# The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Empowers Earners and Learners in Managing their Careers

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## Abstract

This article shares ways in which RPL empowers career management. Because of the acquisition of a credential, successful RPL candidates tend to receive increased renumeration and become more employable. Candidates also acquire skills from undergoing the assessment process itself. They become more aware of what they know and can do and acquire a 'skills language' that helps to self-advocate with recruiters, employers and education institutions. Candidates gain skills for reflective practice which improves professional practice.

RPL Candidates worldwide experience assessment more intimately than mainstream assessment. The process invariably forces candidates to engage in introspection not only on occupational competence but also on learning self-efficacy and learner identity. The RPL process can strengthen or weaken learning self-efficacy beliefs. The construct of meta-learning is presented as a possible mechanism that confronts and strengthens learning self-efficacy beliefs. Being a confident lifelong learner is critical because skills needed in the workplace are changing quickly and drastically. People must engage in learning to remain employable.

An Australian case study based on my master's research in 2019 confirms how RPL candidates gain skills for career self-advocacy. The study also illustrates how the RPL process can be technically, logistically and mentally challenging. As challenges mount, many candidates in Australia lose confidence in successfully completing, which risks weakening learning self-efficacy beliefs especially in the context of formal education. Ongoing research is proposed that seeks to understand how best RPL candidates can confront their learning self to strengthen learning self-efficacy and empower career management.

**Keywords:** recognition of prior learning, career management, learning self-efficacy, meta-learning, reflective practice, learning outcomes

## Introduction

In many nations' vocational education and training (VET) sectors, the recognition of prior learning (RPL) is an assessment process that evaluates evidence of existing skills and knowledge against learning outcomes embedded in formal qualifications. The process results in credentialling part or all of a qualification. This article illustrates how the RPL experience and outcome can empower career management.

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I first share tangible outcomes of pay increase and increased employability then more subtle gains as a result of undergoing the RPL process that give candidates skills to self-advocate as earners and learners. I present why these skills are important in today's contemporary job market.

I share how RPL assessment is intimate and because of this, the process presents as an opportunity to strengthen learning self-efficacy beliefs or in fact reduce learning self-efficacy beliefs. An Australian case study confirms how RPL candidates gain skills for career self-advocacy. The study also illustrates how in Australia the opportunity to strengthen self-efficacy is far from reality. Most candidates experience the RPL process as negative. Some systemic technical barriers were found to cause most challenges for candidates.

### Increased Remuneration

Firstly, and importantly as the cost of living rises, is pay increase. Some say from the point of view of human capital theory, if a worker stays in the same enterprise after receiving a credential, there is no rationale for a pay rise since there is no increase in human capital and therefore in individual productivity (Recotillet & Werquin, 2009). However, the RPL process may reveal latent human capital not visual to or utilised by employers prior to RPL assessment. Since under utilisation and misalignment of skills can lead to reduced and impeded productivity (Brun-Schamme & Rey, 2021), it makes sense that increased employer awareness of human capital can enact increased utilisation thereof and therefore productivity. Additionally, research shows 'happy' workers are more productive (Broom, 2019) and it has been found that individuals are more motivated to work and work more professionally after self-directed learning has been valorised by the formal sector through RPL assessment (Carpenter & Ker, 2021; Carr, 2019; Carr, 2023). A study in Bangladesh found workers were motivated to 'work harder' after receiving certification through RPL (Nakata, Sharma, Rahman, Rahman, &

Aziz, 2021), in theory increasing productivity. The same study found whilst RPL certificates do not supplement formal education qualifications in employers' decisions for initial wage levels, existing employees with RPL certificates were more likely to experience a wage increase in the six months following assessment than the control group. The difference was particularly stark for females who experienced a wage level increase of approximately 20 percent. The study claimed it likely that RPL assessment played a role in mitigating gender-based wage discrimination (Nakata, Sharma, Rahman, Rahman, & Aziz, 2021).

