

RPL – Recognition of Prior Learning

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What is RPL?

According to the National Training glossary **RPL is the acknowledgement of a person's skills and knowledge acquired through previous training, work or life experience, which may be used to grant status or credit in a subject or module.**

RPL is a process that was introduced to the Vocational Education and Training (VET) system with the change to Competency Based Training (CBT) from the mid 1980s.

It is sometimes called Recognition of Current Competency (RCC). RCC is not mentioned in the **Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF)**, the quality system we are obliged to comply with which is analogous to ISO17025, so we refer only to RPL.

RPL – Recognition of Prior Learning **What is competency based training?**

CBT is training which develops the skills, knowledge and attitudes required to achieve competency standards.

CBT assumes that given sufficient training and opportunities for reassessment, most people can achieve competence.

There are two outcomes of assessment under CBT:

- Competent
- Not Yet Competent.

If Not Yet Competent complete further training and reassess.

How does it compare with the old ways?

Normative assessment used in schools and universities measures participants against their peers. If you fail, come back next year or next semester and re-enrol. Generally, the emphasis is on assessing the person's knowledge with less emphasis on skills assessment.

On the other hand competency based assessment measures the participant against nationally agreed (endorsed) industry standards to determine whether they can perform to the standards required in the workplace. The person's skills, knowledge and attitudes are assessed.

In the old days I and many others gained our qualifications by enrolling at the beginning of semester, attending classes in which we learnt many things we already knew (sometimes better than the teacher) and sat exams that tested a lot of things that were handy to know (but not necessarily.) There was no other way and we served our time.

What is a competency standard?

A competency standard is an industry-determined specification of performance which sets out the skills, knowledge and attitudes required to operate effectively in employment.

Competency standards are made up of **units of competency**, which are themselves made up of **elements of competency**, together with **performance criteria**, a **range of variables**, and an **evidence guide**. Competency standards are an endorsed component of a **Training Package**.

A *Training Package* is a national document, developed with the relevant industry or industries; hat defines the competency standards and qualifications relevant to that industry.

Because laboratory operations cover the spectrum from pathology to construction materials it was decided to develop a cross industry package for all laboratories with generic and industry-specific units of competency.

All lab operators need to communicate, work in a quality assurance system, and work safely, etc. although the context will vary.

On the other hand, only CMT/geotechnical testers need to perform earthworks supervision or geotechnical site investigation.

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Appendix 1 - Example of a competency unit on page 7 shows a typical competency unit.

How do we assess competency?

Assessment is the process of gathering and judging evidence in order to decide whether a person has achieved a standard or objective.

There are three forms of evidence:

- **Direct evidence** where we see the person performs a task that demonstrates a skill. For example they perform a liquid limit test or calibrate a SMDG.
- **Indirect evidence** where the person produces an artifact they have created, that requires the necessary skill. They produce a test certificate and the associated worksheets showing their signature/initials.
- **Supplementary evidence** where the person produces third-party testimonial, answers written or oral questions, or supplies other supporting documentation.

Appendix 3 – Third-party evidence on page 18 is a form for collecting testimonial evidence.

What are the rules of evidence?

In assessing competence we need to ensure that the evidence is:

- **Authentic** – can we be sure that the test certificate was the person's own work?
- **Valid** – is the evidence relevant to the unit being assessed? If the unit is about OHS, a short course in computing probably won't be relevant.
- **Reliable** – would another assessor reach the same assessment decision based on this assessment, and would I reach the same decision if I carried out the assessment next week/next month?
- **Sufficient** – have I enough evidence to judge the person's competence? Is there more than one piece of evidence and do they corroborate?
- **Current** – is the evidence up-to-date? If the person was a NATA signatory in 1987, are they able to perform tests to current test methods.

What evidence can you provide?

When you apply for recognition of prior learning, what evidence can you provide to support your claim.

Certification

Certificates for completed courses of study may be used. These may be of three types:

- Completed units of competency whether from the Laboratory package or others. Laboratory units (completed since 2000) will be automatically credited. Some generic units from other packages (eg. Workplace safety, communication, teamwork and quality assurance) may be immediately relevant. Others that are

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relevant to your current workplace may be relevant, or may support your claim for recognition (eg. Computing studies, Radioactive devices operator licenses).

