Adult learning and recognition of prior learning: The "white elephant" in Australian universities

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Adult learners are being attracted to university programs based on the granting of either academic credit or the recognition of prior learning (RPL). Typically, this attraction is being aligned to fast-tracking degree attainment or student cost effectiveness. It appears from the literature that there are varied interpretations and application of RPL within Australian universities. This can be problematic for adult learners with diverse experiences and expectations. Given the uniqueness of university learning, the future political changes to occur in Australian universities, and the problems with RPL that adult learners experience in university learning, it is timely for Australian universities to establish RPL practices that are transparent and consistent.

Introduction

Australian universities, like many of their international counterparts, are in an ongoing process of adaptation and transformation as they adjust to what Coaldrake and Stedman (1998) referred to as the "new realities" in academe. Although these "new realities" may vary and be applied differently both nationally and internationally, their impact has seen a move away from the traditional function of universities "for dealing in knowledge for its own sake…" to providing service to various stakeholders in government, industry and for the students (Coaldrake & Stedman 1998, p.1).

> They [the universities] have been encouraged to increase significantly their numbers of students, to make better use of their budgets, and to raise money from industry and the professions … students also have a level of expectation that if they have paid for their studies, they have better prospects of employment or, if they already have a job, that their career opportunities will be improved by their studies (Coaldrake & Stedman 1998, pp.2–3).

Noting student expectations as they relate to the "new realities" can be seen as a fundamental tenet of adult education and learning dealing with why adults return to study. However, this limited recognition of adult learning interests and expectations can only be viewed, at best, as being marginal. A more realistic appraisal of the impact of the "new realities" in Australian universities is that they have overlooked critical elements of adult learning associated with *recognition of prior learning* (RPL).

At the risk of being polemic on the question of the value of RPL in Australian universities, there are significant issues in determining each university's position in respect of the value, impetus and usefulness of RPL for adult learners.

The purpose of this paper is to suggest that the "new realities" in Australian universities have not realistically applied adult learner characteristics, especially in respect of the learner's experiences as

they relate to RPL. This major oversight has led to a commercially-oriented, university-centred framework with limited or no consistency in advancing RPL. Rather, the utilisation of RPL has been referred to as a means to increase adult learners as aggregate entities – that is, to raise "participant numbers" foregoing adult learner experiences, knowledge and/or expertise. This has led to a haphazard, unclear commitment to RPL with most Australian universities opting to foster the more succinct, administratively manageable process of academic credit.

The benefits and values of RPL have become a conceptual academic phenomenon that is entangled in notions of accelerated learning paths and cost effectiveness. Crucial elements for advancing and administering RPL, focusing on adult learner characteristics, development and the acknowledgement of adult learner experiences and needs, have been substantially overlooked. The impact of these shortcomings has led to significant factors as to the appropriate use and implementation of RPL in Australian universities, justifying the notion that RPL in contemporary Australian universities is a "white elephant".

The 'alphabet soup' for defining RPL

As a basis for understanding debate and discussion, it is imperative that there is a clear, consensual understanding of the concept being addressed. This understanding lays the foundation for logical and informed positions on the issues being considered. This is not the case with RPL because there is prevailing confusion about its definition. This is supported by Smith (2004), who writes that "there is no clear agreement among writers, researchers and major policy-influencing agencies regarding what RPL is, does or encompasses" (p.11).

In order to understand the general Australian definition of RPL, it is necessary to appreciate its emergence in the Australian tertiary sector. RPL, according to Michelson (1996), developed in the United States of America during the late 1960s and early 70s. This was in response to large, adult student numbers necessitating "structural innovations" in addition to linking RPL to educational fairness and social mobility. It must be acknowledged that the formal introduction of RPL in Australia is relatively 'new' and this may have contributed to difficulties in its definition and function (see Cameron, 2004). Moreover, there is evidence that, at its introductory level, RPL was more aligned to the training and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) sectors within Australia and not the university sector.