Education frequently explains pay disparity for the same job (Wilkie, 2017). Broadly, empirical research confirms education attainment yields higher individual income (Patrinos & Psacharopoulos, 2018; Roser & Ortiz-Ospina, 2016; Australian Government, Department of Education, 2022; Understanding Children's Work (UCW) Programme, 2013). Whether this is partly a signalling effect or reflects actual higher productivity from educated employees is up for debate.

### Increased Employability

There comes a time in one's career whereby earners are locked out of career progression by the paper ceiling (STARs: Skilled Through Alternative Routes, 2021). Having a credential that proves competency opens doors. Some employers feel those with qualifications have proven their ability to learn (OECD in Recotillet & Werquin, 2009). A study on job market outcomes for out-of-work people who received RPL certificates in Bangladesh found they were almost twice as likely to become employed as the control group who had no certification. The study attributed the positive results to not only having a certificate to prove skills but individuals' increased confidence in their skills which prompted them to successfully compete in the open formal job market as opposed to only the informal job search channels which is extremely common in

Bangladesh (Nakata, Sharma, Rahman, Rahman, & Aziz, 2021).

> Oceanie, a single Madagascan mother of two shared her RPL story on a recent UNESCO event. She shared that after gaining her Diploma in Hospitality through RPL she was promoted to manager (UNESCO - Education, 2023) and that improved working conditions and renumeration. It was life-changing for her and her family.

Forbes predicted that more and better qualifications will be required to get a job by 2027 (Morrison, 2020). Most companies still require a minimum level of education in job listings says Indeed Career Guide (Indeed Editorial Team, 2023). In a nutshell, having the piece of paper generally makes you more employable.

However, recruitment practices are changing as nations experience skills shortages and expensive skills mismatches (Cedefop, 2018; Thomason, 2022; Roslansky, 2021) exacerbated by Covid fall-out (Brunello & Wruuck, 2021). RPL processes empower candidates with skills that can leverage these changed recruitment practices.

## Acquisition of Skills for the Job Market

### To Know, Describe and Evidence What You Know

As candidates progress through RPL assessment they become more aware of and can describe what they know and can do. They learn a common language understandable across different workplaces and formal training institutions. The common language can be termed 'skills-language' and typically comprise 'learning outcomes'. Learning outcomes describe what learners are expected to know, be able to do and understand at the end of a learning process (Cedefop, 2022). Candidates learn how to 'map' these learning outcomes to work experiences, work activities, practices, roles and responsibilities, effectively translating work experience to a language that has increased currency because typically, learning outcomes are broader than job role and span occupations and sometimes industries. Workers often do not realise that the skills they have for one job can be easily transferred to another (Roslansky, 2021). Heather Carpenter, New Zealander careers' consultant found that with guidance, New Zealand candidates learn how to reframe their work-story to a skill-story (Carpenter & Ker, 2021).

People who can use skills-language to describe what they know and can do, can advocate for themselves with recruiters and employers for a job or a better job without experience in that specific job role. Today's job market is primed for those that can articulate their skills. Skills based hiring is a term used to describe the primacy of skills over qualifications during the recruitment process; and it is on the rise (Fuller, Langer, & Sigelman, 2022). Even though job adverts still display a 'job-role', recruitment emphasises finding evidence of applicants' skills rather than evidence of holding specific job roles or qualifications. A recent interview with Canadian career mobility expert Ms Pazukha (2023) reveals that Canadian employers are starting to understand transferable skills – those skills that move across jobs, occupations and sometimes industries. Notably the world's two largest skills taxonomies, ESCO and O-Net Online explicitly define and use transferable skills.

The acquisition of skills-language also empowers individuals in navigating their learning world. Candidates that go through the RPL process become aware of their specific training needs, that is, the competency gaps between the sought after credential and their existing skills. Workers can then use newly acquired 'skills-language' to independently research targeted learning whether it be formal training, workplace learning or self-directed learning, saving time and money.

RPL assessment necessitates candidates to evidence their claim. Once candidates have mapped work experiences to learning outcomes and confirmed their competency in their own mind they must determine and provide evidence to the assessor for judgement. Throughout this part of the process, candidates are connecting learning outcomes with 'evidence' such as is illustrated here.

