Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is defined in the NVR Standards as:
An assessment process that assesses an individual's formal, non-formal and informal learning to determine the extent to which that individual has achieved the required learning outcomes, competency outcomes, or standards for entry to, and/or partial or total completion of, a VET qualification.

RPL assessment means that people can be assessed against a benchmark without having to undergo formal training. This will save time and resources in training, and give people recognition for competencies they have achieved. The RPL process is particularly useful for mature-age jobseekers or existing workers with accumulated life and work experiences.

Models for RPL
Many different models or processes of assessing for prior learning have been proposed over the years. Whatever model you are using, you still need to gather quality evidence according to the principles of assessment and rules of evidence, support the candidate, and make a decision against a benchmark.

RPL assessments need to be rigorous, but care needs to be taken not to over-assess (beyond the requirements of the benchmark). RTOs must have an RPL process in place.

Candidate preparation
Like any other form of assessment, preparation of the candidate for RPL is critical. The assessment process, the unit of competency and its evidence requirements must be explained well enough for the candidate to work independently of the assessor, if necessary, and may require specific methods and tools.

Because RPL usually involves the candidates gathering some of their own evidence, which is then supplemented through other methods of assessment, it is very important that these candidates are provided with a clear explanation of RPL and what they will need to do.
Before a candidate makes a decision about whether or not to proceed with RPL, they will need an explanation of the following:

- the basis of RPL
- the benefits of RPL
- what is involved
- the outcomes of RPL.
- The basis of RPL

RPL may be a new concept to the candidates and it is important that they understand what it is and what it involves. You should explain that they will need to decide whether they think that their relevant experience will be adequate to meet the specifications of the benchmark.

The benefits of RPL
As part of your briefing, you should explain the benefits to be gained through RPL, including full or partial credit towards the qualification or individual units of competency. There also needs to be a discussion of what the outcome would be should the applicant be successful (reducing the time and volume of the learning and assessment program).

What happens in RPL assessment?
Candidates also need to be aware of what is involved, including the time commitments and possible costs. While your selected tools for RPL assessment should be designed to minimise time and costs, candidates need to understand that they may be required to gather various forms of evidence and complete self-assessment tools. You will also need to explain the rules of evidence to them so that they are fully briefed on their obligation to provide sufficient, valid, authentic and current evidence.

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Information for the candidate

If the candidate believes they have a solid claim of competency, you will need to provide them with the following information:

- clarification of the benchmarks
- steps in the RPL process
- tools, such as self-assessment tools
- typical experience
- typical evidence.

Depending on your training organisation's RPL procedure, you may need to clarify any of the above points or make judgements on whether benchmarks have been met.

Candidate self-evaluation

The role of the candidate in gathering evidence is vital. Your role is to help candidates make the connection between their experience and the requirements of the unit of competency (or other benchmark).

The candidate should be given every opportunity to decide what experiences and information would best demonstrate competence. To do this, the candidate must be familiar with the requirements of the unit of competency and the variety of methods and tools that they can use to demonstrate competence. There are several ways for a candidate to self-evaluate. Your training organisation will normally have its own procedure, or you may have a preferred procedure of your own. Whatever procedure you decide to use, the self-evaluation does not amount to the total evidence gathering process, and should not be seen as a long, arduous process relying purely on documentation. Instead, self-evaluation provides evidence that can be used by an assessor to discuss with the candidate, and to indicate areas where a practical demonstration is required, in order to make an assessment decision.

Here are some suggestions for different ways candidates can be assisted with self-evaluation:

- self-assessment forms
- group information sessions with self-evaluation
- completion of a portfolio
- verbal self-evaluation.

Self-assessment forms

One method of self-evaluation is through the completion of a self-assessment form, which lists the critical aspects of the benchmark. Candidates can record how competent they feel about the benchmark and whether they have any evidence. However, when using a self-assessment form, make sure that the candidate knows that the decision is not just based on the documentation and that other forms of assessment will be used as well.

Group information sessions with self-evaluation

The assessor can explain the RPL process to a group of candidates, including an explanation of the benchmarks and typical evidence. With a simple self- assessment form, candidates can evaluate their own skills and knowledge against the benchmark. This method is useful if there are a group of people in a workplace or industry with a similar need to upgrade qualifications and who have similar types of experience that they can use as evidence. As assessor, you can advise these groups which evidence would be most appropriate to meet necessary benchmarks.

Completion of a portfolio

Completion of a portfolio does not need to be a long, complicated process. Candidates need to be aware of exactly where the benchmark sits and typical evidence required to meet it. Assessors must provide guidance as to what evidence should be included in the portfolio and what should be excluded.

Evidence required could include:

- third party reports
- examples of current work
- workplace documents or drafts
- photographic or video evidence.

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To guard against the portfolio becoming too large, ensure that candidates are not including any unnecessary information that does not constitute evidence. Discuss with candidates what they intend to include and encourage candidates to exclude any unnecessary documents.

Verbal self-evaluation

In some cases, you may prefer that candidates provide a verbal self- evaluation. This is often more efficient for both you and candidates, as neither of you need to trawl through piles of documentation.

In some cases it might be appropriate to have a support person present to assist the candidate to recognise areas of skills and experience and match them against the benchmark.

Conversation with the candidate

A conversation with the candidate can provide further evidence, using the self-evaluation as a guide. The main purpose of this conversation with the candidate is to get a full picture of their experience with the relevant competencies, rather than relying on documented evidence. With your own vocational competence in the area being assessed, you should be able to gain a good understanding of whether or not the candidate is competent. The conversation could be based on a series of open questions based on aspects of the candidate's work, experience and the evidence they have produced in the self-evaluation. Open questions designed to elicit information could include: 'How have you...?' 'Tell me about when you...?' 'What would you do if...?'

Alternatively, it could be a discussion on topics drawn from the required skills, required knowledge and assessment requirements of a unit of competency. While it is important to have a backbone of questions that are directly linked to the relevant competencies and benchmarks, you should be flexible in what questions you ask. A rigid question bank as this can be very limiting in eliciting information from the candidates as it does not provide for their diverse backgrounds and varying range of experience and skills.

Follow-up assessment If you feel that you still don't have adequate evidence of competence after completing the previous steps for assessing candidates' eligibility for RPL, you need to ask the candidate for further evidence, such as products or documents.

Alternatively, or, additionally, candidates may be able to demonstrate performance in a workplace or simulated workplace environment. If you are conducting practical assessments, you would follow the same procedures as any other assessment where a candidate is demonstrating skill and use an observation checklist. You may be able to group a series of units of competency for demonstration.
Tools for assessment

In the four steps described above, there are a series of tools and instruments which could be provided to candidates to ensure that they meet benchmarks of required skills and knowledge. Some of these, among the many others, are listed below.

- Information for candidates about RPL, the RPL process and what they will need to do. This could be written or verbal information, or both.
- A copy of the benchmark, which may need to be put into a format and language which can be understood by the candidate.
- A self-evaluation or self-assessment form.
- A guided list of evidence to put in a portfolio and instructions for completing the portfolio.
- Instructions for demonstration of skills with observation checklists.
- A list of questions or topics to be included in a discussion.

When producing these assessment tools, as with other assessment tools, care must be taken that they conform to the principles of assessment to allow for a valid, reliable, flexible and fair assessment of compete

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