Pascoe (1999), in his succinct presentation on admission to Australian universities, outlines the growth and expansion of university student numbers in the 1980s in addition to the existing range of university admission systems. Noting that RPL made a formal appearance in Australia's National Board of Employment, Education and Training (NBEET) policy documents during 1991, whereby one Australian university adopted a system of questionnaire and interview for student recruitment and was responding to "industry representatives in the course design team who successfully argued the case for RPL in a course that so strongly interacted with cutting edge technologies" (p.8). However, the emerging problems for RPL are raised by Bateman (2003) who noted that the literature on RPL was written before the introduction of Training Packages and the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF). It could be argued that the early interest in RPL demonstrated the "cart before the horse" phenomenon, and the introduction of the AQTF led to the interest and impetus of RPL for the university sector diminishing and not appearing relevant. Bateman (2003) writes:

> The national data collection requirements specified in the Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information System (AVETMIS) Standard distinguish between RPL (an assessment) and credit transfer (an administrative process):

- Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is based on evidence which confirms that the student already has the required knowledge and skills. RPL involves an assessment or some other form of evaluation of the student's knowledge and skills. The AVETMIS Standard does not capture information about 'partial RPL" situations, such as the granting of RPL for units or elements of competency which form part of a larger unit of delivery.
- Credit transfer arrangements are based on the completion of the same subjects with another VET provider (known as 'mutual recognition' under the AQTF),or of equivalent subjects at another education or training institution such as some other VET provider, a higher education institution or a secondary school. Credit transfer arrangements can also encompass overseas courses or subjects, such as those administered by the National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition (NOOSR). Each Australian state and territory has a reciprocal recognition authority to support mutual recognition arrangements within and across the various education and training sectors. The granting of credit though credit transfer arrangements is essentially an administrative process (p.2).

Cameron (2004) writes that RPL was introduced in Australia as part of an Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) in 1993. The Australian National Training Authority (abolished in 2004) provided the following definition of RPL, which became part of the AQTF Standards for registered training organisations (RTOs) delivering accredited training:

> Recognition of prior learning (RPL) means recognition of competencies currently held, regardless of how, when or where the learning occurred. Under the AQTF, 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 (ANTA 2001, p.9).

RPL literature refers to various descriptors which have included:

- Advanced standing
- Accelerated progression
- Special entry
- Special admission
- Alternative entry, and
- Experiential learning record.

Given the difficulties in establishing a concise definition or understanding of what constitutes RPL, it is easy to concur with Michelson's (1996) assertion that:

> The alphabet soup that serves English language shorthand for the assessment of prior experiential learning includes PLA (Prior Learning Assessment) in the USA and Canada, APL & APEL (Assessment of Prior (Experiential) Learning) in Britain and Ireland, and RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning) in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa (p.195).

As a means for consistency and general consensus amongst Australian adult educators and practitioners, the ANTA definition of RPL forms the basis of this paper.

Contemporary issues with RPL in Australian universities

Although emerging from the United States of America in the 1960s and 1970s, RPL, Michelson (1996) suggests, was based on assumptions about experience and knowledge that went largely unexamined. Aligning this assertion with the 'cart before the horse' phenomenon with respect to Bateman's (2003) observation that RPL literature was written before Training Packages and the AQTF, in addition to a propensity to view RPL as not relevant to university learning, the fundamental shortcomings in acknowledging and exploiting the value of RPL in Australian universities can be seen to be emerging.

In a substantial study investigating RPL information on Australian university websites, Childs, Ingham and Wagner (2002) established that there were many problems in gaining information about RPL. They found the quality of information varied widely, was often absent, poorly written or hard to find. However, information about 'credit transfer' of prior formal studies was available. Further attempts to address RPL practices in Australian universities were made by the Vice-Chancellors' Committee Credit Transfer Project (Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee 1994) in its report, *Recognition of prior learning in Australian universities*. The Committee advanced a policy paper dealing with university recognition of education and training offered by industry, private providers and professional bodies. The purpose was to make associated recommendations in the area of industry-based training. However, the Committee focused more on the allocation of a fixed credit value to a particular training course or development program; realistically, it advanced a credit transfer model. The practice of credit transfer is a process with which university faculties had been engaged for a substantial period of time prior to the Committee's endeavours. It is interesting to note that the title and operations of the Committee's activities laid claim to the prevailing confusion regarding RPL in Australia. The Committee (1994) reported that:

> The development of RPL arrangements, in the broad sense, is now so dynamic in so many industry, industrial and educational domains that the situation represented here is a snapshot of a rapidly changing scene (p.1).

What appeared to be an exciting process for addressing RPL in Australian universities by the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee only verified differing interpretations of RPL and its understanding shows that it aligned RPL to the definition of academic credit. Also, given the recognition of the 'rapidly changing scene', the snapshot process fell short of identifying realistic needs and directions for RPL in Australian universities.

Is RPL viable in Australian universities?

As RPL now stands, which in general terms is difficult to ascertain given the myriad of problems previously identified, it can be argued that it is not viable in Australian universities. Michelson (1996) reported that student-centred educational movements of the day linked RPL to educational fairness and social mobility. Similar themes are noted by Pascoe (1999) who reports that, in Australia during the 1980s, the federal government was committed to increasing university student numbers and to ensuring that "a fair share of those new placements went to groups of Australians who had historically missed out on educational opportunity" (p.2). Yet, this did not seem to be adopted by the universities and Pascoe (1999) notes, "Seldom did the universities themselves proclaim a rhetoric about equity" (p.2).