"I can do x, and here is evidence that demonstrates how I did do it".

"I know this, and here is evidence that shows explicit application of that knowledge".

Employers also seek evidence of learning outcomes when skills-based hiring. The CEO of LinkedIn says employers are developing methods of gauging applicant's skills without relying on education or job-role experience as proxies (Roslansky, 2021). RPL candidates have gained skills to better respond to employers' interviews, tests, auditions, questions and challenges. They are experienced in having to evidence their skills.

## Skills for Reflective Practice

For the purpose of this article, even though there is much debate around the words skills, competence, competencies, applied knowledge, I use the words interchangeably.

Another skill RPL candidates acquire that empower career management, is the art of reflective practice. RPL assessment questions typically encourage candidates to interrogate their practice. Harris (2004) found that being schooled in reflection was one of four prior affordances for success in the South African RPL process. Pokorny (Pokorny, 2023) found that the requirement for United Kingdom candidates to produce evidence elicited deeper reflections than if no evidence was required. Carpenter (2021) shares that New Zealand candidates themselves noted their development of reflective practice. Whilst Brookfield's Model of Reflection specifically refers to the practice of teaching, his expertise in adult learning provides rationale to use his definition of "the sustained and intentional process of identifying and checking the accuracy and validity of teaching [occupational] assumptions" (Brookfield, 2017). Critical literature is one of the four lenses which Brookfield's model proports. In the context of RPL, the critical literature lens through which occupational reflections are focused, can be the qualification's knowledge outcomes. Candidates check the accuracy of their everyday practice against knowledge outcomes explicit in the qualification and 're-learn' how this is applied in their workplace. Sometimes, there is an assumption that job tenure equates with competency. Not so. Workers who have not continued to professionally develop may hold outdated skills or be deficit in contemporary skills.

It is now evident that throughout the RPL process candidates become more aware of their skills, more able to articulate and prove their skills and that this can help to self-advocate as both a learner and earner.

## RPL and Learning Self-Efficacy Beliefs

### RPL is Intimate

A study of Portuguese candidates found that even though participants' expectations were predominately professional the real effect was mainly personal (Migual, Ornelas, & Maroco, 2016). I posit the RPL process not only improves self-awareness of competency and capacity for career self-advocacy but can strengthen learning self-efficacy beliefs. The formal, external-to-self valorisation of candidates' self-directed learning positively impacts beliefs in learning self-efficacy. I also suggest that a resultant strengthening in learning self-efficacy beliefs is not solely attributed to increased awareness of one's own skills or improved capacity for self-advocacy.

Self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) determines whether a person will attempt a behaviour, amount of effort into that behaviour and how long the behaviour will be sustained when obstacles are encountered. Self-efficacy beliefs, when viewed in relation to learning, will determine if an individual decides to attempt learning objectives, their learning performance and their persistence in that learning. An American study found that low self-efficacy beliefs about learning behaviour serves as barriers to career development, especially for those experiencing additional barriers because of poverty, cultural obstacles or linguistic barriers (Brown, 1999). For the contemporary work world, learning self-efficacy beliefs are critical because adults must engage in lifelong learning to remain employable. Just having experience and an entry qualification are no longer enough.

## RPL can Contribute to Strengthened Learning Self-efficacy Beliefs

Self-reflective strategies used within a positively experienced RPL process can raise self-efficacy beliefs about their self-directed informal learning behaviour. As we have seen, one way it does this, is by reminding individuals of their mastery. Brookfield found when teachers are checking their practice against critical literature, they stumble upon cogent words that explicitly articulate facets of practice that they have had trouble putting into words and that this stumble is 'wonderfully affirming' (Brookfield, 2017). Another way RPL can positively change learning self-efficacy beliefs is by the fundamental fact that the formal education world values their self-directed non-formal and informal learning behaviour. As RPL applicants enter the formal education world with their package of alternatively acquired learning achievements in hand, their reception and journey are critical to their feelings and beliefs of learning self-efficacy.

