THE UTILITY OF RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING (RPL) IN AUSTRALIAN HRM CONTEXTS

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ABSTRACT

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is a key element of Australia’s Qualification Framework (AQF), however, the utility and value of RPL is not confined to educational application. The purpose of this paper is to broaden the utility of RPL by identifying the multitude of uses of RPL within human resource management (HRM) contexts. RPL can assist in addressing some of the big human capital issues impacting the Australian economy: aging workforces; skill shortages; global labour markets and; need for labour mobility. There has been very little research on the use of RPL within HRM contexts in Australia and internationally. This paper discusses three exemplars of RPL in HRM contexts before presenting a framework for mapping RPL utility within HRM.

Keywords: RPL, HRM, skills recognition, informal learning, non-formal learning, work-based learning,

INTRODUCTION: SYNERGIES BETWEEN RPL AND WORKPLACE LEARNING

RPL first emerged in educational practices in Australia in the 1980s, however it was not officially introduced as policy until the national training reforms of the early 1990s. RPL was introduced in 1993 as part of a larger national training reform agenda that included the introduction of a competency-based training and assessment (CBT&A), training packages and an Australian qualification framework. The first interation was referred to as the National Framework for the Recognition of Training (NFROT). It is now the Australian Qualification Framework (AQF). Prior to this the vocational education and training (VET) sector had shown interest in RPL, with growing demand from unions and employers for practices and procedures to recognise workplace learning. The first project to respond to this demand (in 1987) was the Ford/TAFE (technical and further education) ‘Articulation Project’, a tripartite strategy between the Victorian Government, the Ford car manufacturing company and Broadmeadows College of TAFE in
Victoria. Similar projects in other states followed (South Australia, Western Australia and New South Wales). The report from the Ford/TAFE project (Broadmeadows College of TAFE, 1990) greatly influenced the speed and direction of policy thereof, with mixed effects and outcomes (Smith 2008).

The AQF defines RPL as follows, ‘Recognition of prior learning is 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’ (AQF, 2013, 99). This definition includes three types of learning: formal; informal and; non-formal learning. If this definition is dissected we see that RPL and workplace learning have many synergies and common theoretical foundations. If we take non-formal learning this is defined by the AQF as ‘learning that takes place through a structured program of learning but does not lead to an officially accredited qualification’ (AQF, 2013, p. 98). Structured workplace learning is covered under this type of learning and could include activities such as a work-based leadership program where an external consultant is brought in or in-house computer software training. However, other forms of workplace learning are also covered under the concept of informal learning. ‘Informal learning is learning gained through work, social, family, hobby or leisure activities and experiences. Unlike formal or non-formal learning, informal learning is not organised or externally structured in terms of objectives, time or learning support’ (AQF, 2013, p. 96). Examples of workplace learning that falls within this definition of informal learning would cover on-the-job training for apprentices and trainees and the on-boarding of new recruits on the job training. It would also encompass informal coaching by line managers to their reports or when new technologies are being introduced into the workplace.

The Australian National Training Authority defined workplace learning as learning or training undertaken in the workplace, usually on the job, including on-the-job training under normal operational conditions, and on-site training, which is conducted away from the work process (e.g. in a training room) (ANTA 2002). ‘Informal learning can be deliberately built into organisational systems as a way of enhancing performance. Informal learning is not an ad hoc process; rather, there is an interrelationship
between informal learning and work.’ (NCVER, 2003, p.5). A substantial amount of non-formal and informal learning occurs in Australian workplaces. The ABS Employer Training Expenditure and Practises survey reported that ‘During the year ended June 2002, 81% of all Australian employers provided some training for their employees. Of all employers, 41% provided structured training and 79% provided unstructured training’ (ABS 2003, p. 3).

Dawe (2003) provides a matrix of workplace training based on whether the training is conducted externally or internally and whether the training is formal (structured) or informal (unstructured). This creates four possible training arrangements. The AQF definition of RPL and Dawe’s (2003) workplace training matrix have been combined in Table 1 to demonstrate the nexus between RPL and workplace learning. This will be further extended to HRM contexts throughout the paper.

| Insert Table 1 here |

RPL and workplace learning also have many common theoretical foundations. RPL draws heavily from experiential and transformational learning theories (Kolb 1983; Saddington 1998; Mezirow 1991) and key theorists in workplace learning such as Billet (2002), Marsick and Watson (1990, 2001) and Eraut (2000, 2002, 2004) draw upon a range of theoretical frameworks including situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger 1991), communities of practice (Boud & Middleton 2003) and activity theory (Engestron & Kerosu 2007) to tease out informal and non-formal learning that occurs in the workplace. Research into RPL and workplace learning both have informal and non-formal learning as key theoretical concepts.

