**Literature Review of PLAR in Australia and New Zealand**

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TRU- PLAR

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**Abstract**

This literary review examines the frameworks, policies, and governing bodies that dictate the evaluation of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). Both RPL and PLAR are used interchangeably during the report, as they both represent a global concept although the exact terminology varies based on country. Both New Zealand and Australia have inclusive PLAR programs that are undergoing refinement to help applicants receive formal recognition and accreditation for their experiences, that will enable them to participate in the work force and meet industry needs (Te Tahuhu o te Matau range, 2023; Competenze, 2023; NZQA, Dec.6th, 2023). Both countries also have policies and processes specific to the transferability of credentials earned overseas (Skills Recognition International, 2023; The State of Queensland, Jan. 10th, 2020; Te Tahuhu o te Matau range, 2023; Visa Envoy, 2023). New Zealand in particular places an emphasis on increasing equity and making RPL services accessible to diverse populations (Te Tahuhu o te Matau range, 2023).

Examining successful PLAR programs and learner-centered policies in these two countries could lead to findings that enable the advancement of TRU’s PLAR program and address learner needs identified in the TRU PLAR Experience Review findings (Forseille, S., 2019).

**Overview of New Zealand PLAR/RPL**

The New Zealand Qualifications Authority has declared Recognition of Prior Learning programs as tertiary education and seeks to award academic credits or trades certification to those who have gained skills through “formal education, independent study, workplace and life experience” (NZQA, 2023). Qualifications are available in a diverse array of fields, and the process to prepare for Assessment of Prior Learning (APL) is at the applicant’s own pace, to avoid interfering with work or other responsibilities (Ara Institute of Canterbury, 2023). The applicant’s program is customized to their needs and circumstances, and application packs are specific to the qualification level and program being applied for (Are Institute of Canterbury, 2023). To receive credit, the learner’s knowledge is compared to “the outcomes of a: qualification, program, course, module, or assessment standard”; knowledge gaps are identified, and a customized educational program is created so the learner does not have to repeat learning that has already been achieved (NZQA, 2023; Unitec, 2023). Accredited organizations and post-secondary institutes are able to provide RPL services for a fee below the cost of achieving the qualification in full and are expected to provide support to learners in completing the evaluation process.

The two main programs recognizing learning for credit are called Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and Credit Recognition and Transfer (CRT) (NZQA, 2023). In CRT, the applicant’s “verified official transcript” is assessed, and compared to New Zealand’s qualification standards (NZQA, 2023). New Zealand also directs RPL programs to specific industries, such as the trades, to “help those that perhaps missed out on getting their trade qualification when they were younger, or people skilled in more than one trade or trained outside of New Zealand (Competenz, 2023). This is advantageous as it enables more skilled trades people to be recognized and mobilized in strengthening the country’s infrastructure and economy in helping applicants obtain “nationally recognized qualifications valued by industry” (Competenz, 2023).

**Overview of Australian PLAR/RPL**

Australian RPL programs evaluate learning gained through a range of experiences, including paid and volunteer work, and life experience, in their evaluation of prior learning compared to certificate or degree standards (The State of Queensland, Jan. 10th, 2020). Successful applicants receive formal recognition in the form of credits towards the field they have experience in; diplomas for business and administration capabilities; and certificates for agriculture, youth work, and similar (The State of Queensland, Jan. 10th, 2020). Like New Zealand, RPL deals with both trades and academia (The State of Queensland, Jan. 10th, 2020). Skills and knowledge are compared to industry standards by RPL assessors, and the assessment may include demonstrating the tasks required of the job, explaining, or providing samples of the applicant’s work (The State of Queensland, Jan. 10th, 2020). Rather than the applicant applying for a specific certification, the assessor examines their “skills and knowledge… (to) match them against a suitable qualification (The State of Queensland, Jan. 10th, 2020).