## Meta-learning Confronts Learning Self-Efficacy Beliefs

The RPL process necessitates meta-learning. Meta-learning is increased awareness and control of learning habits.

Habits being beliefs, assumptions and opinions about learning that have been internalised and influences learning behaviour (Maudsley, 1979). The RPL process demands the explicit talk and thinking about learning, about the atypical pathway candidates have travelled to become competent, about learning in general and about themselves as learners. Self-reflection on professional competence is inextricably intertwined with self-reflection on learning competence. Some individuals have deep-seated beliefs about themselves as learners and about learning in general that have been internalised and until confronted, drive learning behaviour. The conscious effort of confronting and challenging erroneous learning habits is meta-learning and I propose RPL triggers this confrontation.

**An Australian case study:** In 2019 as part of master's research in how RPL is experienced, I followed 11 candidates on their RPL assessment journey within the Australian VET sector for five months. Most candidates were trainers and assessors seeking to upgrade their qualification, a few sought to gain the entry level qualification. The semi-structured interviews with RPL candidates gathered their description of typical challenges and any 'learning' they experienced along the way. Discussion topics were informed by interviews with 21 RPL assessors who collectively had assessed over 5000 candidates spanning all Australian Qualification Framework (AQF) levels and many different industries. A literature review highlighted the fact that RPL is not experienced positively by many candidates in Australia. Interviews were transcribed, challenges were analysed and themed, and then ascribed a numerical Impact Score calculated on prevalence of challenge across candidates and frequency of mention. Learning experiences were analysed for common threads and themed. Each candidate participated in three interviews.

Key findings of learning experiences confirm candidates gained increased self-awareness of their skills and strengthened capacity to navigate their learning and

earning worlds as they made connections between learning outcomes and work experiences.

One candidate described the process felt like putting on "…learning goggle. I see lessons everywhere" (Carr, 2019). Some candidates admitted they didn't know what they didn't know! One candidate happily said, "I get to learn what I know, hopefully getting to look at new things!" (Carr, 2019). Candidates felt overwhelmed with the prospect of connecting learning outcomes to their everyday work tasks and practices. Guidance helped make sense of the learning outcomes by interpreting it into familiar workplace words. One candidate commented, "once she [assessor] sort-of broke it down for me, I'm like, I actually do know these things".

Candidates felt the process improved their professional performance. Some candidates claimed it validated their practice; some said it made them look at the "bigger picture" outside their own workplace's ways of doing things. One candidate said, "I hate to say it, but I think I was maybe taking shortcuts because I was working in isolation". Candidates claim RPL improved their practice through reflecting on what, why and how they were doing things. One candidate shared, "Well, I think we spend so much time in the workplace doing things because it's habit. But this RPL is adding value and allowing me to go back and look at theory that's in the back of my mind" (Carr, 2019).

Findings around the challenges candidates experienced are worrisome. Figure 1 illustrates how expressed challenges spanned technical, logistical and mindset issues.

