

# Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL): A Practitioner's Guide

**Russell Savage and Cath Stephensen**

**FIRST EDITION**

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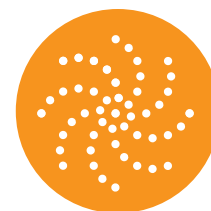
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# Preface

The vocational education and training (VET) community has a diversity of understanding and practices when it comes to Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). For a number of years we have explored ways of “doing RPL better” within an ever changing VET landscape across Australia.

When I first heard and learned about RPL, I found it difficult to understand the real benefits and like many others I was busily focussed on the traditional “bums on seats” delivery of training and assessment activities. Initially, RPL just didn’t seem to fit well with our approach or our customer’s expectations.

Back then we were burdened with bureaucratic and paper based processes that did not seem to serve either our RPL candidates or our RPL assessors particularly well. We found that RPL assessments were usually added on top of the VET practitioner’s already full workload. Hence, the motivation to conduct RPL assessments was rather limited and for many, RPL was simply an inconvenience. We also found that, because RPL was cast as something different to or of lesser value than training and assessment outcomes, that potential RPL candidates found it very difficult to access and obtain RPL assessment.

Things may have improved somewhat in recent times with the acknowledgement in the 2015 RTO Standards, of RPL as part of every system of assessment, and for mandating RTOs to offer RPL to all potential students. The advent of eLearning and new technologies has also accelerated the ways and means by which we can engage more effectively with RPL candidates and manage RPL evidence.

With an increasingly “casual-ised” workforce across the VET sector, opportunities for professional development and peer to peer mentoring for VET practitioners appear to be diminishing. The minimum qualification requirement for aspiring VET practitioners remains the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment. However, one would struggle to find any recent graduate of this course who could undertake an RPL assessment with any real confidence.

The purpose of this guide is to provide a platform for the professional development of assessors whom work with RPL processes. For the less experienced, we hope to provide an opportunity to discover more about RPL and what an RPL practitioner actually needs to know and do. There is very little written on the topic of RPL. While we have provided a number of the more recently published references and resources relating to RPL, we hope that this guide will:

- outline the benefits of RPL
- help to explain RPL terminology, roles and processes
- advise and provide tips on RPL professional practice
- assist VET practitioners to critically reflect upon their RPL practice
- help VET practitioners to become better RPL practitioners.



Back then we were burdened with bureaucratic and paper based processes that did not seem to serve either our RPL candidates or our RPL assessors particularly well.



## Background to RPL

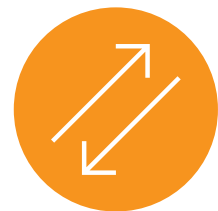
Discussion about the application and practice of RPL was plentiful during the 1990's when the National Training Framework was established and assessment practice was developed to complement the use of competency based training and assessment methodology.

Researcher and writer, Roslyn Cameron has this to say about RPL in Australia.

“Australia introduced Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) as part of a national training reform agenda that included the introduction of a competency-based vocational education and training system, a national qualification system and training packages. RPL is now a standard and requirement of any offering of accredited training that is embedded in the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). As time has progressed and RPL policy and practice has evolved it has become more central to the vocational education and training (VET) sector than any other post-compulsory educational sector. RPL is also a growing activity outside the education sector, impacting on human capital and workforce development policy and initiatives. The Australian government's current policies related to reforms in higher education, the social inclusion agenda (specifically in relation to education) and workforce development (including skilled migration) may see even greater impetus for RPL activity across educational sectors and within workplaces. New areas of research interest are emerging regarding building RPL practitioner capabilities and using Web 2.0 technologies and digital media.

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Cameron, Roslyn (2011-01-01). *Australia: An overview of 20 years of research into the recognition of prior learning (RPL)*.



# Introduction

## What is Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)?

RPL is an assessment process that assesses the competencies acquired by an individual through formal, non-formal and informal learning in relation to the established criteria and requirements of a given qualification or standard. The Standards for Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) 2015 defines:

- **formal learning** as learning that takes place through a structured program of instruction and is linked to the attainment of an AQF qualification or statement of attainment (for example, a certificate, diploma or university degree)
- **non-formal learning** as learning that takes place through a structured program of instruction, but does not lead to the attainment of an AQF qualification or statement of attainment (for example, in-house professional development programs conducted by a business)
- **informal learning** as learning that results through experience of work-related, social, family, hobby or leisure activities (for example the acquisition of interpersonal skills developed through several years as a sales representative).

These Standards also require all RTOs to implement an assessment system including RPL that complies with the assessment requirements of training packages, and that is conducted in accordance with the principles of assessment and rules of evidence.



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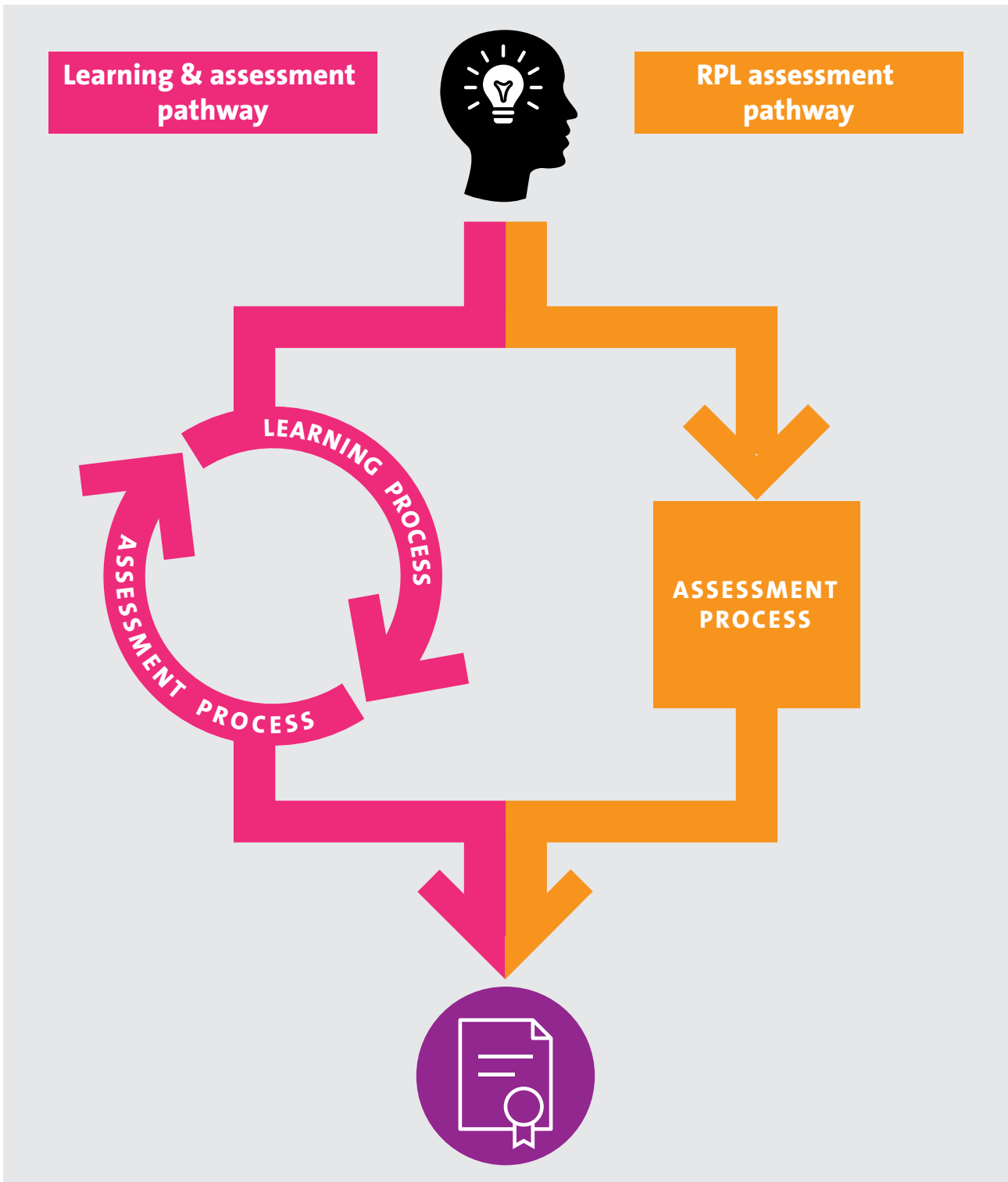
### RPL



