

## AARE/NZARE CONFERENCE

### RECOGNISING PRIOR LEARNING -

#### A NEW ZEALAND POLYTECHNIC PERSPECTIVE

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### 1. THE NEW ZEALAND SCENE

#### 1.1 Recent Developments in Tertiary Education

In New Zealand, as perhaps in Australia, tertiary education has faced a major change. At one level, it is easy to see these changes as largely structural (eg the separation of policy and qualification functions or as changes in the funding mechanism). But, in addition, there has been a continued move towards a more "student centred" approach to learning. Included here has been the growing acceptance of competency based learning, of independent study, availability of distance learning options and of the ability to customise a qualification (through increased choice and portability of units of learning).

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is another step in the attempt to focus on the student, although undoubtedly the increased acceptability of RPL in New Zealand has been enhanced by some concurrent structural changes.

Perhaps most significant of the latter has been the adoption, by The New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA), of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) which, amongst many other things, establishes the Unit of Learning as the building block in the qualifications structure. Significantly, for RPL purposes, each unit is to include specific learning outcomes (be they in the area of knowledge, skills or attitudes). This is a development which has become a key factor in the growing acceptability of RPL - a point that will be developed later in the paper.

#### 1.2 Polytechnics in the New Zealand Tertiary System

As many will be aware, New Zealand Polytechnics fill roughly the role of an Australian TAFE College. While there are 25 Polytechnics in New Zealand, they range in size and function from the smallest, with 115 equivalent full time students (EFTS) in 1992, to the largest with 6,344 EFTS.

Likewise, there is a huge range in the types and levels of courses provided (pre-apprentice to degree). While there is an important Community Education movement within all Polytechnics the majority of

Polytechnic courses have a direct vocational base.

Nelson Polytechnic, where the researchers are based, is a middle sized Polytechnic. This year (1992), Nelson Polytechnic has 1,439 EFTS enrolled in programmes ranging from a Bachelors degree (in Business Studies and Accounting) to short term courses in aspects of personal development. Nelson Polytechnic serves a population of approximately 100,000 people at the very top of the South Island. Nelson city and Blenheim are the two major urban areas and have about 55% of the population but the rest of the population is rather far flung by New Zealand standards. It might take 7-8 hours to drive from one end of the region to the other.

### 1.3The Research Contract

Nelson Polytechnic was commissioned late in 1991 by NZQA to develop guidelines on how Polytechnics might implement RPL policies and to test these guidelines with students and tutors. The Report now completed, is with NZQA who will use the findings when setting their national guidelines early in 1993.

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

### 2.1 Limitations in scope and intent

The researchers deliberately kept this project focused on NZ Polytechnics. They had only limited recent contacts with Colleges of Education and Universities. However it is expected that the guidelines will be useful to NZ Universities and Colleges of Education.

It is also important to stress that the procedures developed should be considered guidelines only. In keeping with recent changes in educational administration the researchers believe each polytechnic has the responsibility for developing and approving their own RPL policies and that these may be monitored, in part, by NZQA actions.

### 2.2. Background

The researchers interpreted their task as essentially one of adaptation rather than invention. Their task was to develop procedures that were suitable to New Zealand conditions and to New Zealand Polytechnics in particular.

In keeping with the research contract, three phases of the project were identified:

- \*Establishing draft procedures

- \*Trialing draft procedures

\*Revising draft procedures and preparing final report

### 2.3 Establishing draft procedures

The first step was to review the current literature.

As the project had to be completed in six months, the literature review was confined to materials that were readily available to the researchers, either through the Library Interloan System or from the NZQA Library in Wellington.

The background paper (and attached bibliography) on the recognition of prior learning, prepared by Chris Loades of NZQA, was a useful starting point.

Other major sources of information used in the report were Benton (1991), Ford/TAFE (1990) Evans (1987) and various materials from Elmwood, Strathclyde and Scotvec.

The pamphlets and information for students prepared by Elmwood College, Scotland signalled the type of presentation that could be appropriate for NZ students while the step by step process was developed from the Broadmeadows TAFE experiences.

Having reviewed the literature, the researchers then began drafting procedures for recognising prior learning.

### 2.4 Trialing draft procedures

Whilst the researchers were undertaking the literature review and establishing the draft procedures, they also identified eleven tutors who would trial the process with students.

The researchers ran information sessions for the tutors who volunteered. Topics covered included background to the project, RPL model, four methods of proving prior learning and the expectations/timelines for tutors.

