

Recognition of prior learning: opportunities and challenges for higher education

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Abstract

Purpose – Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is a process by which both formal learning for recognised awards, informal learning from experience and non-formal learning for uncertificated but planned learning is given academic recognition. The paper aims to discuss these issues.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper refers to international developments in RPL and then focuses upon the extensive and innovative use of RPL by Middlesex University and the developing RPL work at the Australian Institute of Business.

Findings – The Middlesex experience of recognition of learning from experience as part of the development of customised work-based learning programmes demonstrates the potential of RPL for business and management programmes.

Originality/value – The use of RPL for admission and/or credit in standard programmes enables individuals to have their work-based knowledge acknowledged as relevant, worthwhile and equivalent to learning obtained in the higher education classroom.

Keywords Higher education, Recognition of prior learning, Australian qualifications framework, Areas of learning

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is a process by which both formal learning for recognised awards, informal learning from experience and non-formal learning for uncertificated but planned learning (e.g. workshops/seminars that are uncertificated) is given academic recognition (Garnett *et al.*, 2004). Learning from experience includes knowledge and skills acquired in an unplanned way through life and often as a result of the learning demands of work (both paid and unpaid). The description of such learning as “prior” means that it has happened in the past and is often taken to mean prior to entry to a course of study towards a qualification. This paper refers international developments in RPL and then focuses upon the extensive and innovative use of RPL (especially learning from experience) by Middlesex University and the developing RPL work at the Australian Institute of Business (AIB) in order to highlight some of the key opportunities and challenges of RPL.



International developments in RPL

In Australia, RPL was introduced in 1992 as part of the national framework for the recognition of training. RPL was designed for vocational education and training at polytechnic and adult education colleges. Since then RPL has slowly become accepted for the purpose of any accredited education and training, including higher education.

It is only in the last few years that RPL has become clearly or widely adopted by the higher education industry in Australia, for two reasons. First, the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) has identified RPL as a pathway for admission and/or credit that must be available to all applicants into any qualification at any level. A second reason for RPL adoption in the Australian higher education sector is a government policy shift towards achieving higher levels of education among a wider proportion of the population. This means Australia now more strongly embraces the notion of lifelong learning with existing graduates encouraged to continue their education and enrol in further study while working. The policy change also means that higher education institutions are encouraged to offer multiple pathways into their undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, including enabling admission (and credit) for applicants from a wide range of backgrounds and with a wide range of prior learning.

In Europe, a wide range of RPL approaches have been developed within the European Union Bologna Process of lifelong and life-wide learning, some with the support of national policies and funding. To date, most RPL processes are for the purposes of entry with advanced standing to taught programmes (i.e. enabling access and exemption). The exception is France, which in 2002 legislated to allow for degrees to be awarded according to competence obtained either formally through taught programmes, and/or through professional activities and experience, thereby addressing the needs of professionally experienced adult learners who had lower levels of formal education than their younger counterparts. However, the requirements can be onerous; for instance, in order to gain a Master of Arts candidates need to submit a written application of typically 40-50,000 words. Nevertheless, RPL has been recognised as playing an important role in addressing issues relating to lifelong learning, employment and social inclusion (CEDEFOP, 2010). There is also increasing emphasis on the “rights” of individuals to have their learning recognised.

In England, the development of the recognition of learning from experience as part of RPL was stimulated by the pioneering work of the Learning from Experience Trust in the early 1980s (Garnett *et al.*, 2004). Many of the early developers of accreditation of learning from experience at higher education level benefitted from participation in Learning from Experience Trust study tours of the USA. A milestone in the acceptance of accreditation of learning from experience was achieved in 1986 when the Council for National Academic Awards, the body which until 1992 awarded degree qualifications in the polytechnic sector, published regulations for the accreditation of learning from experience for use in relation to its awards. The 1990s saw a favourable policy context for RPL as there was a focus on increasing participation in higher education and widening access. RPL, especially in relation to learning from experience, was seen as a valuable tool to widen access by recognising the achievements of mature students and providing an alternative basis for entry to higher education. In 1996, the South East England Consortia of higher education institutions produced a code of practice for accreditation of prior experiential learning which was endorsed by 37 higher education institutions. In 2005, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) that oversees standards in higher education produced RPL guidelines.