RPL is an alternative, summative, assessment-only pathway for an individual to achieve vocational qualifications. The outcomes and rewards are exactly the same for an individual who participates in the RPL pathway as they are for an individual who participates in the training and assessment pathway to achieving vocational qualifications. The difference lies only in the pathway to obtaining the outcomes and rewards.



LEARNING & ASSESSMENT VS RPL ASSESSMENT PATHWAY



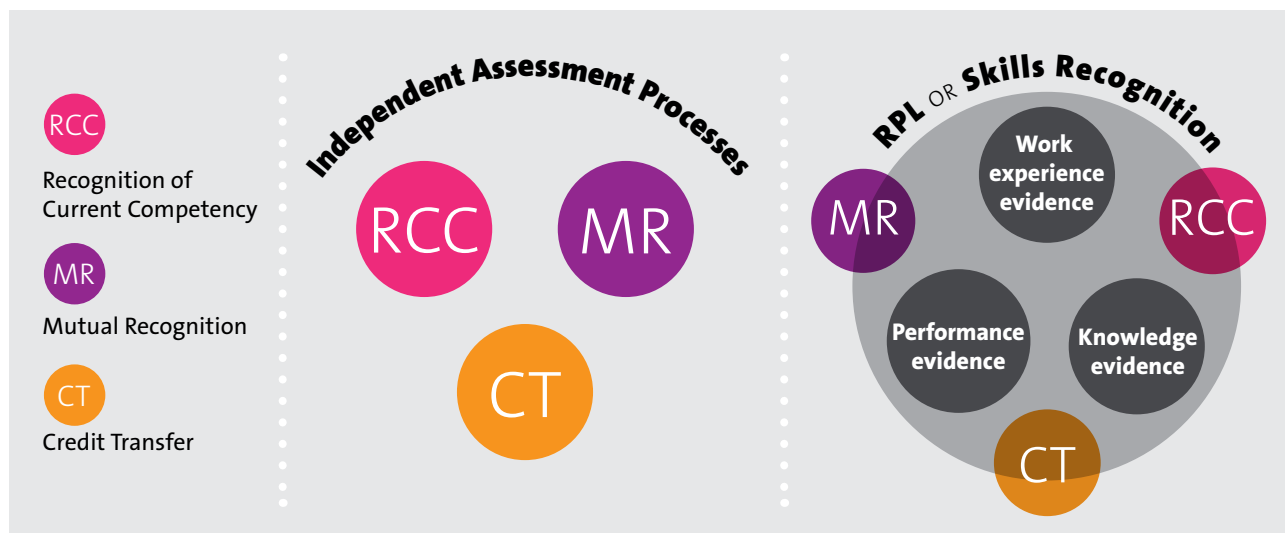
RPL is not to be confused with other similar vocational education practices that are focussed on both training and assessment such as work-based learning or blended learning. The difference lies in the extent to which the individual is engaged in learning activities. This is worth clarifying because, by definition, RPL is an assessment process, not a learning process.



Over the last decade RPL has been defined in a number of ways by practitioners, researchers and policy makers. Nationally agreed, accurate and current definitions of all terms can be found in the Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard (AVETMISS) publications. RPL is defined in the Australian Qualifications Framework Second Edition July 2013 as ‘an assessment process that involves assessment of an individual’s relevant prior learning (including formal, informal and non-formal learning) to determine the credit outcomes of an individual application for credit’.

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and Skills Recognition (SR) are interchangeable terms that incorporate Recognition of Current Competency (RCC), Mutual Recognition (MR) and Credit Transfer (CT).

While RCC, MR and CT can be conducted separately and independently, RPL (or SR) innately includes RCC, MR and CT. (See Section ‘Definitions and Terminology’ for further information on RCC, MR and CT.)



Sometimes it helps to better define something by not only describing what it is, but also by describing what it is not. Here are a few tips to help us to better define RPL by describing what RPL is not.

**RPL assessment is not, or should not be:**

- x more difficult, rigorous or challenging than training-based assessments
- x subject to higher compliance standards than training-based assessments
- x a formative assessment as part of a program of learning
- x work-based learning or work simulation training-based assessment
- x an unstructured assessor-centric exercise that primarily requires the RPL candidate to satisfy unrealistic or unnecessary requirements
- x a costly and time-consuming process designed to encourage potential RPL candidates to attend a course instead
- x an exercise in frustration that requires RPL candidates to map their evidence to qualification requirements
- x the same or suitable for every RPL candidate.







## RPL has two useful purposes:

1. RPL provides a method of accelerating the process to gain access to a course by satisfying the prerequisites or training requirements for individuals seeking further or higher study; or
2. RPL leads directly to the awarding of a unit or units of competency that either partially or fully satisfies the requirements of a qualification or accredited course.

However, RPL is not appropriate for all individuals. In addition to the requisite formal, non-formal and informal learning that must have been acquired by an individual, RPL also requires some minimum levels of literacy and numeracy foundation skills. Therefore, RPL would not be recommended for individuals who:

- ✓ have less than 2-5 years recent work related experience that is specific to the units being assessed
- ✓ are unable to provide referees who can verify their work related experiences
- ✓ are unable to access and provide genuine evidence of their skills, associated workplace documentation and work related experiences
- ✓ do not meet the minimum Foundation Skills requirements for the Qualification they are seeking.

### What is an RPL practitioner?

Every Vocational Education and Training (VET) practitioner is also an RPL Practitioner. RPL assessment is a practice that forms part of the assessment skill sets required of all VET practitioners, no matter what their job title. RPL practitioners may also be known as an Instructor, Trainer, Assessor, Facilitator, Teacher, Lecturer, Coordinator, Supervisor, Manager, Officer, Mentor or Coach.

