Recognition of prior learning: why is it so difficult to accredit learning that has occurred outside the academy towards the award of a qualification? A report from Australia

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Abstract

One of the key drivers for RPL is its perceived capacity to act as a mechanism for social inclusion within the context of lifelong learning policy frameworks that seek to “encourage formal learning, to promote links between it and informal learning and to improve opportunities for people to use their informal learning to gain recognised qualifications” (Young, 2001: 4). However, it has not acted as a mechanism for social inclusion in Australia or internationally. This paper seeks to answer the question: why is it so difficult to accredit learning that has occurred outside formal education and training towards the award of a qualification, particularly for people from disadvantaged backgrounds? The paper draws on research that the authors were commissioned to undertake in 2002 for the Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board. In this paper we consider two factors that inhibit the extent to which RPL is implemented: the focus on RPL as an outcome, with insufficient attention paid to RPL as a process; and, the extent to which RPL is mediated by, and mediates, exclusionary processes in formal education and training. Formal education and training is contextualised by the discourse of lifelong learning, which can increase opportunities on the one hand, but on the other, can act to “increase tendencies towards greater inequality, and [which] may [help to] entrench existing ones” (Field, 2002: 104).

Introduction

This paper seeks to answer the question: why is it so difficult to accredit learning that has occurred outside formal education and training towards the award of a qualification, particularly for people from disadvantaged backgrounds? The paper draws on research that the authors were commissioned to undertake in 2002 for the Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board. We found that while recognition of prior learning (RPL) was one of the key objectives of the AQF Advisory Board, and a key principle in the vocational education and training sector in Australia, that it has not yet delivered the policy goal of creating pathways to qualifications in the numbers originally envisaged. One of the drivers for the introduction of RPL in Australia, as in many countries internationally, was its perceived capacity to act as a mechanism for social inclusion. This, by and large, has not happened (Cretchley and Castle, 2001; Bateman and Knight, 2002; Cleary et al 2002).

This paper considers two factors that inhibit the take-up of RPL:
- the focus on RPL as an outcome, with insufficient attention paid to the process of RPL; and,
- the extent to which RPL is mediated by, and mediates, exclusionary processes in formal education and training. These processes are contextualised by lifelong learning discourse, which can increase opportunities on the one hand, but on the other, can act to “increase tendencies towards greater inequality, and [which] may [help to] entrench existing ones” (Field, 2002: 104).

1 While this paper draws on the research commissioned by the AQF Advisory Board, the views expressed are our own and should not be attributed to either the AQFAB or to our colleagues in the research consortium.
The approach used here to analyse the relatively low take-up of RPL is in contrast to deficit based approaches, which suggest that those from disadvantaged backgrounds may not have had the same opportunity to acquire the skills and knowledge that would qualify them for credit through RPL. The problem is not, as we define it, with the skills or knowledge that individuals and communities have; rather, the problem lies with systems of post-compulsory education and training (PCET), which create and validate knowledge, and certify individuals as members of knowledge communities (through issuing qualifications) by the extent to which they internalise and conform to values, norms and ways of thinking validated as ‘legitimate knowledge’ by institutions and powerful stakeholders.

Before considering these issues, we first outline the background to our research.

Background

The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) was established in 1995, and its role is to designate the qualifications (and the descriptors of each) offered in the senior secondary school, vocational education and training, and higher education sectors (AQFAB, 1998). Unlike the qualifications frameworks in England and Scotland, the AQF has no accreditation or recognition functions; nor does it have quality assurance functions (Keating, 2000). One of the key objectives of the AQF (1995) is to:

- help with developing flexible pathways which assist people to move more easily between education and training sectors and between those sectors and the labour market by providing the basis for recognition of prior learning, including credit transfer and work and life experience.

The AQF Advisory Board commissioned a project to:

- research existing policies and practices relating to RPL in the four sectors of post-compulsory education and training in Australia (senior secondary school, adult and community education, vocational education and training, and higher education); and,
- develop cross-sectoral, national RPL principles and operational guidelines to promote greater consistency between the sectors in the way informal and non-formal prior learning is assessed and counted towards a qualification, or for entry to a qualification.