In the wider UK, the recognition of learning from experience has been seen as an important way of recognising lifelong learning and enhancing social inclusion by providing access to academic and vocational qualifications for those who might otherwise be excluded

by lack of formal qualifications or the demands of work (Mumford and Roodhouse, 2010). The importance of recognising the workplace as a site for learning grew in significance during the 1990s as the Government saw the economic imperative to up-skill the UK workforce. In the context of current debates about the role of education it is equally important that valuing the learning from experience of the individual learner is a sound starting point from an educational point of view (Osborne *et al.*, 1998). This RPL fits well with aspirations of learner autonomy and the high-level cognitive skills of analysis, synthesis and evaluation that are typically associated with high-level learning. The recognition of learning, wherever it has occurred and provided it can be demonstrated, fits well with the academic awarding function and expertise of higher education. Increasingly, what makes universities unique is not teaching or research but their function of formally recognising learning achievement.

The report of the UK Universities Vocational Awards Council on RPL (Garnett *et al.*, 2004) highlighted that while RPL in the UK had more than a 20-year history and was espoused by over 90 higher education institutions, only an average of 100 students gained RPL in each higher education institution. Similarly, while RPL was embedded within the system of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) which allowed for full awards to be made on the basis of RPL, the take-up rate was modest. The report highlighted a number of limitations to the take up of RPL. Even institutions that reported that they offered RPL acknowledged that the opportunity to do so was not always highlighted to applicants. There was also concern that the expertise of advising on and assessing RPL claims was often concentrated in only a few members of staff. Some institutions were concerned that RPL was very labour-intensive and so was not cost effective for the institution. Despite the longstanding nature of RPL practice, some institutions also reported lingering doubts about the reliability and validity of RPL assessment and concern about the quality of the learning assessed. A combination of these factors led to instances where both staff and students felt it was in fact easier to take the full course rather than seek to gain entry on the basis of RPL!

RPL: the case of Middlesex University in the UK

Middlesex University is one of the largest higher education institutions in the UK and maintains a strong focus on professional education developed as Middlesex Polytechnic. Middlesex University recognises that learning occurs throughout life, especially through active participation in training courses, continuing professional development (CPD) activities and in the workplace. Learning also occurs in non-employment situations such as the home and voluntary work. The outcome of this learning may be acquisition of skills and/or knowledge that is comparable to learning gained from taught courses offered by Middlesex University and other institutions of higher education. Such learning has been recognised by (some) professional bodies and, implicitly, in terms of career progression by industrial, commercial, public sector and voluntary organisations.

Middlesex believes that these kinds of learning should be accredited to provide:

- (1) motivation for and recognition of CPD education and training;
- (2) a means of ensuring greater equality of opportunity and practice in career progression;
- (3) a means for widening and deepening access to its programmes of study; and
- (4) to ensure that students entering higher education are awarded credit for previous learning achievements so that they are enrolled in programmes of study with advanced standing.

Such accreditation gives students opportunities to negotiate a programme of study building upon their achievements and meeting their needs (Osborne *et al.*, 1998).

Accordingly, it is the policy of Middlesex University to actively promote the accreditation of learning however and whenever it occurs including through: short courses, prior learning, experiential learning, work-based learning (WBL) and other forms of continuing education and CPD.

In order to translate this policy into reality, Middlesex developed and approved regulations for the accreditation of learning from experience in 1991 and established quality assurance principles and procedures to enable this work to be conducted within the mainstream quality assurance framework of the University. These procedures covered: supporting the development of an accreditation claim, assessing the claim, and awarding and recording the academic credit that might result from a claim. These procedures are important because the Middlesex accreditation quality assurance principles start from the premise that the University is responsible for all academic credit awarded in its name and thus all learning for which credit is awarded must be assessed with equal rigour. In the case of accreditation of prior learning from experience, this premise means that credit is only awarded on the basis of demonstrable learning achievement and not on the assumption of learning due to undertaking a particular job for a particular period of time. Comparability of rigour of assessment also means that the same process of internal moderation and external examiner scrutiny which applies to the assessment of university-taught courses must also be applied to the assessment of claims based upon learning from experience. The University was willing to award “specific credit” where there was a direct match between the learning evidenced and the learning outcomes of specific modules or programme years, and to award “general” credit where no specific match was made but the learning was at higher education level.

