

***Recognition of Prior Learning in New Zealand:  
What Has Been, What Is, and What Might Be***

*Dave Hornblow*

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Further copies of this paper may be obtained from

The Co-ordinator, Working Papers Advisory Panel  
The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand  
Private Bag 31 914  
Lower Hutt  
Email: WorkingPapers@openpolytechnic.ac.nz

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## *Abstract*

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This paper traces the history of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in New Zealand from the beginning of the 1990s to the present day. It draws upon a case study from the early years, a wide range of the literature, advice from experts in the field, and personal experience of the author in presenting at conferences, both nationally and internationally, and in facilitating candidates through RPL processes. In terms of what has been and what is, benchmarks of inspiration, frustration and celebration are indicated. Looking to the future, it suggests that RPL policy and principles rest easily within the concepts of flexible assessment and open learning. To help put strategies for recognising prior learning in place, a convenient way of categorising tertiary educational institutions in terms of both their accessibility to learners for RPL and their related economic viability is presented. 'Lo-Lo' (that is, low in accessibility and low in economic viability, respectively), 'Hi-Lo', 'Lo-Hi' and 'Hi-Hi' organisations are identified and described. Overall, the author proposes a 'Flexible Assessment Model' involving partnerships among learners, education and training providers, industry, unions and government. This model, from the perspective of education providers, incorporates a cyclical process of,

- pre-entry counselling
- referrals between institutions as appropriate
- learner profiling
- negotiation of learning and assessment options
- assessment
- granting of credit
- consideration of new learning opportunities.

## *Acknowledgements*

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The willingness of 'Jenny' to have her case publicised is gratefully acknowledged. It was her wish that people in similar circumstances should have their knowledge and skills formally recognised by flexible institutions operating in a sympathetic environment. Also, heartfelt thanks are extended to leaders in the field of experiential learning - Susan Simosko and Urban Whitaker, overseas, and Nancy Mills and Nena Benton, in New Zealand, in particular, but many others as well who have pointed to paths of discovery and assisted my journey along the way. Further, significantly, the contribution of my parents to the development of this paper is noted. Between them, they lived a lot (189 years in all) and learned a lot (and passed on a lot) but never received a formal piece of paper for any of it. Finally, my gratitude is expressed to The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand for providing this opportunity for publication.

## *Preface*

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Recognition of Prior Learning, or RPL, is an integral process of flexible assessment and open learning. The concept goes by a number of labels and acronyms throughout the world.

As defined by Simosko (1991, p. 11), for example, under the label *Accreditation of Prior Learning* (APL), RPL is 'a process that enables people of all ages, backgrounds and attitudes to receive formal recognition for skills and knowledge they already possess'.

As defined by Evans and Bailleux (in Challis, 1993, p. ix), under the label *Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning* (APEL), RPL is a process of 'helping people identify the unrecognised learning and the many skills they had acquired outside paid work and in domestic and voluntary work'; and 'a means of facilitating access to education, training and work, through relating learning from experience to the desired targets of the individual'. Following on from those definitions, they suggest that APEL becomes APL when the 'desired targets of the individual' equate with the gaining of formal qualifications (such as, in England, a National Vocational Qualification) (p. ix). Essentially, this is a shift from the general recognition of skills, knowledge, attitudes and values of candidates to the granting of formal credit for those competencies.

As defined by Whitaker (1989, p. 1), under the label *Prior Learning Assessment* (PLA), RPL is 'an essential part of successful planning for future learning'. He states (p. 1):

It offers both process and content information to assist new learning: awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of the learner's style helps to plan improvements in the learning process; and identifying the quantity and quality of the past learning provides a content analysis that is an essential foundation for setting new learning objectives.

As defined by Broadmeadows College of Technical and Further Education (Broadmeadows College of TAFE, now called the Kangan Institute of TAFE, 1990a, p. 6), RPL is 'the acknowledgment of the full range of an individual's skills and knowledge, irrespective of how it has been acquired'.

As defined by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (1993b, p. 4), RPL is 'a process of awarding credit for unit standards in the National Qualifications Framework where the outcomes have been achieved outside the Framework'.

In an analysis of the various concepts, terms and definitions for the recognition of prior learning, Harre Hindmarsh (1992, p. 67) has stated:

The same terms are used sometimes as umbrella concepts – to refer to all forms of recognising all forms of learning, and sometimes as specific concepts – to refer specifically to the recognition of non-certificated learning through the awarding of credit and/or other mechanisms. The learning is usually acquired in nonformal and/or informal learning situations. In addition, the terms may emphasise either the identification and assessment of learning [as in the Whitaker definition above] or the awarding of credit for learning in relation to a specified set of learning criteria or benchmarks [as in the NZQA definition above].

Throughout this paper RPL will be represented as a process that empowers learners by facilitating an understanding and acceptance of their knowledge, skills, attitudes and values, both by the people themselves as individuals and by others, and by the granting of formal academic credit or other means. Being an integral part of the broader concepts of flexible assessment and open learning, it will be characterised as an umbrella concept rather than one that is exclusive to qualifications within a specific framework.