RPL Practitioners hold a minimum qualification of Certificate IV in Training and Assessment and possess relevant industry experience. These skills and knowledge are essential when making assessment decisions. RPL practitioners have a deep knowledge of the workplace competencies they are assessing including the relevant Training Package Qualification and Assessment Requirements.



## RPL practitioners

When making decisions about an individual's competence, VET Practitioners apply a professional body of knowledge and possess an aptitude for making judgements based on their own experience, skills and knowledge. A proficient RPL Practitioner should be very familiar with the definitions, terminology, roles, processes and discussion outlined in the following sections.



## What are the benefits of RPL?

### For individuals

- Remain competitive in a job market that uses qualifications as a way of short-listing applicants.
- Enable access to further or higher educational studies.
- Demonstrate career readiness when applying for a promotion or new job.
- Assist with applying for workplace promotion.
- Qualify existing competencies against portable industry standards.
- Help to maintain current industry standards, professional registration or licensing requirements.
- Reduce time and money required to attain a qualification.
- Remove the need to study something already learned through formal, non-formal or informal learning.

### For employers

- Benchmark existing workforce skills against current industry standards.
- Profile existing workplace skills sets and identify enterprise capability gaps.
- Reduce costs of off the job training and enable access to subsidised training.
- Improve staff retention through workforce development and staff training incentives.
- Build morale and improve employee relations through recognition gained from on the job learning.
- Prepare workforce for change and future training needs.

### For RTOs

- Open new markets for employers and potential students.
- Improve engagement with potential students.
- Increase student enrolments, satisfaction, retention and completions.
- Ability to provide customised courses that better meet employer and student needs.
- Improve resource productivity.
- Integrate with other learning pathways to optimise student outcomes.
- Satisfy legislated compliance requirements for RTOs assessment systems.



# Definitions and terminology

## **Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF)**

The framework for regulated qualifications in the Australian education and training system, as agreed by the Commonwealth, State and Territory ministerial council with responsibility for higher education.



## **Assessment**

The process of making judgements about evidence presented and on whether competency has been achieved, to confirm that an individual can perform to the standard required in the workplace, as specified in a training package or VET accredited course.

## **Assessment Moderation**

Moderation is the process used in validation, involving discussion between assessors aimed at reaching agreement about assessment processes and outcomes in a particular industry or industry sector. This enables assessors to develop a shared understanding of the requirements of specific training packages, including the relevant competency standards and assessment guidelines, the nature of evidence, how evidence is collected and the basis on which assessment decisions are made.

Moderation seeks to standardise the parameters of assessment evidence that can be accepted for a given unit of competency, particularly in relation to the principles of assessment and the rules of evidence.

## **Assessment Validation**

Validation is the quality review of the assessment process that takes place both before and after the assessment process.

Validation (before assessment) involves checking that the assessment instrument is likely to meet the principles of assessment and rules of evidence to enable reasonable judgements to be made as to whether the requirements of the training package or VET accredited courses are met. This provides assurance that the assessment tool will provide evidence that meets requirements of assessment as outlined in the Training Package and the specific unit/s of competency.

Validation (after assessment) includes reviewing and moderating assessments, in collaboration with other assessors, to determine whether the requirements of the training package or VET accredited courses are met, and to make recommendations for future improvements to the assessment instrument, process and/or outcomes and acting upon such recommendations.

## **Certification**

The set of official documents that confirms that an AQF qualification or statement of attainment has been issued to an individual.

An RPL assessment performed against units of competency within a Training Package Qualification follows the same rules for outcomes and the issue of certification as any accredited course. Testamurs for Qualifications, Records of Results and Statements of Attainment for individual units of competency are issued and carry the same weight as



certification obtained through course assessment. They are recognised by other RTOs under the rules of mutual recognition (MR) and there is no differentiation on the certificate about the method of assessment.

### Competency

The consistent application of knowledge and skill to the standard of performance required in the workplace. It embodies the ability to transfer and apply skills and knowledge to new situations and environments.

### Credit

Credit is the recognition of equivalence in content and learning outcomes between different units of competency and/or qualifications. Credit assesses courses against each other to determine the extent to which there is an exact match.

Within the Higher Education (HE or University) sector, RPL terminology may be applied in a slightly different context. More specifically, RPL may be used for the purposes of awarding Credit for Advanced Standing, as a measure of equivalence for prior formal learning or courses successfully completed at another educational institution or college. This approach has been more prevalent in recent times as a means to promote pathways between Vocational Education and Higher Education, and also to assist students with the reduction of their study requirements leading to an award, or even for the award of a dual outcome.

Although we now find the HE sector beginning to acknowledge experiential and informal learning within their pathways programs for entrance requirements, the application of such requirements remain specific to each institution and are not standardised, as they are in the Australian VET sector where the principle of mutual recognition applies.

### Credit Transfer (CT)

Credit Transfer is an administrative process that reduces the amount of units of competency required to achieve a qualification or course of study being undertaken. When an RPL candidate provides a verified training record or academic transcript that shows that they have already attained the same unit of competency, then Credit Transfer must be granted and no further evidence or further training is required to satisfy recognition of that unit of competency. Credit Transfer employs the principles of Mutual Recognition to recognise the prior completion of an equivalent AQF qualifications and units of competency that have been attained at another RTO.

Credit Transfer cannot be applied to non-equivalent or superseded units of competency unless the mapping information deems the new unit of competency as equivalent. If the unit of competency is superseded and/or not equivalent, then the relevant training record can only be used as supporting RPL evidence together with other RPL evidence, and only to the extent of the equivalence.

### Current Industry Skills

Current industry skills may include, but are not limited to:

- having knowledge of and/or experience using the latest techniques and processes



- possessing a high level of product knowledge
- understanding and knowledge of legislation relevant to the industry and to employment and workplaces
- being customer/client-oriented
- possessing formal industry and training qualifications
- training content that reflects current industry practice.



### Evidence Verification

Verification is the term used for the methods performed by an RPL assessor that ensure that RPL evidence meets the rules of evidence, that is, the RPL evidence is authentic, current, valid and sufficient.

Verification methods may include:

- cross checking evidence to see that it is backed up or corroborated by other pieces of evidence
- contacting referees or reference writers to check the evidence was provided and supported
- asking the RPL candidate questions about current industry skills based on the evidence presented
- contacting other RTOs to check the authenticity of certificates issued by them
- seeking additional information that corroborates the candidates claims or assertions

### Foundation Skills

The term that Australian Government agencies have started to use to cover the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF)'s five core skills (learning, reading, writing, oral communication and numeracy), plus the employability skills, or the Core Skills for Work framework. However this is not a definitive definition and it's worth noting that the Foundation Skills Training Package covers core skills plus digital literacy.

### Mutual Recognition (MR)

The application of recognition and acceptance by an RTO of AQF qualifications and Statements of Attainment issued by other RTOs, enabling individuals to receive national recognition of their achievements. When an RPL candidate provides a verified training record or academic transcript that shows that they have already attained the same unit of competency, then, under the principles of Mutual Recognition, Credit Transfer must be granted and no further evidence or further training is required to satisfy recognition of that unit of competency.