The following general principles apply to all claims for RPL:

- (1) appropriate description of the learning claimed and supporting evidence must be provided by the claimant;
- (2) claimants for uncertificated learning will have access to a university adviser (normally by taking an appropriate modules) but retain full responsibility for the claim they submit;
- (3) assessment of previously unaccredited learning will be by (an) appropriate expert(s), will be subject to moderation and will be considered by the appropriate Accreditation Board;
- (4) general or specific credit for certificated learning for which established equivalence can be determined by reference to national or international reference points (e.g. National Academic Recognition Centres) cannot be accredited at a higher level or with a greater number of credit points;
- (5) specific credit for learning cannot be awarded at a higher level or with a greater number of credit points than the general credit rating of the same learning;
- (6) all credit awarded will be certificated. In the case of general credit a Certificate of Credit will be awarded. All credit used for an award bearing programme will be recorded as part of a student transcript; and
- (7) claimants may appeal against the decisions of the Accreditation Board in accordance with the University Appeal Regulations.

The accreditation work of the University is managed by the Middlesex University Accreditation Services, part of the Institute for Work Based Learning (WBL). The University Quality Assurance Committee approves the university accreditation procedures and receives an annual report on the work of the Accreditation Services. Accreditation proposals follow a standard university format and assessor recommendations are considered by the University Accreditation Board that is responsible for agreeing credit rating of the accredited activity and the award of credit to individuals. The external examiner to the University Accreditation Board has oversight of the process by which credit is assigned to accredited activity and subsequently to individuals on accredited activity. Activity accredited at UK Level 5 or above will be aligned to an external examiner appointed to a University programme or appointed specifically to examine work from one or more accredited activities. Accredited activities seeking the award of Middlesex credit to individual participants will enter into a memorandum of co-operation with the University and be allocated a University Accreditation Link Tutor. The Link Tutor is involved in the assessment process and in the production of an annual monitoring report.

The main use of accreditation of prior learning from experience at Middlesex University is as part of a negotiated programme of Work Based Learning (WBL) (Garnett *et al.*, 2009). WBL is learning that is through, at and for work. Middlesex pioneered the development of WBL at higher education level in the early 1990s and won a Queens Prize for "Excellence and Innovation" in this area in 1996. Further development of WBL has been commended by QAA audits in 2003 and 2009. The success of the Middlesex approach has resulted in the award of a centre for excellence in teaching and learning to Middlesex in the field of WBL. The University established the Institute for WBL in 2007 to strategically develop WBL as a resource for the whole University and in 2009 received an £8million award from the Strategic Development Fund of the Higher Education funding Council for England to develop work aimed at employer engagement.

The Middlesex approach to WBL (irrespective of the level of programme) focuses on four key stages:

- (1) The common starting point for most WBL programmes is a forward focused review to establish what relevant knowledge/skills the individual brings to the programme (this can lead to formal accreditation via RPL). The Middlesex focus on the facilitation of learning review leading to general credit has moved the traditional RPL process from its limitation of only recognising learning that closely matches existing validated programmes (Garnett, 1998). This is highly significant as it provides for fuller recognition of the learning achievement of learning (from experience or taught) which is external to the University and hence leads to enhanced customisation of higher education programmes.
- (2) After the individualised starting point for the higher education programme has been established, a planning stage takes into account stakeholder interests and requirements as well as resources (e.g. of time, information, materials) (Garnett, 2000) to produce a customised programme. This programme demonstrates coherence and progression from learning identified and certified by the RPL to a work-based programme designed to not only meet the academic requirements of the University and also to be of value to an employer or client.
- (3) A key input from the University into such a work-based programme is to equip the work-based learner with appropriate research and development skills to undertake real life projects that are focused on knowledge creation and use.

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- (4) The work-based projects are often the focal point of the work-based programme and have the potential to impact upon the workplace by making the case for or bringing about change (Garnett, 2005).

The case of “Ben” from a major construction management company illustrates the role of recognition of prior experiential learning in the customised WBL provision of Middlesex University. Ben was referred to the University by his employer; while he was recognised as the company expert on project management of design and build contracts, the company was unclear what he actually knew and was able to do. The challenge for the accreditation of prior experiential learning was to draw out what Ben knew and not restrict this process by seeking only a very close matching exercise with existing University subject-based modules. Ben worked with a university adviser to put together a RPL portfolio following a standard Middlesex University format. The RPL portfolio includes a curriculum vitae (resume) extended to focus upon key learning episodes (e.g. the first time Ben managed a project outside the UK) and a current job description that focused on the knowledge and skill requirements to perform the job. These documents served as the basis for advising on the development of his claim, helped to focus him on differentiating between describing the experience and identifying the learning from experience, and served to put the accreditation claim in context for the assessor.