- Courses that have been assessed may support that you have underpinning knowledge. Examples of these include VET courses with Statements of Attainment or qualifications and university academic histories. Other short courses such as First Aid, Workplace Health and Safety Officer courses may be used.
- Short courses with Statements of Attendance such as NATA, VET and professional development courses demonstrate underpinning knowledge. Toolbox talks and internal training records are also supportive.

Documentation

Workplace documentation can be valuable evidence. Examples include:

- Position description, personal performance review reports
- Completed reports, worksheets, drawings, sketches
- Memos, e-mails, faxes, letters to or from clients, suppliers, supervisors or subordinates
- Accreditation certificates showing your signatory status

Demonstration

Demonstrating sampling and or testing techniques in real time or a videorecording of the process.

This can also be used to demonstrate knowledge of the laboratory information management system and ability to perform calculations.

Interview

This is used to authenticate other evidence and to clarify underpinning knowledge. It can also be used to establish competence where documentation is not readily available or the person can provide a spoken explanation more readily than a written one.

Appendix 4 - Examples of competency on page 19 is a form that can be used either as a record of interview or for the candidate to provide a written response to the competency.

Testimonial

Testimonial can be provided by third parties such as supervisors/employers, clients, suppliers, colleagues and even subordinates.

These may take the form of reference letters, but we prefer to use a standard form that specifies the skills the person needs to demonstrate.

- Supervisors'/employers testimonials are valuable for determining whether the person is meeting enterprise requirements
- Clients' testimonials, whether from internal or external clients, are valuable for competencies that require service delivery.

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- Suppliers' testimonials, whether from internal or external suppliers, are valuable for competencies that require demonstration of ability to acquire equipment, materials and services.
- Colleagues' and subordinates' testimonials can be used for communication, teamwork and supervisory competencies. They are a way of assessing the person's attitudes.

Testimonial evidence is valuable but not sufficient by itself. Responses may be subjective, coloured by personal bias. Subordinates may feel the need for a positive response to protect their current and future employment prospects.

What if you can't prove competence?

When the assessor considers the evidence they may decide that competence has been demonstrated. All that remains is to deem you competent and credit you with that unit.

On the other hand they may decide that there is insufficient evidence. In this case there are two possibilities available:

• **You can't provide the evidence** – in this case you will have the opportunity to find evidence that will meet this deficiency, assuming it exists. It may well be that you have overlooked it.

• **You need further training** – any gaps in your skill or knowledge can be filled through further training. This may involve:

o Training by your employer

o Training by your RTO

o Self directed training through research.

Unless there are major gaps in your competence it should be necessary to reassess only the gaps.

Conclusion

RPL is a process that allows workers to gain recognition for the skills and knowledge they have acquired no matter how they were acquired. It is a requirement of the Australian Quality Training Framework that Registered Training Organisations offer RPL to all participants on enrolment

It is a self-paced and generally self-directed process that many people have found to be relatively painless. While the process needs to be rigorous to ensure the integrity of the outcome, RTOs can and should facilitate the assembling of evidence.

This can be done in a number of ways:

- Providing documentation so that the candidate knows what criteria they need to meet
- Guiding the candidate in the types of evidence that will be acceptable so that they don't waste time and resources in the process

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- Providing the assessment tools that facilitate the collection of good quality evidence
- Thinking laterally to ensure the candidate is aware of potential evidence they can present, for example from previous employment or even from outside the workplace.
- Assessing holistically (for example two or more units at a time). For example, in assessing the ability to sample or test consider communication, OHS and quality assurance compliance requirements.

- Being flexible in the types and amount of evidence that will be accepted.

The ability to access RPL allows experienced operators to gain qualifications that, in the past, would have required several years' attendance at a teaching institution, in as little as six months.

Done properly, this can only benefit the nation as a whole by ensuring that we have a qualified workforce.

It can only benefit enterprises by a having a motivated workforce whose competence has been externally validated.

Finally it can only benefit the worker in having formal recognition of the skills and knowledge they possess. I have had the privilege of issuing qualifications to men in their late fifties and early sixties who have not undertaken any further studies since leaving school. Through recognition of prior learning and training they were able to achieve their first post-school qualification, particularly one recognised in their workplace.

In my opinion this is the most important benefit.

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