### Personal Declaration

A personal declaration is a formal written statement or attestation made by a person who is providing RPL evidence about the truth of certain facts, circumstances or assertions.

A personal declaration is similar to a legal affidavit and is used to assist with the verification of the authenticity and validity RPL evidence presented by an RPL candidate or their referees.



## Principles of Assessment

Principle	Explanation
<b>Fairness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The individual learner's needs are considered in the assessment process.</li> <li>● Where appropriate, reasonable adjustments are applied by the RTO to take into account the individual learner's needs.</li> <li>● The RTO informs the learner about the assessment process, and provides the learner with the opportunity to challenge the result of the assessment and be reassessed if necessary.</li> </ul>
<b>Flexibility</b>	<p>Assessment is flexible to the individual learner by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● reflecting the learner's needs</li> <li>● assessing competencies held by the learner no matter how or where they have been acquired</li> <li>● drawing from a range of assessment methods and using those that are appropriate to the context the unit of competency and associated assessment requirements, and the individual.</li> </ul>
<b>Validity</b>	<p>Any assessment decision of the RTO is justified, based on the evidence of performance of the individual learner.</p> <p>Validity requires:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● assessment against the unit/s of competency and the associated assessment requirements covers the broad range of skills and knowledge that are essential to competent performance</li> <li>● assessment of knowledge and skills is integrated with their practical application</li> <li>● assessment to be based on evidence that demonstrates that a learner could demonstrate these skills and knowledge in other similar situations</li> <li>● judgement of competence is based on evidence of learner performance that is aligned to the unit/s of competency and associated assessment requirements.</li> </ul>
<b>Reliability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Evidence presented for assessment is consistently interpreted and assessment results are comparable irrespective of the assessor conducting the assessment.</li> </ul>

Source: Standards for Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) 2015, Commonwealth of Australia

## Qualification

A qualification is an academic or vocational educational award of a specified standard defined by the AQF, that is endorsed in a training package or accredited in a VET accredited course. A qualification descriptor includes the following important information:

- modification history
- description
- entry requirements
- packaging rules listing core and elective units of competency
- mapping information
- links to companion volumes.

## Recognition of Current Competency (RCC)

Recognition of current competency (RCC) applies if an individual has previously successfully completed the requirements for a unit of competency and is reassessed to ensure that the competence is maintained.



## Rules of Evidence

Rule	Explanation
<b>Validity</b>	The assessor is assured that the learner has the skills, knowledge and attributes as described in the module or unit of competency and associated assessment requirements.
<b>Sufficiency</b>	The assessor is assured that the quality, quantity and relevance of the assessment evidence enables a judgement to be made of a learner's competency.
<b>Authenticity</b>	The assessor is assured that the evidence presented for assessment is the learner's own work.
<b>Currency</b>	The assessor is assured that the assessment evidence demonstrates current competency. This requires the assessment evidence to be from the present or the very recent past.

Source: Standards for Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) 2015, Commonwealth of Australia

## Training Packages

A Training Package is a set of documents that are developed and endorsed in accordance with the Standards for Training Packages. The endorsed components form part of the requirements that an RTO must meet under these Standards. The endorsed components of a Training Package are:

- units of competency
- assessment requirements (associated with each unit of competency)
- qualifications
- credit arrangements.

A training package also consists of a non-endorsed, quality assured companion volume which contains industry advice to RTOs on different aspects of implementation including assessment methods, assessment conditions, evidence advice and assessment validation for the training package.

## Unit of Competency

A unit of competency means the specification of the standards of performance required in the workplace as defined in a training package. Units of competency have been split into two documents:

- unit descriptor
- assessment requirements.

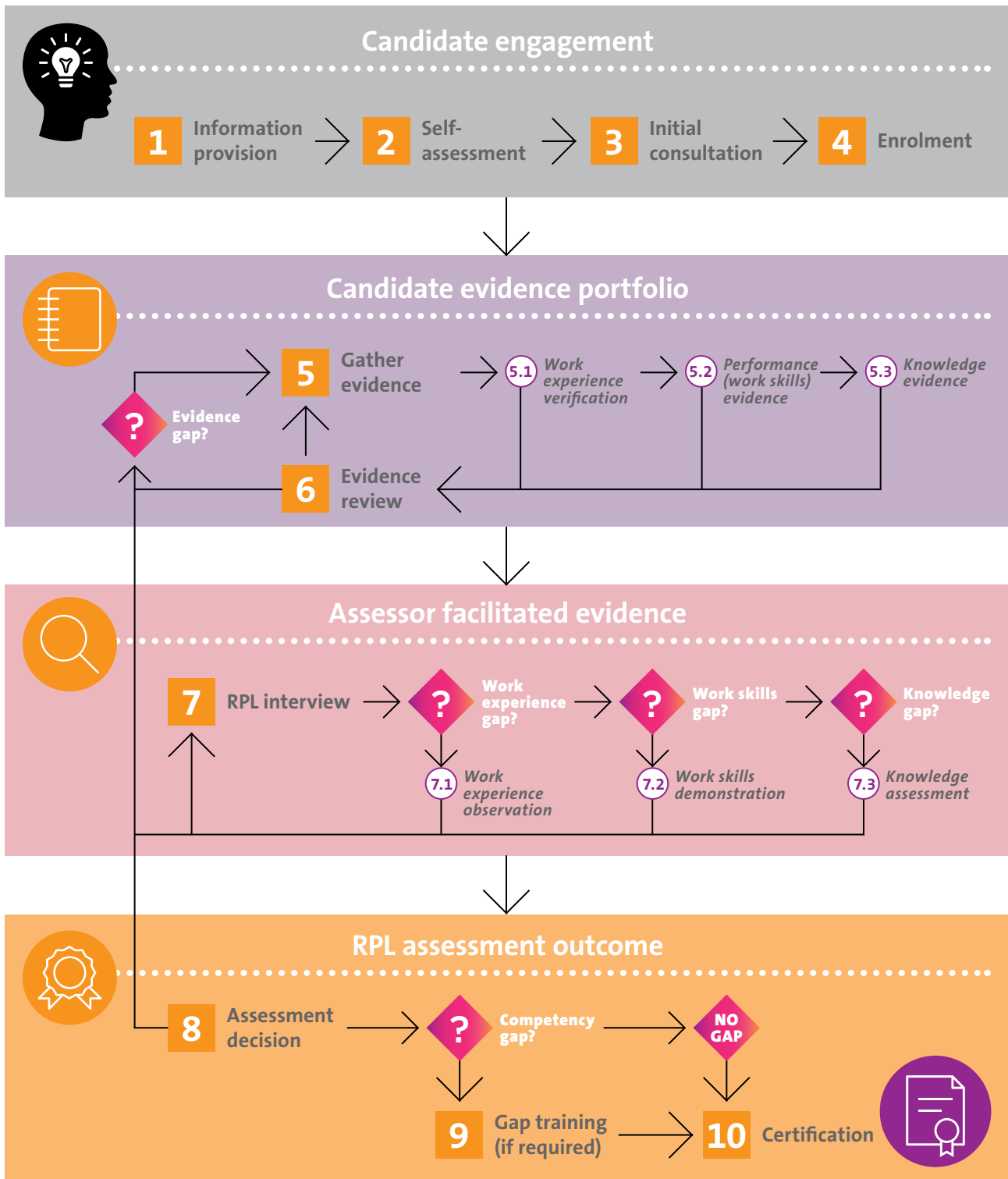
The Assessment Requirements document specifies the required:

- performance evidence
- knowledge evidence
- assessment conditions.