### Figure 1. Impact scores of candidate-identified challenges.
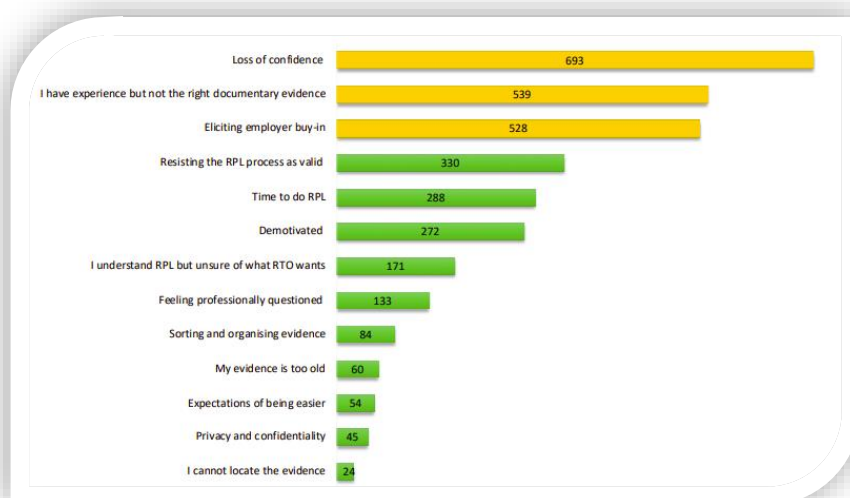


As technical and logistical challenges mounted, candidates expressed negative sentiments and these themselves became challenges transpiring as barriers for continued engagement in RPL. They described these mindsets as 'loss of confidence in their ability to complete the assessment, difficulty with feeling professionally questioned, expectations of it being easier, lost motivation and mental fortitude to continue, and resisting the validity and workplace relevance of the assessment minutia'. Candidates typically described the RPL as an emotional rollercoaster (Carr, 2019). This was echoed by RPL assessors who added, 'candidates' negative past formal learning experiences served as a mindset challenge in and of itself' (Carr, 2019).

Figure 2 identifies the subthemes of mindset challenges and illustrates the percentage of candidates who expressed the subtheme.

**Figure 2. Percentage of candidates expressing mindset**
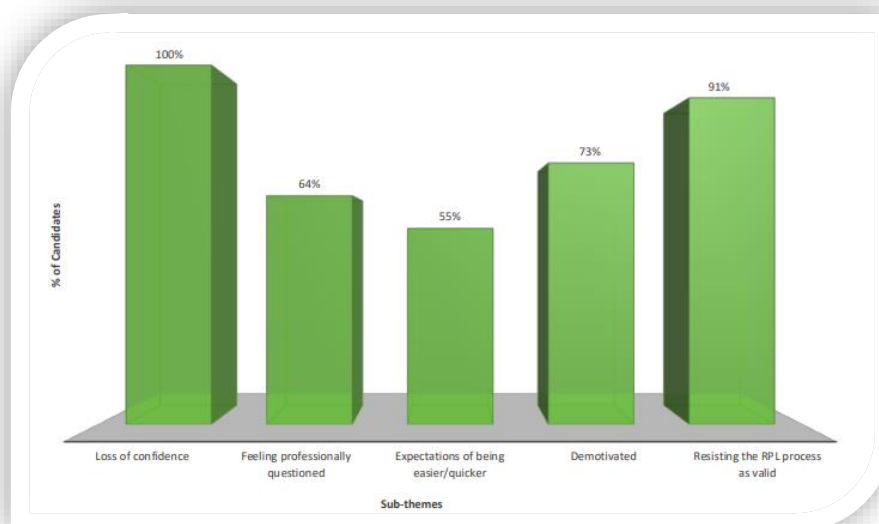


Notably, all candidates expressed a loss of confidence in 'doing RPL'. Candidates felt confident of being successful at the start of the RPL process but lost confidence along the way. Candidates explicitly disassociated confidence in their workplace competence with confidence in doing RPL (Carr, 2019). Eroded confidence had more to do with burdensome technical and logistical assessment processes than whether they had requisite work competence.

The significance of eroded confidence is that candidates located this negative experience squarely in the formal education world because in Australia, RPL is an instrument of formal education, supposedly to improve accessibility for non-traditional learners. They felt RPL represented a barrier for access rather than an enabler. One candidate expressed, 'this is not set up to recognise work experience at all' (Carr, 2019). This interaction with the formal education world was negative for these candidates, who themselves are education professionals, some with post graduate qualifications. One can assume candidates totally new to formal learning

environments would also struggle, perhaps more so. How candidates experience the RPL process makes a big difference. It can impact the learning self. The RPL experience can be positive or negative. The experience is dependent on enabling or disenabling technical and logistical factors as well as the extent of guidance.

Systemic barriers whereby people have little or no control over a repeated situation is a notorious variable for learned helplessness (Seligman, 2006), potentially impacting self-efficacy beliefs. One disenabling system factor is the extent to which candidates' competence is mapped and assessed against learning outcomes. In Australia, RPL assessment criteria does not differ to mainstream assessment. All components of the unit of competency (unit) are considered learning outcomes including performance criteria and must be assessed successfully for credentialling. Figure 3 is an example of the components that constitute a unit. Typically, a qualification has around 20 units. Candidates expressed feeling confident at the start of the RPL process when looking at unit summaries. However, when it came

to the detail, they lost confidence in meeting all the criteria. RPL assessors

confirmed this as a common challenge for all candidates.