Given the social and cultural influences linked to the introduction of RPL and the subsequent impetus of equity in the 1970s and 1980s, adult educators are now being challenged to consider if these elements are outdated and irrelevant. Rather, the contemporary commercially-oriented "new realities" in Australian academe (Coaldrake & Stedman 1998) have surpassed the influences and trends of the 1970s and 1980s. It can be argued that changing social structures, economic underpinnings, internationalism and globalisation demand a new, specific and transparent adaptation of RPL in Australian universities. This position is enhanced by Cameron's (2004) research on RPL and the mature-age job seeker which noted that:

> Since its inception, RPL has carried with it promise and potential for recognising the life and work experience of those who have been marginalized from formal learning… Unfortunately, the reality of RPL practice and up-take in Australia paints a very different picture. Those most likely to utilize RPL are students who work fulltime, are established in the workplace and already have educational capital to draw from (p.6).

Elaborating on the changing nature of political and economic influences on contemporary adult education policy, Foley, Crombie, Hawke and Morris (2000) in referring to postmodernist theory argue that:

> The role of education and learning in a restructuring capitalism needs to be analysed at macro and micro levels, at the level of policy formation, and at the point of practice in particular sites (p.119).

Herein lies the challenge for advancing and applying RPL in Australian universities. Its intent, purpose and function must be seen to reflect and complement the economic, political and social changes that are rapidly occurring in Australia and the western world. This can be established by advocating professional links with industry, appreciation and understanding of what is actually occurring in industry, knowledge and understanding of the demographic changes and characteristics of communities, and professional links and service with educational policy-makers.

Current RPL evaluation issues

The evaluation process in RPL has led to extensive criticism in that it is too subjective and lacks consistency. Stehlik (1998) argued that credit decisions are made usually by a course coordinator who may occasionally consult with others. He suggests that the whole area becomes vague, and there is some inconsistency, when comparing credentials amongst various Australian universities. Further, in discussions on RPL evaluation, Day (2002) notes that RPL is:

> ... a systematic process that involves the identification, documentation, assessment and recognition of learning (i.e. skills, knowledge and values). This learning may be acquired through formal and informal study including work and life experience, training, independent study, volunteer work, travel and hobbies and family experiences (p.3).

These elements raise questions about how this information will be collected and presented and how the information will be assessed and administered in the RPL process. Day (2002, p.4) has suggested six areas which are vital in producing RPL information and documentation; these include:

- identification of learning whenever it has taken place
- the selection of learning which is relevant to a desired outcome, career or occupation
- demonstration of the validity and appropriateness of the learning
- matching learning outcomes to those stated within our accreditation framework
- assessment of evidence against criteria to ensure the validity of the claimed learning, and
- accreditation within an appropriate and recognised accreditation framework.

Benson (1995) sees the value of the creation of an RPL portfolio as the means for a systemic assessment of what people already know and understand, to ensure that the quality of their prior learning can stand scrutiny and become the foundation of new learning. It is the notion of scrutiny that in part warrants further discussion in terms of credentialism, expertise and knowledge, in addition to consistency and fairness. The process and level of investigation into RPL varies. While some researchers advance the creation of a portfolio (Benson 1995, Day 2002), it is evident that elements addressing contents and criteria for evaluation of the portfolio are not consistent. Typically, alignment and relevance to the aims and objectives of academic programs and curriculum content are fundamental. However, some applicants may be impeded based on their existing assumptions about their experiences which may not conform to the specifics of program aims and objectives or the curriculum content. Kamp's (2003) research on mature-age New Zealand women and RPL demonstrates these problems, indicating that "there was no process of RPL in place

that gave the women opportunity to critically evaluate their prior experiences and the expertise gained by way of these experiences" (p.22).

The demands associated with the creation of a portfolio and its ultimate assessment as being irrelevant or having marginal relevance to the academic program could be detrimental to any mature-age student's self-esteem and self-concept. It can lead to extra demands on the student and RPL assessor based on university processes dealing with academic appeals. The worst case scenario for universities would be if students opt to withdraw completely or "shop around" until the portfolio contents are accepted (Stehlik 1998). Such practices could lead to negative competition in which universities that accept such students are considered 'easy' to get into which inadvertently undermines their credibility. Those institutions that reject the RPL application for legitimate reasons face being labelled as 'difficult' institutions to gain admission resulting in diminished student numbers. Both scenarios could influence student choices which inadvertently could be detrimental to Australian universities.