# Generic RPL process

The most effective and efficient RPL processes and systems will make RPL easy for candidates to access and navigate, and provide the candidate with sufficient and appropriate RTO support. All RTOs are required to have their own RPL process and each may undertake RPL differently. A generic RPL process is outlined below which summarises the key steps.





## Candidate engagement



### 1 Information provision

Most RTOs provide RPL Information Kits and potential RPL candidates often enquire about RPL before enrolment. Appropriate information about RPL for potential candidates includes details about:

- the benefits, eligibility and requirements for RPL
- the RPL process including costs, time and resources involved;
- how to apply for RPL
- RPL Self-Assessment and any information required for the Initial Consultation
- contact details for further information.

An RPL Information Kit is not an RPL Evidence Guide, which is normally provided after enrolment.

### 2 Self-assessment

An RPL candidate will usually want to know whether or not they may be eligible for RPL assessment and what outcomes they are likely to obtain from an RPL assessment. This can be achieved through an early-stage diagnostic activity that asks the candidate to self-assess themselves against criteria that are specific to each unit of competency, performance evidence and knowledge evidence for the qualification being sought by the candidate. This also includes information about unit selection, available RPL evidence, related work history and referees.

The information gained from the self-assessment will help the candidate to gain an insight into their readiness for RPL and whether RPL is right for them before they decide to participate in the Initial Consultation.

### 3 Initial consultation

Prior to the initial consultation, the RPL candidate will need to complete their self-assessment and gather some associated information such as a resume or work history, any records of formal training and certain personal details.

The initial consultation allows the RTO to establish a relationship with the candidate and help prepare them for the RPL process. The RTO will review the candidate's self-assessment and associated information then discuss the candidate's readiness for RPL. At this stage both the candidate and the RTO are confident that RPL is an appropriate pathway for the candidate to obtain their desired qualification outcome.

It is also possible that the initial consultation may result in a decision that the candidate is not ready for RPL and that they should pursue the training and assessment pathway.

The initial consultation also allows the RTO to prepare an RPL plan with the candidate that:

- confirms whether the desired qualification outcome is a reasonable fit with the candidate’s experience
- confirms which units of competency may be granted credit transfer from their training records
- identifies which units of competency best match the candidate’s experience and available evidence
- selects which units of competency will be assessed to achieve their desired qualification outcome
- determines any eligibility criteria for enrolment (such as personal identity, government funding, etc.)
- identifies any possible need for additional assessor facilitated evidence requirements
- provides an indication of the total cost and any additional fees that may be payable by the candidate.

## 4 Enrolment

If the RPL candidate decides to proceed with their application for RPL, they will need to complete the RTOs enrolment application process.

Once completed, the RTO should provide the RPL candidate with the relevant RPL Evidence Portfolio Guide for units of competency that were selected in their RPL Plan to achieve their desired qualification outcome.

## Candidate RPL evidence portfolio

## 5 Gather evidence

The RPL candidate gathers and submits a portfolio of RPL evidence for each and every unit of competency. The RPL Evidence Portfolio Guide should assist, inform and advise the RPL candidate about what type of evidence to gather and submit. The RPL evidence portfolio collates evidence of work experience, skills evidence and knowledge evidence aligned to the unit of competency assessment requirements.

### 5.1 Work experience verification

Work experience verification outlines the candidate’s history of employment and volunteer activities that provide an indication of a candidate’s current industry skills. It helps primarily to verify the nature and scope of the candidates’ acquired vocational competencies and abilities. It includes details and achievements of previous job roles and identifies referees who may provide 3rd party reports. Work experience evidence may be supported by resume, copies of position descriptions and written references.



**5.2 Performance (work skills) evidence**

Performance evidence provides samples of the candidate’s work skills and aims to demonstrate what a candidate can do. Because of this, skills evidence may be difficult to gather in a documented format and may require secondary or indirect supporting evidence.

**5.3 Knowledge evidence**

Knowledge evidence underpins the candidate’s ability to perform work skills and demonstrate competency. It is the candidate’s ability to define the body of knowledge that needs to be understood for a competency to be performed. It can usually be satisfied through a question and answer approach. Knowledge evidence may also be addressed through the context of the work experience evidence and performance evidence already provided by the candidate. A candidate’s responses to knowledge evidence requirements may address a number of requirements that may be common to a number of units of competency.

**6 Evidence review**

The RPL candidate’s evidence portfolio is submitted to the RTO for review and verification. Verification will consider the nature of the evidence submitted and the extent to which the relevant criteria are satisfied.

The assessor may request further evidence if the candidate has not been able to adequately satisfy assessment requirements. In particular, the assessor may also seek an RPL interview with the candidate to confirm aspects of evidence and discuss the evidence outcomes.

**Assessor facilitated evidence**

Assessor facilitated evidence is evidence that is facilitated and gathered by the assessor that will contribute to the candidate’s RPL evidence portfolio. Assessor facilitator evidence must be recorded if it is to become valid and authentic RPL evidence.

**7 RPL interview**

The RPL interview is a conversation between the RPL candidate and the assessor to seek out corroborating evidence to verify and support the submitted evidence. For example, this conversation may be used to check dates, ask for examples and descriptions of tasks performed, discuss aspects of the nature and scope of work responsibilities and achievements, and so on. The RPL interview may also support the gathering of knowledge evidence through the use of oral questioning.

If there are any gaps in RPL evidence, now is the time to discuss these with the RPL candidate and to request further available evidence, or to arrange for other assessor facilitated evidence gathering.



**7.1 Work experience observation**

A work observation assessment may be needed where specific evidence supporting work experience verification is unavailable or incomplete. Work observation is only possible where the RPL candidate is currently employed in the relevant field and able to be observed, by an assessor, performing the unverified performance criteria in the workplace.

**7.2 Work skills demonstration**

A work skills demonstration may be needed where specific performance evidence is unavailable or incomplete, or is not current or not able to be observed during work. This may take place in a training or simulated environment where the required work skills can be demonstrated to an assessor.

**7.3 Knowledge assessment**

A knowledge assessment may be needed where specific knowledge evidence is unavailable or incomplete. This may take the form of a question and answer style, written test or oral assessment.

**RPL assessment outcome**

**8 Assessment decision**

The assessor reviews the entire evidence portfolio that has been presented for assessment by the candidate and makes an holistic assessment decision using their professional judgement to determine whether an RPL outcome is granted for each unit of competence.

This process may involve the moderation and validation of RPL evidence. The assessor will identify whether there are any outstanding gaps in the candidates evidence portfolio and may recommend further assessment or learning pathways to complete their desired qualification outcome.

