Chapter 2

Australian Universities’ RPL Policies and Practices: What Knowledges Counts?

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the difficulties surrounding the credentialing of open learning through an analysis of policies and practices relating to recognition of prior learning (RPL) in the Australian higher education sector. Here, credentialing encompasses both RPL for credit, where we ask to what extent there is a hierarchy of value placed on prior learning; and RPL for access where the notion of ‘meritocracy’ is foregrounded. The main argument is that, in the context of the Australian higher education sector, and possibly well beyond, RPL is more likely to be operationalised for strategic reasons relating to competitive university positioning within the sector, than for pedagogic motivations. As a result, equity considerations - especially for the most disadvantaged students - are further marginalised. It is one thing to develop processes through which open learning facilitates the production of knowledge, but another for this knowledge to be recognised by the Academy.

INTRODUCTION

As a philosophy, open learning implies greater accessibility, flexibility and student-centeredness: it implies placing the learner rather than provider at the core of educational practice (Field, 1994). In these respects, and under the broader rubric of lifelong learning, open learning scholars can draw much from concomitant studies into the recognition of prior learning (RPL). Our focus here on RPL in the Australian university sector is, in effect, a specific case of the credentialing of open learning. Like open learning, RPL is almost universally regarded as a fundamental pillar of lifelong learning systems (Watson, 2003; Wheelahan et al., 2003) and, theoretically at least, RPL addresses a trinity of educational policy reform.
agendas: humanistic, economic and social. Humanist agendas prioritise the desire to learn for learning’s sake and minimise delineations and valuations between formal, non-formal and informal learning modes. Here, RPL, as a process of reflective learning, becomes an act of personal development and fulfilment (Matas & Allan, 2004; Weiland, 1981). Economically, universities have had from the outset the aim of professionalising certain social and community groups (Watty, 2006) and RPL is one means by which universities can motivate workers to skill or re-skill, by offering them a reduction (of time and/or money) to complete a qualification. Furthermore, the integration of informal and non-formal learning into tertiary curricula arguably enhances the applicability and relevance of the academic qualification (Gallacher, Ingram, & Reeve, 2009). Socially, the potentially transformative power of the RPL process allows learners to translate even negative life experiences into valued and recognised learning (Cleary et al., 2002), or to act as a means of social redress and educational inclusion for disaffected groups of people (Alexander, Van Wyk, Bereng, & November, 2011).

This chapter uses as its foundation a study into the RPL practices of selected Australian universities to explore how certain forms of knowledge are validated by the Academy and how the processes of validation are cultural and strategic, as well as epistemological. The implications for open learning practices are then explored.

BACKGROUND: DEFINING OPEN LEARNING IN THE CONTEXT OF RPL

Open Learning

The term ‘open learning’ eludes precise definition and is a phrase to which a range of meaning can, and is, attached (MacKenzie, Postgate, & Scupham, 1975). For the purposes of this study, our definition of open learning focuses on learning that is a) learner-centred rather than institution-centred; b) recognises the use of a wide range of teaching and learning strategies and; c) supports the removal of barriers to learning, particularly those inherent in conventional education/training provision (Lewis, 1986). For us, therefore, the term ‘open learning’ encompasses not only pedagogic processes but also experiential, self-directed and even ‘accidental’ learning.

Most extant definitions of open learning assume an intention to instruct, or educate the learner, by someone other than the learner his/herself. For example, open learning is “a set of techniques… characterised by the use of resource-based teaching and training” (Field, 1994, p. 7); and while Rumble (1989) elucidates the impreciseness of the term, his discussion nonetheless presumes it is an educational offering. Although we would argue that this defines ‘open education’ rather than ‘open learning’, we acknowledge that the approach we take in this chapter extends the concept of open learning beyond its usual delineations. Nonetheless, the lessons learnt from our study have relevance to scholars in the field of open learning, especially as they relate to credentialing, which is a foundational concern of this chapter.

Credentialing and RPL

In higher education, RPL is understood as both an outcome and a process. As the former, the focus is very much on the actual assessment and outcome of that assessment (Wheelahan et al., 2003), i.e. credentialing. Chisholm and Davis (2007, p. 47) refer to “the knowledge, skills and understanding which have been acquired through a work-based situation but which has [sic] not been formally attested through
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