The heart of a portfolio is a number of claimant-defined “Areas of Learning”. For each area, the claimant will identify a title and explain how they acquired knowledge and skills in the area (often this will be a combination of short training courses and learning through carrying out a work role). The claimant is required to clearly identify what it is that they know and are able to do (i.e. their claim for knowledge and skills) and, crucially, to provide evidence for this claim to learning achievement. Ben claimed for learning achievement in areas of learning relating to commercial awareness, design and build contracting and project management (including knowledge of legal procedure, management of resources and management of people) and was able to draw upon a range of evidence including tender documents, project plans, reports to clients and photographic evidence supported by explanatory text and line manager statement.

As a result of the RPL process, Ben was awarded academic credit at postgraduate level. Upon this basis the University gave Ben the opportunity to negotiate a work-based programme of study at Masters level. The Middlesex University WBL Framework allowed Ben to build upon the learning from experience and achieve a customised Masters in WBL Studies (Construction Management) following the successful completion of modules in programme planning, work-based research and developments methods, and a major project. The project resulted in the creation of a handbook for project managers engaged in design and build projects that was taken into use across the organisation. Without the combination of RPL and negotiated WBL Middlesex University would not have been able to contribute to Ben’s CPD nor would Ben have had the opportunity to gain a Masters qualification. The University has extended this approach to qualifications at undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral level.

RPL: the case of the AIB

Could the lessons of Middlesex University be transferred to a higher education institution in Australia? AIB is one of the most established private higher education institutions in

Australia. AIB offers the full suite of business degrees from Bachelor level to doctorate (Master of Management, Doctor of Business Administration and PhD). The mission of AIB reflects the philosophy of its owners: to be a practical business school offering work-applied degrees. The work-applied learning approach is embedded into all courses offered at AIB. The reason for the work-applied approach is its impact on the performance of managers working with real problems and seeking to produce real solutions for their organisation. With a large proportion of practising managers among AIB's student cohort, the impact of the work-applied learning approach for the students is noticeable and immediate (Abraham, 2012).

With a clear interest in practising managers and recognising the value of work-applied and work-based learning, AIB has always had admission policies that provide pathways and opportunities for applicants without formal qualifications to step into AIB study. In AIB's early days it was unusual for a higher education provider to offer admission to applicants without formal qualifications and which was based on the applicants prior work experience. AIB has always believed strongly in prior work experience as an important indicator of ability and recognised that valuable knowledge and skills are gained from work experience. As an Australian private provider, AIB has to comply with strict government regulations and has always had to strongly and clearly justify its practices, including AIB's admission criteria. The Australian regulatory bodies have agreed many times that AIB's admission policies are appropriate, comply with regulation and have academic integrity. Like other higher education institutions in Australia, AIB has recently started to pay increased attention to formalising RPL and to applying RPL concepts to admission into AIB courses and to advanced standing by awarding credit for subjects within AIB courses. The pressure to become more knowledgeable about RPL and to develop strong policies, procedures and processes to assess RPL comes from two directions.

First, AIB's students (who usually are practicing managers) are becoming increasingly aware of the availability of RPL as a way of obtaining credit. Hence, more students are asking for credit based on experience in the workplace, roles or positions they have held, work-based courses and training they have attended, etc. Recent AIB experiences of assessing such student requests have shown that it can be tricky to make appropriate assessments on the basis of a wide range of evidence provided by RPL applicants. This experience has highlighted the need for AIB to develop a comprehensive suite of RPL resources, including detailed procedures, guidelines for students and staff, templates and forms.

Second, the AQF formally released a "Qualifications Pathways Policy" in 2013 that requires all Australian higher education institutions to make RPL widely available by 1 January 2015 (AQF, 2013, p. 103). AQF makes the higher education institution responsible for offering RPL assessment to students and requires institutions to have appropriate policies and practices in place to ensure an appropriate and consistent approach to granting RPL. While the policy may appear to open the door to "lower standards" and to "provide easy entry" into higher education qualifications, on closer examination this is clearly not the case. AQF specifically recognises the importance of institutions granting RPL in such a way that students meet institution qualification outcomes and that institutions maintain the integrity of their qualifications. In order to maintain academic integrity while also making RPL widely available (for gaining admission as well as for obtaining credit), Australian higher education institutions (including AIB) have to develop clearly articulated policies, procedures and practices for RPL.