Finally, another consideration in this area, which has not been addressed in most of the literature about RPL in Australian universities, is the evaluative skills and insights of the academic charged with the responsibility of granting RPL. This position is not meant to undermine academic roles *per se*; however, it must be acknowledged that admission to programs often falls to course coordinators. They may be faced with an evaluation in a profession or industry role of which they have little or no professional experience or understanding as to the nature of the role and duties carried out by the applicant. While their theoretical knowledge in many areas is superior, their 'real world' understanding of experiences and learning gained from the workplace may be limited for some applicants.

Adult education and RPL

Fundamental to the characteristics of the adult learner are four crucial assumptions according to Knowles (1988) – as an adult matures:
- their self-concept moves from one of being a dependent personality toward being a self-directed human being
- they accumulate a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasingly rich resource for learning
- their readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental task of their social roles. and
- their time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application, and accordingly, their orientation toward learning shifts from one of subject-centredness to one of performance-centredness (p.45).

It is suggested that these characteristics should be major considerations in RPL: however, in Australian universities, operations and strategies are significantly influenced by organisational models aligned to profits, marketability, student numbers and graduate output. RPL has in one sense become an attractive option to stimulate potential student enrolments, yet the adoption of the four characteristics of adult learners as they relate to RPL has been negated.

In Australia, we are seeing RPL being used in an *ad hoc* basis and in some instances being used at a significant impost on students, academics and institutions. This situation verifies Stehlik's (1998) argument that RPL can have a negative impact on the legitimacy of the quality of education, the credibility of tertiary qualifications and the actual process of learning through life. Research by Gravoso, Pasa and Morie (2002) determined that students granted RPL still struggled with direction and "university learning".

Meeting the needs of the adult learner

There have been studies concerned with the impact of RPL on university learning for students with industrial backgrounds, equity groups and women (see Blezer 2004, Bateman 2003, Cantwell & Scevak 2004, Gravoso, Pasa & Mori 2002, Kamp 2003). Generally, these studies allude to various issues and problems associated with RPL and academic credit awarded to students. The problems have included: reliance on educational experiences and learning practices from non-university environments, the relevance of RPL to some university programs, differing expectations and needs of learners, student preparedness and their adjustment to university learning. This situation warrants further analysis of the criteria, evaluation and application of RPL with respect to the differing 'frameworks of operation' in which students find themselves. Universities approach student recruitment on a competitive, managerial model. This can in some regard be viewed as commercial exploitation. Using RPL as some form of reward for "fast-tracking" degree attainment has major implications for students who already possess varied expectations and needs from their university engagement. For students, it is necessary to question their realistic preparedness for university learning based on their assumptions and interpretations of their knowledge in relation to being granted RPL (Cantwell & Scevak 2004). It is imperative to question if the student's current knowledge allows them to conceptualise, analyse and reflect on their learning – elements which are fundamental to university learning. Cantwell and Screvak (2004) determined that:

> For students entering university directly via RPL, however, there is a generally tacit presumption that the developmental changes typically associated with completion of enabling study are in fact present on enrolment – that the prior learning in cognate fields has seen, *a priori,* the construction of an appropriate presentation of the discipline among RPL students (p.133).

Consequently, RPL issues emerge which naturally raise consideration of the 'difference' in university learning compared with vocational education.

The uniqueness of university learning

This section is not intended to create a controversial argument about the value and benefits of vocational education compared with university education. For the purposes of this paper, 'uniqueness' refers to 'being different' from non-university learning environments.

Although it is acknowledged that Australian universities are in a process of transition due to political implications and the "new realities", it is reasonable to suggest that university learning is unique. There is a myriad of research in the area of learning associated with academic disciplines that include education, psychology, sociology, ethics and the sciences. Typically, university learning focuses on what learning involves and where it can go, whereas vocational education is more aligned to practical knowledge and skill attainment. These differences have been problematic for RPL and academic credit students with vocational education experiences. Trowler (1996) asserts that:

> … there are significant qualitative differences in the kind of knowledge expected of students learning in a university environment and the kind of knowledge more typically associated within other contexts (cited in Cantwell & Scevak 2004, p.232).

Researchers have identified previous learning experiences whether primary, secondary or within the vocational sector that have influenced students' approaches and ability to adjust to university learning (see Blezer 2004, Cantwell & Scevak 2004, Gravoso *et al.* 2002). In addition, Trowler (1996) argued that assumptions about prior learning lead to three problems:

- a failure to identify the ontological limitations to the presumed everyday learning

- the presumption of reflectivity in everyday experience, and
- the presumption that the reflection that does occur is necessarily equivalent to the assumed requirements for university study (cited in Cantwell & Scevak 2004, p.233).