This paper provides an overview of the scant literature and research on RPL in HRM contexts in Australia over the last two decades. This is followed by a discussion of the key policy drivers behind the utility of RPL in HRM contexts, as distinct from pure educational processes mainly related to educational access and educational pathways. This is followed by the presentation of three exemplars which have
utilised RPL in HRM contexts before presenting the newly developed framework for mapping RPL utility within HRM contexts.

LITERATURE: RPL IN HRM CONTEXTS

RPL in Australia finds its official roots in education and training reforms brought about by the Australian government in the 1990s, however skills recognition and especially the recognition of learning attained in the workplace has great utility and potential in HRM contexts. Cameron (2011, p. 14) noted this as follows:

RPL is also a growing activity outside the education sector, impacting on human capital and workforce development policy and initiatives. The Australian government’s current policies related to reforms in higher education, the social inclusion agenda (specifically in relation to education) and workforce development (including skilled migration) may see even greater impetus for RPL activity across educational sectors and within workplaces.

The majority of Australian RPL research has been in relation to the operationalisation of RPL in the VET sector however there have been two major commissioned/government funded reports which have focused on the recognition of skills acquired in the workplace:

- *Skills, Knowledge and Employability-Recognition of prior learning policy and practice for skills learned at work*, (Dyson & Keating, 2005)


The International Labour Organisation’s (ILO) Skills and Employability Department commissioned research in 2005 which involved a comparative study of the recognition practices for skills acquired in the workplace for five countries: Australia; Canada; New Zealand; South Africa and the USA.
(Dyson & Keating 2005). In 2009 the National Quality Council (NQC) of Australia investigated alternate frameworks for recognising workplace learning aimed at providing advice on the nature of a broader recognition policy. This research also drew upon international case studies and models relevant to the Australian context (Ireland; Mexico; Scotland; and the UK). The study identified five approaches to RPL in the workplace already utilised in Australia: provider based workplace assessment services; industry based assessment systems; trade skills assessment; use of enterprise business processes to met VET assessment requirements and; credit rating of workplace learning (National Quality Council, 2009).

Recently, Maher et al (2010) undertook a review of RPL research and literature as a scoping exercise for developing a skills recognition framework for the Australian rail industry and identified several main points from the literature:

RPL has been used to address industry decline and promote quality and workforce renewal; little research has been undertaken on equity issues and equity groups (Indigenous, non-English speaking background, women returning to the workforce) are less likely to access and complete RPL or RCC processes; migrant skills wastage resulting from downward occupational mobility could be addressed through programs that recognise former qualifications and update role specific skills and; a number of new models of skills recognition respond to current challenges and opportunities in RPL (Maher et al. 2010, pp 4-5.).

Cameron (2011) identified eight major themes in Australian RPL research literature published from 1990 to 2010. These eight themes included: Implementation:

- Drivers and benefits of RPL
- Implementation: Barriers to RPL
- Access and social inclusion
- Target groups
- RPL in the workplace
• Use of ICT and Web 2.0 technologies for RPL
• Building RPL practitioner capability
• Theoretical discussions and critiques

Of these eight themes, RPL in the workplace and the Use of RPL for specific target Groups of RPL, are most pertinent here. In relation to the latter there have been a small number of studies that have looked at RPL and those disadvantaged in the labour market. O’Connor (1995) focused on women from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) and how they may be particularly disadvantaged in RPL processes. Wagner (2007) and Wagner and Childs (2006) researched issues involved in recognising overseas qualifications for skilled migrants and refugees. Cameron (2004, 2005) researched the engagement of RPL by mature-aged job seekers and those disadvantaged in the labour market (Cameron, 2008; Cameron & Miller, 2004, 2008) while Eagles, Woodward and Pope (2005) and Boyle (2009) focused on Indigenous learners and art workers and how digital RPL processes could assist them in having their skills formally recognised.