Australia in encouraging greater awareness of RPL by mandating all Registered Training Organizations (RTOs) to offer RPL assessments to students (The State of Queensland, Jan. 10th, 2020). RTOs can offer RPL because it meets the Australian Quality Training Framework Qualifications (AQTFQ) as well as the needs for individuals and employers to have a time and cost effective way to upskill or validate on the job learning (NCVER, 2006, p.3). It prevents redundancy in training and allows learners to create a personalized educational program that only requires them to complete courses they are lacking knowledge in, rather than do an entire program (NCVER, 2006, p.3). It advantages the individual as they can gain upward mobility in their career, accreditation; it benefits the employer as they can upskill their staff more affordably and efficiently; and it benefits Australia’s economy and operations by providing skilled workers to meet industry needs. Just the process of RPL application can be encouraging and validating, as people recognize their abilities and the value of their knowledge they may not have recognized prior (NCVER, 2006, p.3). The cost for a successful RPL assessment is less than the full course equivalent, and financial assistance is available for applicants based on circumstances (The State of Queensland, Jan. 10th, 2020). They will also assess previously earned credits and transfer them at no cost if relevant and verifiable (The State of Queensland, Jan. 10th, 2020).

Overseas skills recognition helps combat the ‘brain drain’ that comes from underutilizing immigrants due to failure to recognize credentials and experience gained abroad (The State of Queensland, Jan. 10th, 2020). Evaluation of these credentials, skills, and knowledge can allow migrants and immigrants to have their abilities “officially recognized in Australia” (The State of Queensland, Jan. 10th, 2020). Skills Recognition International is one organization that offers RPL to migrants and immigrants and available as online certifications and diplomas to transfer international training and experience into accredited Australian Qualifications (Skills Recognition International, 2023). It sees applicants for RPL as having “advanced standing in the Australian tertiary education system”, enabling faster, cheaper, and more accessible qualifications (Skills Recognition International, 2023).   
 Despite the promotion and inclusivity of Australia’s RPL programs, a study through the National Center for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) on the behalf of the Australian government, found that both participation and completion of RPL was less than expected (NCVER, 2006, p. 1). Possible explanations for this could be how data is categorized, especially if accreditations are not recorded as RPL (NCVER, 2006, p.1). For example, RPL is often used for “accelerated progression… a practice adopted by some providers where the student enrolls in the course properly but receives some RPL as they progress towards a pass in the course” and is hidden in VET RPL statistics (NCVER, 2006, p.3). VET statistics also only record successfully completed RPLs that have been awarded credits, so their participation estimate is likely lower than reality (NCVER, 2006, p.4). Other possibilities for the low completion rate include individuals and employers not fully being aware of the advantages of RPL, understanding the process, or seeing themselves as eligible (NCVER, 2006, p.1). If it seems out of reach, they may prefer to remain uncertified, give up on their certification, or return to school (NCVER, 2006, p.1). NCVER considered factors affecting participation and completion rates and found that “more effective RPL requires greater promotion; using clean, concise, and jargon-free language; recognition that RPL is a valuable learning experience in its own right; improved support and approaches to assist students to gather evidence; experiences professional assessor; continual efforts to achieve cost effective RPL” (2006, p.1). RPL has the enormous potential to substantially benefit successful applicants, yet it continues to be underutilized (NCVER, 2006, p.2).

**PLAR/RPL Frameworks and Policies**

Australia

RPL entered Australian educational policy as part of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), and is now cemented into “the national Vocational, Educational, and Training (VET) system… (has been) written into the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) charter and into the standards for registered training organizations (RTOs) delivering accredited vocational training programs (NCVER, 2006, p.2). Successfully applicants may receive credits onto their academic transcript to put towards graduation of their program, an official qualification, and/or a RPL certificate- “a document that recognizes an individual’s prior learning and experiences” (My RPL Australia, 2023).

The Australian Skills Assessment is mandatory for the majority of migration visas and employer sponsored visas and compares individual skills and knowledge to the “requirements of a specific qualification or set of learning outcomes” (My RPL Australia, 2023). It is affiliated with other certifying agencies, such as ACWA (Australian Community Workers Association) and Trades Recognition Australia (My RPL Australia, 2023).