At the risk of becoming embedded in knowledge and learning theory, it is evident that prior learning can be problematic for RPL students in Australian universities for various reasons stemming from their entrenched practices and application of their previous learning experiences. Drawing on this dilemma, Michelson's (1996) contention that only *experience* can be exceptional and that *knowledge* must be presented as being similar to that of others and recognisable in terms set by university academic norms, enhances the uniqueness of university learning which is founded on contemporary learning theories with processes drawing on knowledge, analysis, synthesis, debate, reflection and application. This, according to Stehlik (1998), encourages adult educators to develop a "critical and reflective approach to their practices that is linked to theoretical constructs as well as being grounded in applied practice" (p.7).

RPL in Australian universities – where to from here?

The problems of RPL in Australian universities can be equated to a lack of preparedness for students and institutions in understanding its intent and purpose. This has led to RPL in Australian universities being problematic, detrimental and inconsistent. Researchers have valiantly suggested more studies and investigation into formulating a consistent approach to RPL evaluation and use (Bateman 2003, Childs *et al.* 2002, Stehlik 1998). However, given the diversity of academic programs, teaching and learning styles, adult learning needs, industry demands and institutional integrity, it would appear such research would only garner more contention and problems for RPL in Australian academe.

Initially, when researching RPL in Australian universities, and based on a personal commitment to advancing adult learning and adult education practices in Australian academe, there was some defence to being perceived as being polemic in relation to the value of RPL in Australian academe. Yet, given the myriad of problems and issues about RPL currently in Australian universities, this is difficult. Contemporary RPL in Australian universities can be viewed to a large extent as a 'white elephant'. Its value and usefulness can and should be questioned in respect to its relevance and viability for adult learners. Presently, too many students, especially those with industrial experience, face problems with university learning and adjusting to university demands. Academics must consider whether students are being academically jeopardised if they are granted RPL, and whether this disservice could ultimately impact on their lifelong learning.

With the 'revolution' occurring in Australian academe through the impact of the "new realities" taking hold on academic duties and requirements, and the emerging political implications which currently leave many Australian universities in the wilderness, perhaps it is time to set right current RPL practices in Australian universities. Until the political agenda is clearly identified and starts setting directions, it is timely to reassess RPL practices. By taking this step, efforts to create a RPL model or strategy that would be relevant, logical and transparent across Australian universities could and should be advanced. If anything, this strategy would be consistent.

Conclusion

There needs to be a concerted effort to create a university practice aligned to university learning, learner characteristics, operations, language and expectations. Based on the issues and problems of RPL discussed in this paper, adult educators face a challenging situation given the political, social and economic influences now being faced by

Australian universities. Drawing on the writings of Foley, Crombie, Hawke and Morris (2000), it is suggested that adult educators in advancing RPL must consider:

- the composition and educational needs of stakeholders and the ways in which they might be used in formal education – this would include industry representatives, policy-makers, economists, politicians and potential students
- encouraging the federal government to formalise a generic adult education service that ensures all adults have access to good quality learning opportunities throughout their lives
- promoting educational equity, appreciating a policy environment that is characterised by:
  - diminished funding arrangements
  - competition in the provision of services that have been government monopolies, with some safeguards for disadvantaged groups
  - technology and telecommunications allowing more finely tuned services, and
  - attention to 'who benefits and who pays' – there will need to be a push to improve 'fairness' (Foley *et al.* 2000, pp.123–5).

Adult educators committed to RPL in a university environment must, according to Foley *et al.* (2000),

> … consistently improve access to systematic, good-quality learning opportunities for a growing proportion of adults, so as to enable them to realise their full potential…This might most appropriately be expressed in terms of a national policy and strategy for the development over time of a system of lifelong learning, whereby education and training opportunity becomes available in realistic terms throughout the lifespan (p.125).

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A tale of two towns: Learning community initiatives in Bega Valley and Thuringowa

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Current learning community initiatives in Bega Valley and Thuringowa illustrate trends that are likely to become more significant in communities across Australia. In both cases, local government councils have supported the projects with the council library taking a leading entrepreneurial role in the initiative. This role reflects the growing interest of libraries in lifelong learning, and in their role as community learning centres. These initiatives are discussed against the background of wider issues in the development of learning communities in Australia.

Australian experience in building learning communities since 1998 poses the question as to how learning communities may be initiated in a range of contexts and sustained over time.