**9 Gap training**

If further assessment is not appropriate the RTO may offer training in the competencies where a gap in their RPL evidence exists.

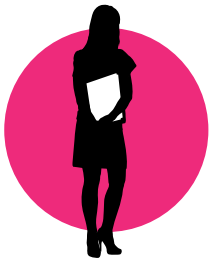
**10 Certification**

The RTO awards any credit transfer and RPL outcomes successfully achieved by the candidate and issues the candidate with a statement of attainment and, if applicable, a certificate of qualification.



# Roles in the RPL process

The RPL process involves a number of roles that perform different tasks.



## RPL CANDIDATE

An RPL candidate is an RTO's customer or client, an individual who participates in the RPL assessment process. RPL candidates are individuals who have knowledge, skills and experience but do not have the matching certificate or qualification that provides proof of their competencies. Typically this includes individuals wanting recognition who are either:

- applying for a job with a new employer
- seeking a promotion with an existing employer
- changing their career or transitioning between industries
- pursuing further or higher studies
- needing to update their professional or licensing credentials

Candidates may come from many walks of life and at many stages of life. As with all adult learners, RPL candidates may bring many external influences into the assessment. Past experiences with education, workplace grievances, gender bias, current relationship status, language, literacy and numeracy skills, social status, self-belief, will all impact on a candidate's ability to uncover and assemble evidence.

Candidates are likely to be seeking the opportunity to upgrade their qualifications, gain an initial qualification to allow entry to a higher-level course or reduce the time to complete a qualification through partial RPL. Candidates should be able to access information about the RPL process with ease, be able to easily contact the RTO and be guided and supported throughout the RPL process.



## REFEREE/S

The RPL candidate will be asked to provide one or more referee(s) with whom they have worked in their most recent employment or volunteering positions, and who is/are familiar with the nature and details of their work experiences and their work performance. Ideally this will be a work supervisor or manager, or possibly a professional or trades colleague who holds

relevant vocational competencies. The Referee must be able to provide responses that verify an RPL candidate's work experience relevant to the candidate's selected units for which they have experience. The referee may also provide additional evidence as a third party report that confirms further details about the candidate's relevant vocational competencies.



The coordinator, facilitator and reviewer roles may be performed by one or more people depending on how the RTO chooses to manage their RPL process.





**RPL COORDINATOR**

The RPL Coordinator is the first and last point of contact between the candidate and the RTO. They are responsible for candidate engagement, providing end to end continuity for the RPL candidate. This role conducts the overarching administration tasks and coordinates one or more qualifications for an RTO, assigning other roles to work with candidates

throughout the RPL assessment process, as required, and ensuring that progress is maintained in a timely and professional manner. In larger RTOs, there may be more than one person undertaking this role depending on the number of Training Package qualifications or site locations that they manage.



**RPL FACILITATOR**

The Facilitator is a qualified assessor who responds to and advises the RPL candidate throughout the RPL evidence gathering process. They determine whether the candidate’s RPL evidence aligns with the required criteria and is satisfactory.

The Facilitator will review and verify the RPL candidate’s RPL evidence portfolio, conduct the RPL interview and any other assessor facilitated evidence gathering before making a recommendation for the candidate’s RPL outcome. They do not review, validate or “sign-off” on the RPL outcome.



**RPL REVIEWER**

The Reviewer is a qualified assessor who holds current industry skills and provides final assessment validation of a candidate’s completed RPL Evidence Portfolio on behalf of the RTO. The Reviewer may be, but does not need to be, the same person as the Facilitator.

These roles are not intended to determine or reflect any particular individual positions within an RTO. The coordinator, facilitator and reviewer roles may be performed by one or more people depending on how the RTO chooses to manage their RPL process. Regardless of an RTO’s structure, these roles play a part in any RPL process.



# Professional RPL practice

## Using technology to take RPL online

New technologies and recent changes to regulations are driving changes in the way the RPL process is managed by RTOs. The ability to capture evidence using technology and the ability to store and transmit evidence through the use of the internet is opening possibilities for:

- better collation and submission of evidence
- improved ability to demonstrate alignment of evidence to assessment requirements
- easier access for face to face interviewing over long distances
- ease of compliance management
- reduction of assessor time and travel.

With many RTOs and businesses rapidly adopting eLearning, using internet and electronic technologies, the collection of workplace evidence becomes easier and can be more secure.

Original arguments against assessment being performed online was the argument that verification of the assessment evidence would be hard to determine. This has largely been overcome by the use of student declarations, automated plagiarism detection, and in the case of RPL, the use of corroborating evidence, mapped across a number of performance and knowledge areas.

## Understanding RPL evidence

The RPL assessment process uses various forms of evidence to establish a candidate's competency. Such evidence needs to meet the rules of evidence, that is, the evidence provided must be valid, sufficient, authentic and current.

Currency is generally recognised as within the last 5 years and may need to be within the last 2 years for critical skills or licensing purposes. The Standards for RTOs 2015 state that the evidence for competency, needs to be from the present or the very recent past. For RPL purposes, 'very recent past' is usually accepted as being within 2 -5 years, depending on the skill or knowledge base, and any legislation or licensing that might affect the competency being assessed.

Traditionally it is generally recommended that RPL assessment criteria should be supported by a minimum of two pieces of evidence. However, it is not evidence itself that demonstrates competency, rather it is what the evidence contains and conveys about the competency demonstrated by the RPL candidate.

It is essential for an RPL Practitioner to be very familiar with the:

1. current industry skills for the competency being assessed
2. unit of competency assessment requirements
3. types of evidence that may be used to demonstrate competency.



With many RTOs and businesses rapidly adopting eLearning, using internet and electronic technologies, the collection of workplace evidence becomes easier and can be more secure.



## DIRECT AND INDIRECT EVIDENCE

RPL evidence may be either direct (or primary), or indirect (or secondary).

**Direct (or Primary Source) Evidence** is evidence that is original and that has not been filtered through interpretation or modified. It is a factual sample and represents something real that is unchanged. Common examples of direct or primary evidence include work samples, recordings, records, artifacts, or any original documents (i.e. birth certificate, will, marriage license, academic transcript.)

**Indirect (or Secondary Source) Evidence** is evidence that is an account written after the fact with the benefit of hindsight. It is an interpretation, a commentary or evaluation of direct or primary evidence. It is often an unverified personal account of history or events that is less reliable than direct evidence. Common examples of indirect or secondary evidence include a resume or written reference.

Direct evidence, when relevant and verified, generally carries more value than indirect evidence when establishing the facts about a matter. However, in the absence of direct evidence, which is often the case with RPL evidence, a corroborating mixture of verified indirect evidence may be sufficient to come to a reasonable conclusion about the facts or set of assumptions that determine competency. This is the exercise of professional judgment by an RPL assessor.



### Direct and indirect evidence

“Evidence can be messy. Because it is a mental construct, it rarely gives us the clear and simple answers that we seek. Sources, by contrast, are physical; we can touch them, see them, smell them, and hear them. Information is also physical, visible and audible. Evidence, however, is intangible. It’s only what we think certain information means. That’s all it can be—until we make something concrete from it by processing it into a meaningful and convincing form.