Regardless of whether the applicant is domestic or international, RPL assessments can be in the form of “interviews, written assessments, workplace observations, or recognition of qualifications or other forms of certification” and are executed by an assessor from a relevant field authority (My RPL Australia, 2023). Each vocational or degree-specific “assessing authority has its own specific requirements and criteria for assessing and applicants qualifications and experience” but all are measured against the national Australian Standards (My RPL Australia, 2023).

New Zealand

The New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) framework is at the center of all qualified educational and training organizations within the country (NZQA, 2023). Through their online resources, all secondary and tertiary credentials approved by NZQA are listed; this organizations are in good standing, even abroad, as NZQAF verification provides an “assurance of quality that is recognized and trusted worldwide” (NZQA, 2023). It sets the rules that apply to all schools, tertiary education providers, and public and private training institutions (NZQA, 2023).

The Educational Regulatory Framework is used to ensure that all branches of Te Pukenga and all course offerings meet national standards, and Te Pukenga is also guided by Te Kawa Maiorooro, New Zealand’s national governing educational regulatory framework (Te Pukenga, 2023).

**PLAR & National regulatory bodies, employers, or professional practices**

New Zealand

Te Pukenga is part of the New Zealand Institute of Skills and Technology and under the Tertiary Education Commission- it’s focus is on graduating learners with practical skills to meet business and community needs (Te Pukenga, 2023). Te Pukenga is comprised of “16 institutions of technology and polytechnics and nine industry training organizations” and falls under the Tertiary Education Commission (Te Pukenga, 2023). Credentials awarded by Te Pukenga are recognized by employers across New Zealand (Te Pukenga, 2023). New Zealand’s RPL programs are influenced by the Statement of National Education and Learning Priorities (NELP) and their Tertiary Education Strategy (TES) (Te Tahuhu o te Mataurange, 2023). TES strategies include modifying the current tertiary educational system to become more inclusive, accessible, supportive towards diverse learning needs, prioritize student needs, and offer more opportunities (Te Tahuhu o te Mataurange, 2023). One of the ways it plans to meet this goals is through collaboration with industries and employers to help students develop the skills, knowledge, and pathways to succeed in their careers (Te Tahuhu o te Mataurange, 2023). Both NELP and TES have intersecting priorities which “recognize that learners change and grow as they move through the education system and the education system needs to listen to them, adapt to their needs, and empower them to achieve their aspirations, whatever their age or stage of learning” (Te Tahuhu o te Mataurange, 2023). RPL connects to these goals in that it considers mature students from diverse backgrounds and is willing to accommodate those in need of more affordable tuition, a flexible schedule, or in achieving their credentials faster. It also acknowledges the value of learning outside of formal institutions.

In their efforts to make NELP and TES more student-centered, they increase equity within the labor force of their country by making higher education more accessible for those with disabilities, adverse life circumstances, from disadvantaged backgrounds, or of low socioeconomic status (Te Tahuhu o te Mataurange, 2023). These are also the demographics most likely to be affected by economic challenges following the COVID pandemic, or changes to the labor market (Te Tahuhu o te Mataurange, 2023). By increasing its population of skilled and qualified workers, New Zealand can help its economy recover post-pandemic as well as become more resilient for the future. RPL helps meet this goal by providing a timely, more cost-effective way of quickly producing more accredited workers and improve the upwards mobility of diverse populations.

The New Zealand Qualification Authority (NZQA) sets the qualification standards and recognizes learning for credit programs, such as CRT (credit recognition and transfer) and RPL (recognition of prior learning) (NZQA, 2023). Providers of RPL and CRT assessments must be approved through the NZQA in order to award credentials (NZQA, 2023).