**Figure 3. Exemplar Australian Unit of Competency components. TAERES511 - Apply research to training and assessment practice.**

| ELEMENTS | PERFORMANCE CRITERIA |
|---|---|
| Elements describe the essential outcomes. | Performance criteria describe the performance needed to demonstrate achievement of the element. |
| 1. Prepare a research brief relating to training and assessment practice | 1.1 Identify the purpose of research to be conducted, according to the current and future needs of the organisation around training and assessment practice |
| | 1.2 Identify and report on rationale for research and proposed research procedures and the methodology to be used |
| | 1.3 Define activities to be undertaken in conducting the research, timeframe, resource required, and expected outcomes in line with organisational practice |
| | 1.4 Develop process and criteria to evaluate achievement of the outcomes |
| | 1.5 Prepare budget and timelines for the research, in line with organisational requirements and constraints |
| | 1.6 Present research proposal to relevant personnel for approval, in line with organisational procedures |
| 2. Conduct research in theories relevant to vocational education and training | 2.1 Manage and conduct research activities using effective techniques for project management, implementation and data collection |
| | 2.2 Collect and record research data in line with approved research proposal |
| | 2.3 Analyse data obtained from the research in relation to its application, and improving current and future training and assessment practice |
| 3. Investigate and apply theories that inform vocational training and assessment practices | 3.1 Identify appropriate sources of information that identify relevant theories |
| | 3.2 Apply appropriate theories to the outcomes of the training and assessment research |
| | 3.3 Make recommendations for training and assessment development, and improvement, in line with the identified current and future needs of the organisation |

**Foundation Skills**

This section describes those language, literacy, numeracy and employment skills that are essential to performance but not explicit in the performance criteria.

| Skill | Description |
|---|---|
| Digital literacy | ▪ Uses main features and functions of digital tools and electronic applications required in own role in a range of contexts to access and exchange information |
| Learning | ▪ Analyses information to determine the rationale and methodology supporting the research project |
| Numeracy | ▪ Structures timeframes to represent a sequence of events<br>▪ Collates, interprets and records data |
| Oral COMMUNICATION | ▪ Participates in verbal exchanges of information, articulating ideas and conclusions using language suitable to audiences |
| Reading | ▪ Critically sources, comprehends, analyses and applies information from a range of sources, to inform research processes |
| Writing | ▪ Documents relationships between information and ideas, and conveys specific and structured information, and analysis, in a style appropriate to the purpose and audience |
| Self-management | ▪ Identifies and takes responsibility for adherence to organisational procedures and protocols<br>▪ Researches, identifies and responds to problems and opportunities for improvement, using systematic, analytical processes |
| Problem solving | ▪ Routinely consults to seek broad input into problem solving and decision making, and develops strategies to elicit |

**Performance Evidence**

The individual must demonstrate the ability to complete the tasks outlined in the elements, performance criteria and foundation skills of this unit, including evidence of the ability to:

▪ complete at least 1 research project that includes:
  ▪ a research brief, including purpose of research, rationale, methodology, research activities, timeframe, resources required and expected outcomes
  ▪ wide research into theories that inform vocational training and assessment practices
  ▪ analysis of data in relation to its application to improving current and future training and assessment practice
  ▪ use of academic referencing and citation protocols
▪ use strategies to implement findings from at least 1 research project into own practice.

**Knowledge Evidence**

The individual must be able to demonstrate knowledge to complete the tasks outlined in the elements, performance criteria and foundation skills of this unit, including knowledge of:

▪ academic referencing and citation protocols
▪ Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research
▪ intellectual property protocols
▪ research methods relevant to the performance evidence
▪ sources of information relevant to theories that inform vocational training and assessment practices.

**Assessment Conditions**

Skills in this unit must be demonstrated in a real or simulated vocational education and training environment.