We found that while the basic policy framework and necessary curriculum approaches (criterion-referenced outcomes, whether in the form of learning or competency outcomes) are in place in the sectors, that the implementation of RPL is very low, and that the main beneficiaries have been those from socio-economic backgrounds who have experience in, and success in, PCET.

In our research we proposed the following definition of RPL:

> RPL is an assessment process that assesses the individual’s non-formal and informal learning to determine the extent to which that individual has achieved the required learning outcomes, competency outcomes, or standards for entry to, and/or partial or total completion of a qualification… (Wheelahan et al, 2003: 3)

We distinguished between RPL and credit transfer, with the latter used to denote credit based on prior formal learning (regardless of whether this was recognised within the AQF), while recognising that both RPL and credit transfer are related, and that the boundaries between them are blurred. They are, however, “distinguished by the way they relate to learning achieved through formal education and training (credit transfer) and learning achieved outside the formal education and training system (RPL)” (Wheelahan et al, 2003: 3).

Approximately 5% of those studying a higher education qualification in 2001 reported that they received RPL, while almost 8% of those studying a VET qualification reported that they received RPL. In 2001, approximately 2.5% of student load in the VET sector was through RPL, while 0.9% of

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2 The 4th sector of PCET, the adult and community education (ACE) sector, where it often offers accredited qualifications, offers qualifications accredited by the other sectors, particularly VET and the senior school certificates.

3 For further information about the project, the research report, and the proposed national RPL principles and operational guidelines, contact Leesa Wheelahan at lwheelah@scu.edu.au.

4 The data for VET in schools and for the ACE sector is included in VET sector data.
VET students completed all their subject or module enrolments on the basis of both RPL and credit transfer (NCVER, 2001; Wheelahan et al., 2002). There are no similar data for the higher education sector.

Broadly speaking, those who were mid-career, established in the workforce, older, work full-time, and in associate professional, professional or managerial occupations benefit most from RPL. Students from non-English speaking backgrounds, Indigenous students, and unemployed students were less likely to receive RPL. Students with a disability achieved RPL outcomes at the same level as, or at a slightly higher level than, all other students, and students from regional areas were more likely to receive RPL than were students from major cities (whether this is a function of the predominant fields of study in which they were enrolled needs to be determined by further research). Students with a disability and students from regional and remote areas are classified as equity groups in Australia, and it appears that RPL may have successfully acted as a mechanism of social inclusion in these instances. RPL remained elusive for the remaining student equity groups.

In our research we interviewed more than 150 stakeholders from all sectors (including private providers in the VET sector, and peak bodies and jurisdictions in all sectors) and from industry (including business peak bodies and unions). In addition, more than 620 teachers/academics, students and administrators completed questionnaires on our project website. We were astonished by the level of support for RPL from respondents, and from the many people who independently wrote to us and rang us. It is true in the case of those who we interviewed that we could have expected a positive response to RPL, given that we deliberately sought out those who we thought would have something to say about it, but we did not expect such a strong positive response. We thought there would be more critics of the idea of RPL (as opposed to how it is implemented – we found many critics here).

Through this process our research questions emerged more sharply:

- If the benefits of RPL are so good and pervasive (as outlined to us by respondents and in the literature), why isn’t there more of it?
- In most areas there is a gap between policy and practice, but it is hard to find an area in PCET policy where the gap is as wide as is the case with RPL policy and practice. Our question then was: how do we account for this gap and what can be done to close it?

We cannot in this paper cover our range of findings, as our focus here is the extent to which the process of RPL (the process of certifying learning outcomes) creates obstacles to the greater implementation of RPL. Issues concerning the contested nature of concepts underpinning RPL which give rise to competing models of RPL (developmental versus credentialling models – see Harris, 1997; Wheelahan et al., 2002) and problems in operationalising RPL (Harris, 1997; Ryan and Watson, 2001; Bateman and Knight, 2002; Wheelahan et al., 2002) are beyond the scope of this paper, although it must be recognised that both these issues are intrinsic to understanding obstacles to implementing RPL.