CUAP (the Committee on University Academic Programs) gives approval for university qualifications:

it “*considers academic matters across the university system, including the exercise of program approval and moderation procedures, advice and comment on academic developments…encouraging universities to develop causes of study that will facilitate the transfer of students between programs and institutions”* (Universities New Zealand, 2023).

CUAP collaborates with industry and employers as well, which can help connect successful RPL graduates with jobs.

Australia

RPL is also used withing Australia’s VET system (Vocational Education and Training), which sets standards and frameworks for career qualifications (NCVER, 2006). Assessors with expertise in the field for which RPL credit is being applied for review the application and compare the evidence and learning to field standards; if not reviewed by an individual specialist, they consult with trade and professional organizations such as Trades Recognition Australia (My RPL Australia, 2023).

RTOs are Australian Registered Training Organizations. RTOs are able to conduct RPL assessments, but they can only do RPL for the fields in which they teach and have been approved for. The Australian Qualification framework sets the standard for competencies, and programs are rated on ten levels that range from “certificates to doctoral degrees” (AQF, 2023). The AQF Pathways Policy dictates that:

“*all higher education and vocational educational and training providers are required to have policies regarding pathways between qualifications and recognition of previous learning and/or experience that you may have*” (AQF, 2023).

The Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency is the national accrediting body for higher education and designates institutions with the ability to “self-accredit qualifications” (AQF, 2023). Three other regulatory bodies that are able to accredit qualifications are the Australian Skills Quality Authority, the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority (VRQA) and the Western Australian Training Accreditation Council (AQF, 2023).

**Findings relevance to TRU-PLAR program**

***International students***

The lack of credit transfer from certifications and experiences abroad has led to low upward mobility of immigrants to Canada, as well as underutilizing the skilled human capital that exists within the country. New Zealand and Australia’s prior learning recognition programs both consider and evaluate the formal and informal education of migrants arriving to their countries, compare to industry standards, and award official certification if all standards are met or create a customized educational plan to help them fill any knowledge gaps. The State of Queensland guidelines say that to qualify for overseas skills recognition, the applicant must already be living in the country, and is seeking skills assessment and recognition so they can be employed in that field (2020). In New Zealand, CRT (credit recognition and transfer) assessors will compare a migrant’s knowledge and skills to national standards and verify their academic transcripts through their prior learning institution (NZQA, 2023).

The process, skill assessment, and supporting documentation is similar to what is required for domestic RPL applicants. Applicants usually have the option of challenging courses and assessments or completing a portfolio and supplying verifiable evidence. An RPL assessor in Australia, Skills Recognition International, works specifically with migrants to transfer “skills, knowledge, and work experience into accredited Australian qualifications” (2023). It is meant to expedite migrant’s accreditation and although they don’t receive full degrees, they receive credits, certificates and/or diplomas that can be put towards a complete degree (Skills Recognition Int., 2023). SRI has created their program to be timely, cost effective, and flexible, with students being able to fully complete the process online and given certification that will be accepted all across Australia (SRI, 2023).

The initial application and assessment is free; then the applicant is charged if they wish to continue (SRI, 2023). Their website does not list their pricing structure, but instead states that cost is affected by “citizenship, prior study, credit transfers” (SRI, 2023). Price quotes are provided for free and with no obligation (SRI, 2023).

Skills Recognition International:

Email: [admin@skillsrecognition.edu.au](mailto:admin@skillsrecognition.edu.au)