In terms of the theme (RPL in the workplace) identified by Cameron, the reports referred to earlier in this paper by Dyson and Keating (2005) and the National Quality Council (2009) are major pieces of grey literature on the recognition of skills acquired in the workplace. Besides these there have been two reports focused upon enterprise based RPL. Blom et al. (2004) researched the practice of RPL within enterprise-based RTOs and Cleary and Down (2005) researched models of RPL within seven enterprises to discover the success factors, inhibitors and the potential for enterprises to work in partnership with VET providers. In addition to these studies are several industry based case studies focused upon RPL at the interface between VET and industry (Broadmeadows College of TAFE, 1990; Wilson & Lily, 1996; Smith, 2004; Catts & Chamings, 2006; McKenna & Mitchell, 2006; Perry, 2009).

There appears to be very little literature and research on the use of RPL in HRM contexts nationally and internationally. This is despite the obvious utility RPL has for HRD (skills audits, learning and development, performance management and workforce development initiatives). Recently, a
framework for e-RPL has been developed by Cameron (2012). The “e” in e-RPL refers to, ‘utilising electronic, digital and mobile web connectivity technology to collect and record evidence of prior learning acquired either formally, non-formally or informally or a combination thereof’ (Cameron, 2012, p. 99). There are three types of e-RPL posited: e-RPL for Access, e-RPL for Self Recognition and e-RPL for Workplace Recognition. E-RPL for Workplace Recognition is of most importance in this discussion and is defined as:

...the unique practice of utilising electronic, digital and mobile web connectivity technology to collect and record evidence of prior learning and current competencies that are required by an organisation/employer. These purposes could be related to human resource management issues (job design requirements, occupational and industry standards, job related competencies, knowledge and skills) or for human resource development related issues such as: skills audits; skills gap analyses; performance appraisal; promotion; and recruitment (Cameron, 2012, pp. 99-100).

The paper now turns to the single most significant policy driver for RPL in workplace contexts, the COAG RPL Initiative enacted from 2006 to 2009.

POLICY DRIVERS: RPL IN HRM CONTEXTS

RPL would not officially exist if it was not for the training reform agenda of the 1990s related to the establishment of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). However the focus of this paper is how RPL then transcended its origins from formal education systems and entered the sphere of the workplace. The key policy driver for this, fuelled by human capital concerns was the COAG RPL Initiative.

COAG RPL Initiative
The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Initiative was funded by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) from June 2006 for a three year period based on the COAG Communique issued in February, 2006. In this Communique a *New National Reform Agenda* was set with several components, one of which was Human Capital and from this an Action Plan for: *Addressing Skills Shortages through a National Approach to Apprenticeships, Training and Skills Recognition* was enacted. The primary aim of the COAG RPL Initiative was to improve the take-up of RPL through a more flexible and responsive training system to ensure a more mobile workforce to help meet skills needs (COAG, 2006). Several key messages from the Final Report on the COAG RPL Initiative included the potential of RPL in the workplace and in HRM contexts:

- contemporary RPL approaches and models, such as group processes and enterprise models, can provide cost-effective and valid options for recognising people’s skills and for developing the workforce
- streamlined RPL processes can be used to recognise people’s skills and facilitate workforce mobility in the current economic climate with high unemployment, and improve their job readiness for the future
- industry, enterprises and associations as well as RTOs and assessors should continue to be informed about the workplace benefits and application of RPL
- outcomes for individuals in workplace restructuring and redundancies can be enhanced by commencing RPL before evidence is lost or dispersed (Leary, 2009, pp. ix-x).

A map of the policy drivers behind RPL and how it becomes operational in HRM contexts is displayed in Figure 1. At the top of the figure the AQF is positioned as the primary policy driver of RPL in educational contexts whilst at the bottom of the figure the COAG RPL Initiative is positioned as the key human capital policy driver of RPL in HRM contexts. The links to the VET sector are crucial as both policy drivers have had substantial impacts on this sector. RPL is mandated in the VET sector. The Adult
and Community Education (ACE) sector is only mandated to use RPL if providers in that sector offer nationally accredited training and universities are self accrediting institutions. RPL in HRM contexts appears to be supported best when there are partnerships between industry/employers, the VET sector and at times tiers of government or government agencies. The three exemplars presented in this paper illustrate this well.

EXEMPLARS

The approach used for this inquiry involved the selection of three exemplars which have reported utilising RPL for HRM purposes. These exemplars have been sourced through a desk top search of the reports which have resulted from the COAG RPL Initiative and RPL practices that have been subsequently developed. These have been documented in grey literature as there is very little existing academic literature reporting these practices. All three exemplars have involved partnerships between the VET sector, industry/employers and in one case a government statutory body (DEEWR). A summary of the three exemplars is displayed in Table 2.