In dealing with tutors, it quickly became apparent to the researchers, that prior learning was already being recognised by many Departments within the Polytechnic and using many different ways.

Tutors were asked to:

- \*invite students to trial the process, (student's self selected into the project)
- \*advise the student about the process,
- \*assist student in making decision about targeting units to seek credit for,
- \*assist student in selecting method/s of proving prior learning,
- \*assist student in preparation of submission,

- \*evaluate or arrange for evaluation of submission,
- \*advise student of recommendation re credit awarded,
- \*obtain feedback from students about the process and
- \*give feedback of their own experiences to researchers.

While tutors were trialing the procedures the researchers assisted tutors by giving further information/clarification/support on the RPL process both in face-to-face meetings with tutors and by telephone, meeting with tutors and students to assist with the process, and by being part of an assessing group trialing the attestation method.

## 2.5 Prepare final report

This involved the revision of draft materials in light of the trials.

The major adjustments made by the researchers related to an awareness of the need for user-friendly information and procedures, the need for flexibility in implementing the model proposed, and the concentration on the development of policies for NZ Polytechnics.

Students, tutors and community groups sometimes felt overwhelmed by the amount of written material. Giving information orally was found to be more effective in conveying the concept of RPL. Written materials, it was found, need to be brief, clear and use diagrams.

The model developed has been adapted so that it can be fully comprehensive or very simple depending on the needs of the applicant and/or the Polytechnic. It also has been adapted to make sure that the process is more interactive and cooperative than was first envisaged.

## 2.6 Summary of Research Statistics

### \*Tutors

Eleven tutors were involved with the trial, seven men and four women ranging in age from 28 to 50.

Disciplines covered include Business Studies, Office Systems, Nursing, Fishing, Computing, Catering, Horticulture and Craft Design.

### Students

Twenty students, twelve female and eight male were involved with the trial in the range of disciplines noted above. Eight students in all were from the Nursing and Business Studies areas.

Students by age group.

Age    Number of Students

Under 20 1  
20 - 29 4  
30 - 39 11  
40 - 49 4

Students by method of proving prior learning

Method Number of times used

Attestation 1  
Challenge 6  
Credit Transfer 8  
Portfolio 12

Total 27

Note: 5 students used multiple methods. 15 students used just one method.

### 3. RESEARCH CONTENT

#### 3.1 Purpose of RPL

A recognition of prior learning policy allows an applicant's existing skills and knowledge (obtained through formal training, work experience or life experience) to be matched to the specific learning outcomes of a course, taught by an educational organisation and for appropriate credit to be awarded to that applicant. It is based on the principal assertion that it is wasteful and demotivating for the applicant and educational institution to spend time and effort studying or teaching knowledge, skills or attitudes that have already been achieved.

#### 3.2 Principles of RPL

The researchers identified seventeen principles underpinning the recognition of prior learning. These principles may be summarised as follows:

\*The overriding principle of recognising prior learning is that if an applicant can satisfactorily demonstrate that they already have the specific knowledge/skills/attitudes required in a unit then credit should be awarded.

\*Specific learning outcomes are the focus not general life experiences.

\*Assessments must be made by competent staff and be flexible enough to allow a range of techniques.

\*Credit awarded through RPL should not be distinguished from credit awarded in other ways.

\*RPL policies should be regularly reviewed to ensure that confidence of students, tutors and industry is maintained.

\*Advisory and assessment roles are distinct.

However, where appropriate these different roles may need to be provide by he same person.

\*Polytechnic commitment is essential. This may be shown by:

- Provision of adequate advisory services
- Development of procedures that are culturally, gender, age and ability appropriate
- adequate training of staff
- adequate promotion of the RPL option

### 3.3 Four methods of proving prior learning

These are summarised in Diagram 1.

### 3.4 The comprehensive model

\*Overview and diagram

Overview: Phases

Phase 1: Request

This phase is primarily the responsibility of the Applicant, although advice and information must be available. In it the applicant discovers what credit might be sought, then assembles and presents evidence in the form of a submission.

Depending upon the type of evidence presented and the method selected (Attestation, Credit Transfer etc) the submission may be in the form of an interview or some other direct interaction between the Applicant and the Assessor, thus achieving a close association or link between this phase and the next.

Phase 2: Assessment

This phase is primarily the responsibility of the Polytechnic and involves an assessment of the applicant's submission and a decision on how much credit should be awarded. As noted immediately above in some cases (eg Attestation) Phase 2 might overlap with the end of Phase 1.