Phone: 1 300 909 956

***Military/RCMP/first responders/veterans***

Aimpoint is an Australian RTO that focuses on military veterans who are building a career outside of the military (Aimpoint, 2018). It sees the value of military experience and training that may go unrecognized by people who have not served and are unfamiliar with how skills developed in service can apply to a civilian career. Aimpoint was developed by ex-military members and currently offers two courses that are accredited through Australian RTOs: a Diploma of Project Management, and a Diploma of Leadership and Management (Aimpoint, 2018). Veterans can apply for an RPL assessment for either or both of the courses, and application is a streamlined and efficient process (Aimpoint, 2018). According to the Aimpoint website (Aimpoint.edu.au), applicants have a brief, initial phone chat to set up further appointments and ask questions (Aimpoint, 2018). Next, they complete a self-paced webinar that addresses frequently asked questions and explains the RPL process and procedure (Aimpoint, 2018). Evidence collection and assessment is personalized for each applicant, and determined during a video call or interview with the applicants to decided what evidence and documentation is required; most applicants are required to present 7 pieces of documentation of their service (Aimpoint, 2018). After all documentation has been submitted, the Aimpoint team reviews the submission and applicants will usually receive a reply within 24 hours of whether or not they would be likely to successfully complete an RPL assessment (Aimpoint, 2018). If yes, they are enrolled in the RPL diploma courses and charged based on the assessment method, the number of modules they need to complete for the diploma, and whether they choose to do in person training for their deficits or complete a self-paced online course (Aimpoint, 2018).

Aimpoint has partnered with defense companies seeking employees, the Edinburgh Industry Alliance, is a Veteran Owned Business, and a “proud supporter of Veteran’s employers” (Aimpoint, 2018).

Contact: [enquiry@aimpoint.edu.au](mailto:enquiry@aimpoint.edu.au)

Phone: 08 7078 4166 or 0435 109 522

RTO code: 45936

***Inclusivity – variety of programs***

The courses and certifications available through RPL assessors vary with each post-secondary institution, RTO, and assessment agency.

In their inquiry form, SIGMA Aerospace College invited those interested to suggest a qualification or course they were interested in if not seen in their collection and is continually developing new courses and tweaking existing programs based on student feedback and needs (2023). It also has payment options and claims to be “priced fairly and provide the fastest and most efficient way to RPL in the industry” (SIGMA, 2023).

Some examples of qualifications available:

Skills Recognition International: Business, post-graduate qualification, community service, work health and safety, health, ICT, and telecommunications (2023).

Aimpoint: Diploma of Project Management; Diploma of Leadership and Management (2018).

SIGMA Aerospace College: Engineers, science, technology, communications…” plus, if we don’t have it in our course library already, we can build you something custom” (2023).

CLET Training: Specializes in RPL programs for military personnel and first responders: police, firefighters, paramedics, and search and rescue (2023). RPL assessors go over applicants portfolio of evidence and experiences and help match them with the qualifications they are most suited for (CLET, 2023).

Ara Institute of Canterbury: certificates, diplomas, and degrees (2023).

Visa Envoy: Include ICT business analyst, systems analyst, analyst programmer, software engineers, ICT decoding specialist, ICT project manager, and ICT manager (2023).

Competenz: Trade specific; includes engineering type trades, manufacturing, print, food and beverage, forestry, transport, and business growth (2023).

Unitec does assessments of prior learning (APL) on a case-by-case basis, so their procedure, time, and pricing will vary (2023). An advantage of this is it considers individual merits, goals, and circumstances in its evaluation.

***Individualization/customization***

Both Australia and New Zealand have RPL programs that create a customized learning plan for applicants to fill gaps in their knowledge and receive full qualifications without having to repeat what has already been learned. For example, the Ara Institute of Canterbury will identify knowledge gaps and provide “completion pathway that outlines what you need to do to fill those gaps. This may involve gaining further experience or taking some courses” (Ara, 2023).

The variety of options for acceptable evidence also enable more people to apply; several organizations cater specifically to first responders and military personnel, so are able to manage complications around confidentiality and difficulty reconnecting with contacts so the application can still be considered for credits.

***Improved accessibility***

Most of the RPL programs in Australia and New Zealand are offered in an almost exclusively online format to improve flexibility. However, some, such as Aimpoint, have an in person option (Aimpoint, 2023); or courses required to fill knowledge gaps found in the assessment are available either in person or online, depending on the program. There is also a range of assessment procedures seen in both countries, ranging from portfolio, challenge exams, demonstrations, presentations, and workplace visits by assessors, to assess skill level.