RPL processes and outcomes

In Australia, the higher education sector (mostly) distinguishes between RPL, credit transfer and assessment of learning resulting from participation in formal education and training. The VET sector does not, in theory, distinguish between RPL, credit transfer and assessment in general. The Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) (the national body created by the federal and state and territory governments to co-ordinate VET nationally) defines RPL as:

…recognition of competencies currently held, regardless of how, when or where the learning occurred….competencies may be attained in a number of ways. This includes through any
combination of formal or informal training and education, work experience or general life experience.\(^8\)

We argued that while the intention of incorporating RPL as part of a broader assessment process was to incorporate it holistically into learning and assessment, that paradoxically the result has been insufficient attention paid to the process of how prior learning can be included. All best practice models of RPL point to the importance of support and advice being available to candidates. This is clearly identified as one of the stages in the RPL process. Recognition is made of the importance of ensuring that students from disadvantaged groups are not further disadvantaged by the use of assessment instruments that rely heavily on documents and high levels of literacy, when these are not intrinsic to the learning or competency outcomes. Much literature focuses on ensuring the assessment is valid and reliable, to ensure, for example, that students are not being assessed on their capacity to read and understand the RPL literature (Kenyon et al, 1996; Wilson and Lilly, 1996; DETYA, 2001; Thomson et al, 2001; Bateman and Knight, 2002).

However, the literature mainly focuses on supporting students through the assessment process. This presumes a relatively straightforward process of ‘translation’ between the student’s prior learning, and the learning outcomes or competency standards against which they are being assessed. However, personal learning is not neatly packaged and subject to comparison to academic or course requirements (Davison, 1996). The assessment process often assumes it is, or can be made to be without difficulty. Relatively little attention has been paid to this process of translation, and in considering this issue we suggest that it is necessary to distinguish between RPL as a process and RPL as an outcome.

Eraut (2000: 12) distinguishes between three forms of non-formal learning: \(^9\) implicit learning, in which “there is no intention to learn and no awareness of learning at the time it takes place…..”; reactive learning, which “is used to describe situations where the learning is explicit but takes place almost spontaneously in response to recent, current or imminent situations without any time being specifically set aside for it”; and, deliberative learning, in which the leaner puts aside time specifically for that purpose. The degree to which individuals are aware of their own implicit learning varies, and “factors affecting the capability to tell were linked to people’s prior experiences of talking about what they knew” (Eraut, 2000: 17). Articulating reactive learning “in explicit form could also be difficult without setting aside time for more reflection and thus becoming deliberative” (Eraut, 2000: 12). He questions the role of the researcher (or assessor) in assessing what students can do and know. To what extent is the role of the researcher (or assessor) to articulate what students can do or know, and what is assessed? Is it what the researcher or assessor infers the students do or know (particularly underpinning knowledge in assessing competencies)? Eraut (2000: 17) says: “Can a skilful researcher [or assessor] communicate what their respondents cannot and does that suggest that the researcher is a good novelist, a potential poet or an expert in knowledge elicitation?” Assessing tacit knowledge is particularly difficult, requiring interrogation and interpretation to ensure the full extent of the knowledge is recognised.

So, focussing only on the assessment may well limit the extent of RPL which can rightfully be claimed, because people may be unaware of what they know and the extent to which they know. They may also not have the language to describe what they know, particularly if they have not had much experience in the telling. The capacity to do this is often associated with past involvement in education and training. These factors are more likely to disadvantage students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This leads to the second factor associated with the process of RPL that inhibits its take-up: the extent to which formal education and training includes or excludes groups and individuals who have not hitherto participated in PCET.

**RPL and social exclusion**

Field (2002: 111) explains that while lifelong learning can create new opportunities for people and play an emancipatory role, it can “also serve to legitimate inequality.” He continues:

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\(^8\) While ANTA uses the broad framework of ‘recognition’ to encompass all forms of assessment, RPL and credit transfer, it still distinguishes between RPL and other forms of assessment for the purposes of implementation.

