relationships between RPL, accelerated assessment and regular assessment. Ideally all these should be incorporated in a broad, flexible framework for assessment.
- Practitioners should factor in the needs of vulnerable candidates – especially those with negative earlier experiences of education which may make them resistant to training / assessment activity, and disadvantaged learners who may lack the self-confidence to apply for RPL.
- Messaging around RPL should avoid emphasising its difference from other assessment procedures, in order to promote parity of esteem between RPL and formal learning processes. Messages should emphasise the quality and rigour of RPL processes.

7. RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING

- Bowman, K. et al (2003). Recognition of prior learning in the vocational education and training sector. Adelaide: NCVET.
- Gillis, T. and R. Moore (2002). Capacity Building and the Recognition of Prior Learning in Southern Africa. Presentation to the *Biannual International conference of the Association for the Study of Evaluation in Education in Southern Africa*, Johannesburg.
- Government of Namibia (2010). National Policy on Recognition of Prior Learning.

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