Applying RPL for organisational as well as individual development

In this age of the “knowledge economy”, the belief is widely expressed that organisations are only as good as their people. The concept of intellectual capital (Stewart, 1997) singles out knowledge and skills as an organisation’s primary assets. Individual knowledge forms the basis for communication of information to others who will then make sense of it in the light of their own personal knowledge. For individual knowledge to become organisational knowledge and thus fully contribute to the intellectual capital of the organisation, it must be shared and accepted by others. This may be problematic as individual knowledge is often unrecognised not only by the organisation but often by the individual holding the knowledge. In these cases, the knowledge is “tacit” and its use within the organisation is limited. It follows that a key concern for organisations must be facilitation of the recognition of knowledge, that is, making tacit knowledge explicit so that it can be shared within the organisation. In other words, does the organisation know how good its people are and take full advantage of their knowledge and skills? And can the organisation make its people even better?

Higher education institutions have expertise in developing the reflective practice of students as part of higher education courses, especially those requiring periods of professional practice (e.g. education, health) and programmes specifically designed for adults in WBL programmes. Reflection is central to the RPL process that is actually structured reflection upon experience to identify, describe and evidence learning achievement relevant to a particular course. This form of reflective practice has been developed over a 20-year period but its application has been largely limited to determining admission with advanced standing to prescribed university courses. The focus of university-facilitated reflection has thus traditionally been the requirements of the specific university course for which entry is sought.

The key to facilitating a successful RPL claim is to enable the claimant to reflect upon their experience in order to identify and evidence-related learning. Donald Schon highlighted the value of reflective practice in the early 1980s and this has been reasserted by an international team of writers considering the concept of “productive reflection at work” (Boud *et al.*, 2006). Coghlan and Brannick (2001, p. 31) describe reflection as:

[...] the process of stepping back from experience to process what experience means, with a view to planning further action [...] it is the key to learning as it enables you to develop an ability to uncover and make explicit to yourself what you have planned, discovered and achieved in practice.

A key to this reflection is the notion of standing back from experience to derive meaning with a view to informing future action. Two vital parts of self-reflection are the ability to critique your own thought processes and to take into account your feelings, for example, the role of inference and distortions of reality.

The Middlesex experience (Garnett, 2009) suggests that RPL should be reconstructed as a tool not only for admission to a course but to also enhance the productive capability of individuals and the organisations in which they work. Used this way, RPL becomes a tool for university-supported reflection to focus upon organisational core competences and other expressions of knowledge valued by the organisation. Thus RPL provides a mechanism for the assessment of an employee’s experiential learning (e.g. identifying and prioritising learning opportunities and sources, and honing the employee’s reflective and evaluative skills) and thus to relate individual knowledge to an organisation’s own appraisal/performance management system. In this way, a RPL process can add value to how an organisation attempts to realise, use and expand its intellectual capital.

Drawing upon the operational experience of Middlesex University, an organisational focus for RPL has the potential to deliver a range of benefits at AIB and elsewhere in higher education:

- increased awareness of staff of their knowledge and skills and ability to relate these to their current work role;
- increased reflective and evaluative capability of staff;
- increased staff self-esteem and confidence to contribute ideas;
- increased awareness at the organisational level of the knowledge and skills of staff and how these are currently used at work;
- enhanced awareness of the organisation of staff potential and future development needs; and
- enhanced awareness of knowledge as a resource within the organisation.

Conclusion

In summary, although RPL has been practiced in higher and vocational education in the UK for 30 years, it may still be under-used. The growing significance of workforce development and the development of work based and work-applied learning programmes has demonstrated how to extend the use of RPL. The Middlesex approach uses RPL as the starting point for developing programmes customised to the needs of the individual and their organisation thus shifting the criteria for recognition of learning achievement from matching a prescribed existing university course to learning of value to the individual and their organisation. Some higher education providers are not in a position to offer highly customised programmes like those offered by Middlesex. However, AIB and other higher education providers can learn much from the Middlesex approach about the processes and procedures to assess individuals for admission or credit based on RPL. Australia has the opportunity to build on substantial overseas experience of RPL and to extend current practice to the level of flexibility achieved by higher education providers such as Middlesex University. If Australian institutions learn from the overseas experience and overcome the factors that have contributed to the under-use of RPL then Australian RPL developments have the potential to help position Australia as a significant player in the education industry worldwide.

In conclusion, the use of RPL for admission and/or credit in standard programmes enables individuals to have their work-based knowledge acknowledged as relevant, worthwhile and equivalent to learning obtained in the higher education classroom. The use of RPL within negotiated work-based programmes highlights the potential of reflective practice to act as a tool to achieve organisational development as well as individual recognition. The linkage between individual learning achievement and organisational change opens up a range of opportunities for higher education institutions offering applied business and management education.

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