\(^9\) He rejects the term ‘informal’ learning because of its residual connotation with any learning outside formal education and training, as most learning through life occurs in this way and also because it is seen to encompass many contexts that have little to do with learning. He thus favours the term ‘non-formal’ learning as an alternative (Eraut 2000: 12).
In a more individualised society, with positive views of lifelong learning, successful participation in organised education and training functions as a mechanism for disguising and naturalising hierarchies. (Field, 2002: 111)

He explains that for those who don’t, won’t or can’t participate in lifelong learning that:

absence from the new learning culture can also become a mechanism for legitimating inequalities – inequalities which may themselves be arising partly from a general acceptance of the idea and practice of lifelong learning. (Field, 2002: 104)

RPL can also play this contradictory role. It is framed by the language of social inclusion and lifelong learning, but can, through the way in which it is implemented and the assumptions which underpin decisions as to whether or not it will be granted, also act as a mechanism of social exclusion. ‘Failure’ to successfully ‘RPL’ can be (and often is) interpreted as individual failure on the part of the student or candidate, both by the students themselves and the institution: their learning is not deemed ‘equivalent’ to the learning of the academy, or it doesn’t count, or they don’t have the necessary skills or expertise to enter the process to begin with. This leaves untouched the way in which courses and qualifications are constructed, and the way in which these are unevenly distributed among the population as the new markers of social privilege and socio-economic status (Field, 2002).

RPL discourse underplays the importance of the ‘curriculum as practice’, with the associated ‘hidden curriculum’ that rewards those for whom the values, concepts and ways of thinking and acting are congruent, and conversely, punishes those who, as a consequence of their social background and patterns of opportunity, do not intuitively understand, speak and reproduce the sanctioned discourse. RPL focusses on the curriculum that is written down – the learning or competency outcomes that are sought, rather than the ‘curriculum as practice’. In drawing from the work of Gramsci, Illich, Bourdieu and Bernstein, Ross (2000: 84) argues that:

The content of education, the ethos in which it is presented, and the structures through which it is delivered are all part of the intimacy education has with the socio-economic order of society.

Ross (2000: 86) explains that schools (and we can extend his argument to PCET) “become mechanisms both for cultural distribution and for class reproduction: the two are indivisible.” He explains further:

The subtle hegemony that a ruling class exercises over the legitimization of acceptable cultural knowledge is employed through the control of the knowledge-producing and knowledge-preserving institutions of that society…Only a particular version of reality is selected and distributed, a selected social construction which will serve the interests of a segment of society.

In exploring Prior Learning Assessment (PLA – equivalent to RPL) in British Columbia in Canada, Barker (2001: 7) explains that power relations are inherent in RPL/PLA and that “For First Nations, visible minorities and other non-traditional students, ‘cultural outsidedness’ is a pivotal problem.” In explaining this, Barker (2001: 7) cites Michelson who says:

We must be careful that we do not fall into the trap of using PLA to legitimize knowledge and skills that reassembles the academic norm and which extends the academy’s traditional gatekeeping function of barring alternative cultures of knowledge and calibrates the legitimacy of students’ knowledge according to sameness and correspondence.

In theory, RPL should be able to bring new ways of understanding and demonstrating learning achievement and competency into education and training. The failure of RPL to act as a mechanism for social inclusion may say more about the extent to which PCET has been unable to accommodate alternative cultures of knowledge and ways in which these are expressed, than deficits in students from disadvantaged backgrounds. In Australia, Indigenous organisations regard both RPL and credit transfer as essential to increasing opportunities for different Peoples, but that so far both failed to live
up to their promise (Andersen, 2002). Indigenous Australians are under-represented in PCET, and when there are far less likely to receive RPL.

Ross (2000: 90) argues that:

…the organization and validation of knowledge becomes more important than the mere content of knowledge, the curriculum: what is important is not what the knowledge is, it is how particular knowledge comes to be validated as important and how it is used to have power-forming and power-augmenting characteristics.

In defending Bernstein against critics who claim Bernstein failed to appreciate the complexity of the working class ‘code’ of expression (which has the unfortunate – and for some, pejorative – appellation of the ‘restricted code’), Ross (2000: 94) argues:

This may well be true, but it misses the point: the essence of Bernstein’s argument was not really whether one code was better than another, but that one code – the elaborated code – was the one utilized by academic culture, was the one that was used to transmit socially approved knowledge, was the one used to make judgments about ability and aptitude, and was the one effectively restricted to middle-class users.