EXEMPLARS

1: Rio Tinto: Embedding RPL in Workforce Development

HRM Context: The increased investment in the rail industry nationally (estimated at $7.96 billion over next 15 years) has meant that rail organisations like Rio Tinto need to ensure their workforce has the skill sets to meet the future demands of this increased infrastructure investment. The rail industry is facing critical skill shortages in engineering, rail trades and para-professional operation staff and a workforce with the average age of 44 years (ABS 2006).
How RPL Applied: Rio Tinto partnered with the TAFE Hunter- NSW to embed RPL in the workforce development strategy it employed to meet the workforce capacity this expansion requires through up-skilling. The strategy was named the Rio Tinto Western Australia Rail RPL Project and focused on RPL for existing workers in Certificate IV Electrical Rail Signalling. Rio Tinto reported increases in productivity through response times in fault finding and scheduling of trains, and longer term staff retention (State Training Services, 2011).

2: National initiative in RPL for Early Childhood Educators

HRM Context: This exemplar is being driven by government through the 2013 Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Review. The Australian Government commissioned PriceWaterhouseCoopers to undertake a review of the 2013 Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce as was required by the National Partnership Agreement on the National Quality Agenda for Early Childhood Education and Care. The National Quality Framework has introduced a requirement over time for better qualified staff in early childhood education and care settings. From 1 January 2014, educators in early childhood education and care centres will be required to have, or to be working towards, a diploma level qualification or Certificate III. By mid-2013 a Workforce Review Report is to be produced to:

- Identify current gaps in workforce supply and appropriately qualified staff
- Identify any challenges reported by the early childhood education and care sector in meeting the new qualifications requirements
- Provide recommendations on how best to address any identified gaps, including suggestions for linkages between relevant programs (DEEWR, )

How RPL Applied: The Australian Government committed $9.2million for a RPL package in the 2011-2012 Budget to improve the quality and uptake of RPL for early childhood professionals to assist early childhood workers obtain or upgrade their qualifications. The package includes:

- development of a new national assessment tool for Certificate III, Diploma and Advanced Diploma’s in Children’s Services
- training 600 existing RPL assessors in the use of this tool
• grants of up to $1125 for rural and remote early childhood educators to contribute to expenses associated with accessing RPL (DEEWR, 2013).

3: Qantas: Re-Skilling existing workers for new technologies

*HRM Context:* Qantas introduced new aircraft to the fleet in 2010, the A380 aircraft. These aircraft were gradually introduced over a staged time period of 12-18 months. Along with this new technology came the need for new staff with experience with these aircraft (Aircraft Maintenance Engineers) based at Sydney airport. Qantas had not recruited apprentices for two years and undertook a recruitment campaign for these Aircraft Maintenance Engineers which was essentially unsuccessful. “At the same time, a large group of staff who had been employed by Qantas for twenty years were facing redundancy. These were staff whose original training had been in various aspects of mechanical metal trades, and had been given internal training to work in an aircraft workshop. With a major reduction in workshop approaches to maintenance, and with staff lacking AME qualifications, a redundancy program seemed to be the future for these workers” (State Training Services 2010).

*How RPL Applied:* RPL was applied through a re-skilling project for these 100 existing staff who would have otherwise faced redundancy. This involved a partnership with TAFE NSW- Southern Western Sydney Institute and focused on re-skilling existing workers in aircraft maintenance, with a combination of skills recognition and customised gap training. The project was lauded by Manufacturing Skills Australia as an innovative training program that addressed skills shortages that confront many manufacturing employers in which highly skilled workers are difficult to recruit. The success of the RPL project will see Qantas role this out in other locations across Australia and internationally (State Training Services, 2010).

**CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR UTILITY OF RPL WITHIN HRM CONTEXTS**

As a result of this analysis a conceptual framework for the utility of RPL in HRM contexts has been developed. The framework begins by mapping the key external forces that are impacting HRM
practices before presenting the human capital elements most suited to the application of RPL in HRM contexts: existing workers, potential employees, new entrants into the labour market and those workers wishing to re-enter the labour market, new migrants and those transitioning in and out of the labour market.