Creating substance from the evidence we perceive, but others may not, requires us to understand the nature of evidence. At its core, evidence comes in three basic types: direct, indirect, and negative—the latter two being sometimes lumped together under the catchall label circumstantial. All three basic types can be used alone or in combination to provide ‘proof’ of any criteria of assessment.

**Primary or Direct Evidence:** As the name implies, direct evidence is information that directly relates to the criteria at hand. It’s not merely something relevant. It plainly offers evidence relating directly to specific criteria, though it may not be complete or completely accurate.

**Secondary or Indirect (or Corroborating) Evidence:** Much of the information put forward as evidence may not be explicitly related to the criteria as defined, yet it can seem potentially relevant—especially if we are thoughtful and watch for patterns and parallels within all



evidence provided. This Indirect Evidence might support or corroborate direct evidence. It might weaken the Direct Evidence we want to believe. It might seem tangential although we can't yet say how. Whatever role it plays, it carries no weight until and unless we combine it with other evidence to arrive at an answer or construct an argument for our conclusion.”

Elizabeth Shown Mills, “Quick Lesson 13: Classes of Evidence—Direct, Indirect & Negative,” *Evidence Explained: Historical Analysis, Citation & Source Usage*

**TYPES OF EVIDENCE**

RPL evidence most often refers to documentary or electronic evidence, which may include:

- personal information
- workplace information
- information from a third party.

The following table lists some of the types of evidence that are typically presented as RPL evidence.

Evidence Type	Personal Information	Workplace Information	3rd Party Information
<b>Direct or Primary</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Certificates/ Qualifications</li> <li>● Licenses/ Tickets</li> <li>● Statements of Attainment</li> <li>● Schedules, rosters or payslips</li> <li>● Workplace or industry awards, prizes, certificates</li> <li>● Professional or trade memberships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● A portfolio of workplace documents that the candidate works with or developed themselves</li> <li>● Samples of work, project or workplace records and forms</li> <li>● Photographs or videos of candidate work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Verified references from supervisors/ peers/ previous employers</li> </ul> <p>Assessor facilitated evidence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Record of RPL Interview</li> <li>● Work Observation Record</li> <li>● Work Skills Demonstration Record</li> <li>● Knowledge Challenge Assessment</li> </ul>
<b>Indirect or Secondary</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Resume, Curriculum Vitae</li> <li>● Job Position/ Description</li> <li>● Diary entries</li> <li>● Training diaries/ records</li> <li>● Performance appraisals/ reviews</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Memos, Faxes, Letters, Plans, Reports, Emails written</li> <li>● Organisational Procedures/ Policy/ Charts/ Checklists</li> <li>● Minutes of meetings</li> <li>● Completed job cards</li> <li>● Industry Standards used</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Written references or letters of verification or support</li> <li>● Witness testimonies or customer/ client feedback sheets/surveys</li> <li>● Published articles</li> </ul>



## Investigative methods & techniques

Professional RPL practitioners are faced with the challenging task of determining whether a candidate's RPL evidence portfolio satisfies the rules of evidence. An error in judgement may have negative consequences on both the candidate and the RTO. So it is often stated that assessors need to ask themselves, "Would this RPL evidence portfolio stand up in a Court of Law?" The use of investigative methods and techniques are therefore very useful for an assessor to follow when reaching an assessment decision.

*"The touchstone of admissibility is relevance. Evidence which is relevant is generally admissible, and evidence which is irrelevant is inadmissible."*

John Stratton SC

[www.criminallawssurvivalkit.com.au](http://www.criminallawssurvivalkit.com.au)

Taking an investigative approach, rather than a desktop audit approach means that the assessor needs to ask questions of the evidence presented. When a position description is submitted as part of the evidence, it needs to align with other workplace reports, as frequently work roles are quite different from the original position description. The assessor's role is to ask where the performance evidence is to support the position description. They need to query everything about the submitted evidence. How many times did the candidate perform that skill, is there evidence of independent work, what were the conditions that this candidate worked under, what was the level of responsibility that the candidate held, etc.

### VERIFYING EVIDENCE

RPL practitioners need to be aware of the potential for fraudulent or plagiarised evidence, including evidence that has no continuity (i.e. the source cannot be verified) or simply does not make sense.

When evidence is not verified as Valid (or relevant), Sufficient, Authentic and Current it does not satisfy the rules of evidence, and cannot be used as RPL evidence. The RPL practitioner needs to verify RPL evidence and be reasonably assured that that the evidence meets the rules of evidence.

There are many ways that evidence can be verified and it starts with having an effective RPL assessment instrument that asks the candidate for appropriate corroborating and supporting evidence.

Verification involves checking facts and sources including references, certificates and any other evidence with the person or organisations who issued them.

Personal declarations are a valuable tool to assist with the verification of RPL evidence, especially where the evidence is corroborated by other evidence.

Discussing and asking for corroborating or supporting evidence can be undertaken by the RPL assessor throughout the candidate's RPL evidence portfolio gathering process.

The RPL interview provides an opportunity to verify evidence by asking appropriate questions to corroborate submitted evidence and also to address any evidence gaps which can be recorded in the assessor's record of evidence.



So it is often stated that assessors need to ask themselves, "Would this RPL evidence portfolio stand up in a Court of Law?"



## DEDUCTIVE REASONING – JOINING THE DOTS

Deductive reasoning is an important skill for an RPL practitioner to use when verifying and corroborating evidence. Sometimes an assessor needs to be able to “join the dots” between pieces of evidence.

Deductive reasoning is a logical process in which a conclusion is based on information and facts that are generally known to be true. Deductive reasoning is sometimes referred to as top-down logic and works from the general to the specific. This evidence-based approach is essential to effective RPL assessment practices.

Its counterpart, inductive reasoning, is sometimes referred to as bottom-up logic, and works from the specific to the general. Caution must be exercised when reaching judgements in this manner without supporting facts or evidence.



### Lack of evidence

There are times when a lack of evidence tells it’s own story, for example the following excerpt in which Elizabeth Mills describes the lack of evidence in a Sherlock Holmes case:

“Sherlock Holmes famously spoke of ‘the sound of the dog not barking.’ Nothing could more graphically define negative evidence. It’s the absence of what should happen under a given set of circumstances. A watchdog is expected to bark. If it doesn’t, then its very silence attests the likelihood of certain things.”

Elizabeth Shown Mills, “Quick Lesson 13: Classes of Evidence—Direct, Indirect & Negative,” *Evidence Explained: Historical Analysis, Citation & Source Usage*

This illustration of the use of Negative Evidence in the Sherlock Holmes story, about the lack of sound from the guard dog and the inference that something DID NOT occur when it was stated, could be disproved if it were found out that the dog was out for its evening walk at that time.

## PROCESS OF ELIMINATION – AN HOLISTIC APPROACH

When reviewing evidence, it is a formidable task to ensure that each assessment criteria is satisfied. This is the reason that the ‘desktop audit’ or atomistic style of RPL has developed. This is when the process of elimination becomes useful for both RPL candidates and facilitators to acknowledge that a criteria only needs to be satisfied once, even though it may be referred to on more than one occasion.