### Phase 3: Appeal

This phase allows for the resolution of any dispute that may arise between the applicant and the Polytechnic. It employs the usual appeal procedures of that organisation. It is a phase that is unlikely to be used very often.

These are summarised in Diagram 2.

#### \*Step by step process

The three phases were in turn broken down into four steps each. These are summarised in Diagram 3.

Diagram 2: Overview

Diagram 3: Step by step process

## 4. SOME ISSUES RELATING TO RPL

Both within the project and subsequent to it, the researchers have discussed RPL with over 150 people. While the level of contact has varied considerably and while the feedback has been largely anecdotal it has been hard to find anyone who is against RPL in principle.

There are however, a number of concerns, or issues which have arisen with most falling into one or more of the following categories.

### 4.1 Quality Control Issues

Is RPL a soft option? Can a student get a qualification without attending a single class? Can a tutor be both an Advisor and an Assessor? These were common questions.

In summary, the researchers proposed that each Polytechnic be responsible for setting and maintaining their own quality control standards, but that NZQA monitor these through their existing accreditation processes.

When it was explained first, that units of learning would include specific learning outcomes (elements as they are now being called), second, that it was the student's responsibility (with advice) to match their learning to these outcomes and third, that the assessment of the student's prior learning would be based on these specific learning outcomes, and

conducted by qualified assessors, then much of this concern was relieved.

#### 4.2 Other Professional Issues

In New Zealand academic circles, as perhaps in Australia, a debate continues on the extent to which it is possible to specify learning outcomes.

The researchers did not enter this debate, but keeping one of the RPL principles in mind, it was argued that the RPL applicant should be treated no more rigorously nor more leniently than the equivalent conventional student.

Another common concern related to the situation where an applicant was found to have met part but not all of the learning requirements. How the gap in learning might be bridged and how disruptive might this be to tutors and classroom students were obvious concerns. One option is for the RPL applicant to join the "conventional" class. If that was not possible, then independent study or distance learning options might apply.

A third area of concern was that RPL would turn tutors into simply "assessors". While this may be true for some RPL tutors, the researchers did not foresee RPL assessments making teaching redundant. The United Kingdom experience indicates that RPL actually increases the number of students in conventional classes and in the decentralised model proposed in this project and (where RPL decisions are likely to be made at the Departmental level) it is most unlikely that the frequency of RPL applications would reach the point that a greater part of the tutors work would be the processing of RPL requests.

#### 4.3 Industrial Issues

Fortunately, it was not part of the research brief to establish the cost of RPL policies, but cost constraints often surfaced. Tutors in particular, were suspicious that more responsibilities would be passed on to them without a corresponding reduction in work load or increase in pay.

#### 4.4 Student issues

Again costs were a major concern.

It is still unclear how RPL will affect the New Zealand Study Right (the NZ Government tuition subsidy) and to what extent Polytechnic Administrations will choose to recover costs.

There was a fear that the cost of proving RPL may be such that students do not exercise the option.

In setting fees the following might be considered: the fee level should not inhibit applications for credit; fees charged should not be based on the number of credits awarded; and a flat fee system, although simple to administer, does not take into account the different amount of work involved in processing individual applications.

#### 4.5 Administrative Issues

The major concern was that Polytechnics will not get an increase in their grant from the Ministry of Education to cover RPL costs.

In addition, there is the need to train staff and to identify the various roles and responsibilities involved in implementing an RPL policy. In particular, there is the need to address the issue of whether or not one person can be both an Advisor and an Assessor.

#### 5. WHERE NOW?

Educational organisations in New Zealand are becoming aware of recognition of prior learning procedures and, if willingness to attend workshops and seminars is any indication, are keen to establish processes to implement such procedures. The next steps in the introduction of RPL policies appear to be:

##### NZQA Guidelines developed

NZQA are planning to circulate draft guidelines on RPL in November 1992 for comment. Confirmed guidelines will be published in March 1993 which organisations wishing to be accredited by NZQA will have to comply with.

##### NZQA Conference held

NZQA are planning to coordinate a New Zealand Conference on RPL to be held in March/April 1993. Details of the Conference are to be announced in QA News in November.

##### RPL Working Group formed

NZQA are planning to establish a working group on RPL. Tasks for such a group might include collating comments received on the NZQA draft guidelines and assisting with writing units of learning for RPL advisors and assessors.

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NOTE

Information on how to order copies of the report on the research undertaken at Nelson Polytechnic is available from:

Julie McDougall  
Nelson Polytechnic  
Private Bag 19  
Nelson  
NEW ZEALAND

6. REFERENCES

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SYMPOSIUM PAPER

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