This includes access to:

▪ sources of information required to produce performance evidence.

Assessors of this unit must satisfy the requirements for assessors in applicable vocational education and training legislation, frameworks and/or standards.

Candidates found that sometimes not all the unit's components could be applied to small or rural enterprise contexts. Unit currentness was also problematic. Sometimes the unit's outcomes described outdated practices or technology. If

Australia reduced the prescriptiveness of units without compromising the integrity of the unit, nine of the 13 challenges would be alleviated, and candidates would feel more confident in their ability to complete the assessment process. The European

Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) confirms, overly prescriptive learning outcomes disallow contextualisation, 'dumb-down' teaching and learning and serve as a barrier for RPL candidates (2022).

As candidates struggle with technical difficulties, they may also be confronting their own assumptions, beliefs, opinions about learning and about themselves as learners. This is a particularly intimate space, more so than for mainstream students because RPL candidates present their own personal 'curriculum' and their own personal learning journey for validation. Some negative learning beliefs and assumptions RPL candidates hold are,

> I'm too old to learn how to use the computer, I'm too old for study, I'm not 'school-smart'/'book-smart', real learning only happens at university, I'm not clever enough, I'm slow, I'm a fraud.

It is a messy and swirling mindset space from which candidates can emerge with strengthened or weakened learning self-efficacy beliefs particularly around formal education environments.

## RPL Presents an Opportunity for Confronting the Learning Self

Constructivist theorists say new learning occurs in the act of integrating new information into existing knowledge schema. Can a positive RPL experience introduce new schema into candidates' learning self-efficacy beliefs? Some say cognitive dissonance is a necessary ingredient for constructivism (Hartle, Baviskar, & Smith, 2012). Does RPL promote cognitive dissonance? Can RPL uncover candidates' misconceptions about their learning assumptions and beliefs, especially about learner identity? Can the growth in self-awareness of competency alone, be enough new schema to impact learning self-efficacy beliefs or does learning identity need to be confronted as well? And how can this be facilitated? This

is the focus of my upcoming PhD as I explore the student outcomes of RPL towards a more empowered lifelong learner.

## Conclusion

In conclusion RPL can empower learning and earning journeys with commensurate renumeration and career progression. Throughout the RPL process candidates learn skills to self-advocate in the job market through being able to articulate and evidence what they know and can do. They are better able to engage in reflective practice and make more efficient targeted decisions about new learning.

The RPL pathway is intimate, and the process can impact perceptions of learning self-efficacy and therein either empower or disempower learners and earners. As candidates seek the education-world's valorisation and validatoin of their informally acquired competence, they are forced to reflect on learning self-efficacy beliefs. It can be a vulnerable space. As technical and logistical challenges of the RPL assessment process mount many lose confidence in successfully completing, which risks weakening learning self-efficacy beliefs especially in the context of formal education. Being a confident lifelong learner is critical in our contemporary work world. The emotional space of the RPL process can be used by both RPL assessors and career coaches to strengthen learning self-efficacy beliefs. RPL is the nexus of the learning and earning worlds. To perform well in this nexus is to empower learning behaviour in both.

In concluding, I asked career expert Heather Carpenter (2023) how career coaches can support RPL candidates. She emphatically answered, 'career coaches and RPL assessors need to work together…they are both talking about the same thing…career development and RPL is the same thing…they both see the potentiality of RPL candidates'.

**About the author**

As an International Skills Recognition Consultant, **Deb Carr** is dedicated to promoting equitable access to education and commensurate employment through skills recognition policy, practice and research. She is currently collaborating with UNESCO on recognizing the skills of 50,000 working-aged refugees in Armenia. Deb has worked with the UAE Military Qualification Centre to credential miliary training for veterans, developed the quality assurance framework for Saudi Arabia's Migrant Skills Verification Project, and drafted UNESCO's Global Guidelines for the recognition, validation and accreditation of migrant and refugee's skills. Deb is pursuing a PhD at Australia's Griffith University to bridge the gap between RPL policy and practice.

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