Additionally, it is also beneficial for evidence that satisfies more than one criteria to be acknowledged and to ensure that the same evidence does not need to be unnecessarily provided again and again. An RPL practitioner will understand how submitted evidence may apply to a number of assessment requirements which will make the evidence gathering process easier for the candidate.



Having a thorough understanding of the performance criteria and the critical evidence needed for a unit, allows the assessor to discard irrelevant evidence and identify the corroborating evidence across units of competency. Issues can arise by focussing only on assessment criteria when the workplace conditions may alter the approach to the work being assessed or the candidate's ability to demonstrate a particular skill.

However, an assessor can step back from the detail and look more holistically at the applicant's work history to make a valid judgement by cross checking against other supporting evidence. This may include consideration of the scale and scope of work performed, the likely transferability of skills and requirements from one role to another.

Using all of the reasoning and assessment skills available should allow the assessor to apply a holistic approach to the assessment decision. An holistic view acknowledges that skills are transferrable, that underpinning knowledge supports more than one skill and that skills may be demonstrated in different contexts. While the evidence may have been presented for one unit specifically, it may well support a number of other assessment criteria for other units throughout the qualification.

## RPL tips & pitfalls

### GROUP ASSESSMENT

Group assessments are often used as part of the learning and assessment pathway, allowing opportunity for practice and feedback. Group assessment is not recommended for RPL.

In a training program, group assessments are valuable as secondary or formative assessment evidence, rather than primary evidence of competence. That is, they may support the primary or summative assessment evidence, but are not valid on their own. To meet the rules of evidence, the RPL candidate must produce their own independent evidence about their knowledge, skills and experience.

### PARTIAL VS 100% RPL

Partial RPL happens when a candidate can satisfy some but not all of the assessment requirements for a unit of competency that may lead to their desired qualification outcome. Partial RPL does not provide the RPL candidate with a statement of attainment for that unit of competency, which has not been granted.

100% RPL happens when a candidate satisfies the assessment requirements for some or all the whole units of competency that lead to their desired qualification outcome. 100% RPL provides the RPL candidate with a statement of attainment for the units of competency awarded, and a certificate of qualification if the RPL candidate has met the training package requirements.

When applied correctly, RPL is able to pinpoint learning gaps which enable tailored or customised individual learning plans for gap training to be successfully completed. This requires a flexible delivery model by the RTO with an appropriately skilled VET practitioner. However, it is common practice for RTOs to only offer 100% RPL for whole unit(s) of competency with any gap training being completed as a new student for the entire unit(s) of competency for those that were not already attained through RPL.



To meet the rules of evidence, the RPL candidate must produce their own independent evidence about their knowledge, skills and experience.



Some believe that 100% RPL relates to granting an RPL candidate 100% of a qualification (i.e. all units of competency being assessed), which is acceptable if the RPL candidate has submitted satisfactory evidence. Some VET practitioners have a problem with this because they believe the outcomes from their RTO are superior to other RTOs and should to be earned through attending their training program. A colleague once described RPL as “giving away the farm” which clearly demonstrated to me how misunderstood RPL assessment can be.

An alternate view is that the RPL process adds value to an RTO’s offerings and is an opportunity to build relationships with clients and open the door to ongoing training opportunities.

### PERSONAL VALUES AND BIAS

Our own personal values and biases can create filters when we evaluate someone else’s performance. We all know the sorts of things we should be keeping an open mind about. Race or ethnicity, gender and age are common filters that we often unconsciously apply. An RPL candidate’s accent, use of language and cultural filters may create a real risk of potentially distorting our judgements in an environment where RPL assessments tend to focus heavily on submitted documents and an RPL interview.

So beware RPL practitioners, our previous history and experience with RPL candidates or learners, employers and the workplace can also unwittingly bias our judgement either for or against the RPL candidate.

### MAPPING ASSESSMENT EVIDENCE TO ASSESSMENT REQUIREMENTS

One major criticism of RPL and an example of poor RPL practice is the extent to which the task of mapping RPL evidence to the qualification and unit of competency assessment requirements is required to be done by the RPL candidate. This presents a significant barrier to RPL candidates who are not versed in, and cannot be expected to know or understand the potentially confusing language and inner workings of competency based assessment practices.

Poor RPL processes require candidates to establish their portfolios and often undertake the alignment of evidence and experience to the desired competencies, themselves.

*“Many registered training organisations (RTOs) are now realising that this methodology was both isolating and excessively demanding. In some cases, the language, literacy and analytical skills involved in these processes may have exceeded the knowledge and skill requirements of the modules/units being assessed or the AQF level of the qualification.”*

Recognition of Prior Learning: An assessment resource for VET practitioners [5th ed.] Department of Education and Training 2008 Perth, WA



We all know the sorts of things we should be keeping an open mind about. Race or ethnicity, gender and age are common filters that we often unconsciously apply.



## RPL candidate engagement

If an RPL candidate is going to have a positive experience and achieve a successful outcome, they need to be engaged effectively from the beginning to the end of the RPL process. As with a training program, every interaction with the RTO should aim to meet expectations and the RPL candidate should be empowered to pursue the RPL assessment pathway.

RPL CHECKLIST		
1.	Your RPL coordinator, facilitator and reviewer know your RPL processes and have a positive attitude towards RPL.	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.	You validate your RPL assessment instrument and map assessment requirements before it is provided to the RPL candidate.	<input type="checkbox"/>
3.	Your RPL facilitator and reviewer are familiar with all the unit of competency assessment requirements for the qualifications they are assessing.	<input type="checkbox"/>
4.	You have a dedicated point of contact for all RPL enquiries and throughout the RPL process.	<input type="checkbox"/>
5.	You have an RPL Information Kit that adequately informs the RPL candidate about RPL.	<input type="checkbox"/>
6.	The RPL candidate has a RPL facilitator who is easily available to provide direction, guidance and support.	<input type="checkbox"/>
7.	You maintain frequent contact with the RPL candidate throughout the RPL process.	<input type="checkbox"/>
8.	You follow up with RPL candidates who enquire but do not progress.	<input type="checkbox"/>
9.	You hold a pre-screening and candidate self-assessment discussion that helps the RPL candidate to select suitable units of competency, apply for credit transfer and prepare an RPL plan that they can realistically achieve.	<input type="checkbox"/>
10.	You make time to discuss the RPL candidates evidence portfolio and hold an RPL interview.	<input type="checkbox"/>
11.	You have moderation and validation mechanisms in place to ensure that the RPL candidate is not being under or over assessed, requiring too little or too much evidence.	<input type="checkbox"/>
12.	The RPL reviewer is prepared to grant RPL for a qualification (i.e. 100% RPL for 100% assessed units).	<input type="checkbox"/>
13.	You ask for independent and meaningful feedback on your RPL candidate's experience.	<input type="checkbox"/>
14.	You use technology to enhance the RPL process.	<input type="checkbox"/>



# References & resources

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