

The Evolution of RPL in Australia:

From its origins to future possibilities

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This dissertation is presented as partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the coursework degree of Master of Education (Honours) at
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I declare that this dissertation is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary institution.

Libbie Doddrell

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from its origins to future possibilities

Abstract:

The concept of formally recognising prior learning in Australia was introduced into the area of education and training as a part of the Federal Labor Government's Competency-Based Training initiatives within its Training Reform Agenda of the early 1990s. It was adopted by the vocational education and training sector, primarily as an avenue for industrial skills recognition within award restructuring. This study analyses documentary and interview sources to try and ascertain the future possibilities of RPL in the post-secondary education sector. Its focus is on the university and TAFE sectors. All universities and TAFE colleges in Australia were invited to participate. Thirty-six TAFE colleges and twenty-two universities responded, providing documentation concerning their policies and practices in relation to RPL.

Initially developing in North America, the idea of recognising prior learning was actively promoted by American educators in other countries, with England and Canada subsequently adopting the concept. The Australian Labor Government of the 1980s was acutely aware of the need for skills recognition as part of its program to reverse Australia's economic malaise. An ideas mission to Western Europe by the ACTU/TDC group was influential in recommending this training reform.

RPL was one of the five principles of the Competency-Based Approach to training adopted by the Labor Government. Factors such as the economic and

efficiency imperatives, notions of lifelong learning, mature age learning, and social justice contributed to validating the concept of RPL.

A broad range of inconsistent TAFE and university definitions for RPL, clearly contributed to a lack of consistency and confusion for both practitioners and applicants. The individual policies and practices of both universities and TAFE colleges were found to reflect very different views of this concept, not only from one another but also between the sectors.

Some innovative practices in RPL were found in both sectors, but the university sector, generally, was found to have grave misgivings about the concept of RPL. These misgivings proved to be a significant hindrance to the future development of RPL in the university sector and articulation between sectors was shown to be affected by this.

Conclusions drawn from this thesis suggest that the future possibilities for RPL are very narrow in focus. The policies and practices examined in the post-secondary education sector, revealed a debilitating lack of consistency concerning RPL. The prospects of future progress seem poor, unless major attitudinal changes occur within Government and education circles. Articulation between university and TAFE was the only arena where the practices of recognition of credit transfer bore any resemblance to the ideal of RPL, and that resemblance was disappointing in its proximity to the status quo.

The Federal Government has historically played a leading role in education and training reform. Only if this Government is prepared to proactively promote and support the further development of the wider concept of RPL is there any future possibility for much needed reform with its beneficial social and economic consequences.

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