The framework is significant in that it assists HRM practitioners and VET sector practitioners to position and promote the application and utility of RPL beyond the confines of educational institutions and formal learning systems. The framework encourages dialogue between VET educators and organisations/employers wanting to recognise the existing skills of their employers or potential employees for a variety of HRM functions and contexts. These include: recruitment and on-boarding; workforce planning (skills audits, skill gap analysis; job design); workforce development (re-skilling existing workers, up skilling an underqualified workforce; meeting industry minimum qualification standards); retention (embedding RPL into performance management, promotions and career development systems); workforce transitions (assisting retrenched/displaced workers; retirement transitions). Figure 3 maps the exemplars presented across the conceptual framework.

CONCLUSION

RPL can assist in addressing some of the big human capital issues currently impacting the Australian economy: aging workforces; skill shortages; global labour markets; the increased need for various forms of labour mobility and; the need to increase workforce participation. The aim of this paper was to present the potential and utility of RPL beyond the confines of formal, learning systems and institutions of education and training and to promote the utility of RPL in HRM contexts. Substantial amounts of learning occurs in the workplace whether it is non-formal, informal or formal. The paucity of existing literature and research in this area nationally and internationally has presented an opportunity to
progress the utility of RPL in HRM contexts. This paper presents a set of exemplars of the application of RPL in HRM contexts which have assisted in the development of a framework for mapping RPL utility within HRM. The key contribution of the framework lies in the utility of RPL for the following HRM functions and practices: recruitment and on-boarding; workforce planning (skills audits, skill gap analysis; job design); workforce development (re-skilling existing workers, up skilling an underqualified workforce; meeting industry minimum qualification standards); retention (embedding RPL into performance management, promotions and career development systems); workforce transitions (assisting retrenched/displaced workers; retirement transitions).

REFERENCES


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State Training Services, NSW Department of Education and Communities. (2011) Qantas and TAFE NSW – working in partnership to re-skill staff for new roles. *Making Connections the Skills Recognition Newsletter*, Issue 5, November:  


### Table 1: Nexus Between RPL and Workplace Learning

**RPL Definition:**
Recognition of prior learning is 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’ (AQF, 2013, 99).

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Components of RPL Definition</th>
<th>Workplace learning</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Formal learning:</strong> learning that takes place through a structured program of learning that leads to the full or partial achievement of an officially accredited qualification. See also informal and non-formal learning</td>
<td>External formal (structured) training: Training courses delivered externally by a training provider and instructor led either in classroom, workplace or by distance/online.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non-Formal learning:</strong> learning that takes place through a structured program of learning but does not lead to an officially accredited qualification</td>
<td>Internal formal (structured) training: In-house training instructor led delivered at workplace or on the job.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Informal learning:</strong> learning gained through work, social, family, hobby or leisure activities and experiences. Unlike formal or non-formal learning, informal learning is not organised or externally structured in terms of objectives, time or learning support</td>
<td>Internal informal (unstructured) training: Discussion with work colleagues or observing work colleagues, asking questions, being coached, mentored and self-study. External informal (unstructured) training: Contact with fellow students/trainees or with external social contacts through observation, listening, asking questions and reading.</td>
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Adapted from AQF (2013) and Dawe (2003)

### Table 2: Summary of RPL in HRM Context Exemplars

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employer/Organisation</th>
<th>Partnership</th>
<th>Focus and HRM context</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rio Tinto - WA</td>
<td>VET sector: TAFE Hunter - NSW</td>
<td>Invest in up skilling its workforce through workforce training and development given $7.96 billion investment in rail industry over the next 15 years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEEWR - National RPL Initiative for Child Care Workers</td>
<td>Government Agency and VET sector: DEEWR and various TAFE providers nationally</td>
<td>Funding to train 600 RPL Assessors to use an RPL Tool Kit to enable existing child care workers to be up skilled and credentialed to meet the new minimum qualifications standards set by the industry and government to be introduced on 1st January 2014.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qantas - Sydney</td>
<td>VET Sector: TAFE NSW-South Western Sydney Institute</td>
<td>Re-skilling project for existing staff who would otherwise have faced redundancy due to introduction of new technologies - A380 Airbus aircraft.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FIGURES

Figure 1: Policy drivers of RPL in Education and HRM Contexts
Figure 2: Conceptual framework for utility of RPL within HRM Contexts

- Global labour markets
- Aging workforces
- Skill shortages
- Labour mobility
- Technological change
- Government policy

Figure 3: Exemplars: Conceptual framework for utility of RPL within HRM Contexts

- Existing workers
- Potential workers (under employed)
- New entrants into the labour market
- Those wishing to re-entry labour market
- Displaced workers
- New migrants