***Time/duration/length of program until assessment***

The time estimates given for RPL programs varied, although multiple RPL assessors in New Zealand and Australia stressed that it was meant to be time-efficient, such as for Skills Recognition International, which stated that:

*“…the entire RPL process can take a few weeks. This depends on the amount of evidence you need to provide. The sooner we receive all your documents, the sooner we can have your RPL assessed” (SRI, 2023).*

CLET Training, a nationally recognized RPL provider qualified under the Australian Qualifications Framework, says on their website that the entire RPL process usually takes 28 days (2023). However, often the time to complete is affected by the applicant’s ability to secure the proper documentation- agency time frames are given assuming that the applicant is able to quickly secure all the evidence they need to provide for their experience. Delays in collecting evidence will extend the time to assess.

Numerous agencies, such as SIGMA Aerospace College, promise a speedy assessment process for those interested in building a portfolio- SIGMA will provide the initial RPL report in days and provide candidates with study material after so they can get started right away (2023).

***Communication***

Skills Recognition International has career advisors available for ongoing support with the RPL process, and also for job seeking after completion (SRI, 2023). Prior to beginning their portfolio, SRI also offers a free skills assessment and consultation with a mentor regarding the process, likelihood of success, and expectations (SRI, 2023). Some RPL assessors will also evaluate the learning an applicant is able to show, and then match them to a suitable qualification (The State of Queensland, 2020).

***Managing evidence – solutions for reference letters (alternatives), etc.***

Providing evidence, especially from work and life experiences more than several years prior to the time of application, was a source of frustration and challenge for many PLAR applicants at TRU (Forseille, 2019). While all RPL assessors in New Zealand and Australia required verifiable proof pf experience and considered it one of the most important factors for evaluation, they were also open to a diverse range of documentation, including: certifications, licenses, professional memberships, portfolio, photographs from on the job, diary entries of your experience of learning, references from employers and colleagues, personal self-assessment letters, examples of work, phone conversations, course reports, service history, course transcripts, and resumes (SRI, 2023; CLET, 2023; Manukau Institute of Technology, 2023). Foreign credentials can also be assessed (SRI, 2023).

**PSI Institutions offering PLAR**

**Australia**

* All post-secondary institutions, plus RTOs.

**New Zealand**

-All institutions under the Manukau Institute of Technology

-Most post-secondary institutions with RPL programs approved by NZQA

-Private training agencies, must be approved by NZQA

**Summary**

New Zealand and Australia seem to have found, and are continuing to develop, ways to make certification more accessible and time-efficient through their RPL programs. The 2019 PLAR Persistence study found that factors such as financial constraints, limited time between a full time job and other responsibilities, plus life and medical crises interfered with completion (Forseille & Brown, 2023, p.7-8). Recognizing this, institutions and RTOs offering RPL in New Zealand and Australia have streamlined their process, with either a no-time-limit and at-your-own-pace approach, or as a rapid process that can be assessed in as little as several weeks, providing all required documentation is provided (SRI, 2023).

While both TRU PLAR and the international RPL programs reviewed all emphasize supporting evidence as necessary for the learning assessment, New Zealand and Australia accept numerous kinds of evidence, even photographs and foreign credentials (SRI, 2023; CLET, 2023; Manukau Institute of Technology, 2023). Several institutes specialize in specific industries, which could contribute to their ability to speedily process and assess applications, as well as navigate difficulties obtaining certain forms of evidence, as in the case of military and RCMP veterans or first responders. TRU’s PLAR program is academic, but Australia and New Zealand both offer RPL programs for trade workers and immigrants, which is a valuable opportunity for them to alleviate the shortage of skilled workers in their country by enabling those with informal or overseas experience to receive national recognition. It can also be used by employers to ‘upskill’ their employees for less than it would cost to have them complete a training program.

The Australian and New Zealand RPL programs seem to be well integrated into the educational and economic goals of the two countries, especially in their efforts to return to normalcy after the pandemic and an increasingly stressed economy.

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