This is a key insight, and it is one that helps us to understand why people from disadvantaged backgrounds are not able to effectively access RPL. It is not that they do not have the necessary knowledge, skills and experience; rather, it is that their knowledge and experience is not ‘counted’ as important, and moreover, even when it is, unless candidates are able to ‘crack the code’, they will find it difficult to access RPL.

This is because individuals, particularly those who have not come from families with little or no experience of PCET, may find it difficult to move from the discourse of their everyday practice to the discourse required to substantiate their claims. Northedge (2001: 308) argues that ‘knowledge’ is constituted by ‘flows of meaning’ within discourse communities, and is “produced between knowledgeable people when they communicate with each other.” He describes three ‘discursive worlds’ – the everyday, of professional or vocational practice, and academic (or other education or training) discourse, each of which works in different ways, particularly in regard to what is taken for granted, and what is subject to debate. The process of RPL requires a translation of students’ professional or vocational practice discourse into the academic (however we define that in each sector).

He describes an academic discipline as “an example of a discourse community of a particularly systematic and committed kind. It is a community which discourses primarily through writing” (Northedge, 2001: 308). It is also the site where knowledge is validated, and where conformity to the assumptions about what counts and how it is expressed is as important as the ‘written-down’ curriculum. These assumptions help to frame the discourse.

Northedge (2001: 313) argues: “For students with little experience in academic communities, the struggle to develop an effective voice through which to ‘speak’ the discourse, whether in writing, or in class, can be lengthy and difficult.” This may seem to apply only to higher education or more ‘academic’ kinds of learning in senior secondary school. However, this observation need not be limited to ‘traditional academic’ learning contexts like these. It is equally relevant to VET. The VET ‘discourse community’ speaks in terms of the concepts and theories that underpin learning, the policy frameworks established to operationalise the VET sector, and the specific language of competency based training. Students need to understand competency standards, elements of competency, performance criteria, evidence and range of variables. Students have to know how much evidence is enough, what sort of evidence they should present, over what time period and contexts, and so on.

They often have to know about codes, and institutional processes. The extent to which they are not required to understand this, increases the responsibility of the assessor in making the translation on behalf of student.

The process of ‘translation’ from the non-formal and experiential to the formal and academic may be much more problematic than we have supposed, particularly for those unfamiliar with participating in formal education and training programs (Davison, 1996; Mattner, 1997; Cleary et al., 2002;
Whittacker, et al, 2002). It is not just about literacy and numeracy in English, it is about literacy in the PCET discourse.

**Conclusion: implications for practice**

If RPL is to become a mechanism for social inclusion, two key changes are needed. First, qualifications need to be reshaped so that they focus more on processes of learning, rather than the codification of sanctioned knowledge or pre-defined skills (Young, 2001). Young (1998: 116) argues that the relationship between qualifications and occupations is more fluid as a consequence of the pace of social, economic and technological change, and that qualifications framework[s] will need to shift from a weak framework with strong qualifications towards a strong framework in which the individual qualifications take on the role of guidelines for learning continuity rather than as gateways to employment.

This reorients qualifications away from a gate-keeping function to one more focussed on supporting learning, and which sees qualifying as a process, rather than an end point. Learning outside the academy has more scope for recognition when qualifications are conceived in this way, as process-oriented learning outcomes are now more significant.

The second key change that is needed is that students should be supported to learn about and use RPL. If we think of RPL as a process (and not just an outcome) we can see that we need to support students in the same way we support them to undergo other forms of assessment. We now understand (or should understand) that students need to learn exam technique if they are to successfully sit exams; they need to learn how to write essays, and how to undertake other forms of assessment. RPL is no different. The hidden curriculum needs to be made explicit. This suggests that lifelong learning requires students to develop ‘learning to learn skills’, but also, arguably, ‘learning to be assessed’ skills.

In this paper we have not been able to consider wider issues associated with the implementation of RPL, particularly the contested nature of RPL definitions, and the problems inherent in processes of operationalising RPL. The issues raised here must be contextualised within this broader framework if the range of factors that inhibit RPL can be understood, as well as those that facilitate and promote its greater implementation.

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