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# ***Recognition of Prior Learning in New Zealand: What Has Been, What Is, and What Might Be***

## ***Introduction***

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Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) has generated much interest for a number of years in countries such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia. However, despite the many advances that have been made in the implementation of RPL systems, it is commonly recognised that there are problems to be solved. For example, Pamela Tate, President of the United States Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), in reflecting that in the early 1970s the initiative to grant credit for experiential learning was driven by a concern for access, has stated, 'Today, we know that people do learn from experiences in diverse settings, and we do have the tools to facilitate the assessment of that learning, but a significant part of that original goal of access has still not been achieved' (Tate 1993, p. 3).

RPL has generated much interest in New Zealand, too. As is the case overseas (Sheckley et al., 1993), more and more adults in New Zealand are deciding that they need new skills and knowledge if they are to continue to be employed. Often this coincides with a need to obtain certificates, diplomas or degrees.

However, have such people been getting a fair deal over the last decade, that is, over the period when there has been a push by educational authorities and institutions to have recognition of prior learning (RPL) processes in place? Perhaps so. Perhaps not. Certainly, there seem to have been many changes indirection, some for the better, some for the worse, relating to an initiative notable for its dialogue, discussion, debate and tensions. Let's focus on the case of a single individual, Jenny, before considering RPL developments in New Zealand over the last 10 years in more general terms.

To conclude, after consideration of the developments, we will reflect on a mix of models aimed at smoothing the RPL paths for candidates throughout New Zealand and the wider world in the years ahead.

All in all, the paper tells a story – not only Jenny's story, but also my own as a practitioner and then a more general story of RPL development in New Zealand. For all parties involved, there have been challenges, frustrations and achievements.

## *The Case of Jenny*

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At the start of 1992, Jenny enrolled in *Organisation and Management* with The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand. She was enthusiastic. This 100-level paper was the last she had to complete to gain her National Certificate in Business Studies (now called the New Zealand Diploma in Business).

Then came a shock. She found that she had abdominal cancer and had to undergo surgery and intensive chemotherapy treatment. Her study plans were shattered. Very disappointed, she felt obliged to indicate to her tutor that she would not be able to carry on.

The tutor shared Jenny's dismay. Already, within just a few weeks of her enrolment, she had completed two test papers that had both received exceptional A+ grades from the tutor.

He reflected upon the situation, reviewed the information he had on Jenny, and put some questions to himself and his colleagues. Wasn't Jenny an experienced manager of an accounting firm in Palmerston North? Didn't she already have the knowledge and skills required to pass the course? Hadn't she already shown that she had the motivation to succeed as an efficient and effective organiser and manager? And hadn't she the ability to succeed as an academic? Should she have had to enrol in *Organisation and Management* in the first place?

He wondered if something could be done. Fortuitously, he had recently participated in two workshops run by the Broadmeadows College of TAFE (Victoria, Australia, now known as the Kangan Institute of TAFE) on RPL, and he had an inkling that the process that had been covered in detail might provide an answer. The first workshop had qualified him as an RPL facilitator, the second as a trainer of RPL facilitators and assessors (Broadmeadows College of TAFE, 1990a, 1990b, 1991).

Given that background, Jenny's tutor decided to phone her to ask if she would be willing and able to go through the RPL process. It was explained that if she decided to go ahead with the idea she would receive

- brochure-type information on the process
- a copy of the *Organisation and Management* prescription (to give, in the absence of anything better, an indication of the learning outcomes of the course)
- some relatively simple forms to fill in.

Then, it was explained, there would be an interview of perhaps an hour's duration involving three or four people. Jenny would be there as the RPL candidate, the tutor as the RPL facilitator, another tutor as the RPL assessor, and perhaps another person, invited by Jenny herself, as her advocate. Finally, it was emphasised that there could be no guarantee that Jenny would be given a pass in *Organisation and Management* even if it were decided by the assessor that RPL applied to her. Jenny was told that the exercise would have to be seen as 'a pilot project with no promises' but that 'perhaps something might eventuate by way of an aegrotat pass or something like that'.

Jenny decided to go ahead. In discussion with her tutor - who was now accepted as the RPL facilitator - and after consultation with her doctor, she felt that the process would not be too demanding on her health. She came to the conclusion that it would, in fact, provide an enriching and empowering experience whether or not she gained academic credit at the end of it. She decided, also, to have her boss, Ian, as her advocate at the interview.

The forms were completed and the interview was arranged to take place in Ian's office. The RPL facilitator and RPL assessor would drive up from The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, in Lower Hutt, to Palmerston North, a distance of about 130 kilometres.

Before the interview, the RPL facilitator spoke by phone to all parties involved and stressed the positive and supportive nature of the RPL interview. The aim was to make sure that everyone had the opportunity to state their case in an atmosphere that was friendly and at the same time, allowed for valid and reliable academic assessment. Roles were understood by the prospective participants and they looked forward enthusiastically to the experience.

The day of the interview arrived. The RPL facilitator and RPL assessor drove to Palmerston North, found the address of the accounting firm, parked their car, went inside, and introduced themselves to Ian. A brief, friendly chat ensued.

Jenny arrived. She looked nervous. The RPL facilitator eased her tension by chatting with the others about his favourable memories of Palmerston North and then invited her to talk about her family. Specifically, he asked about a daughter who (as he knew from previous correspondence from Jenny) had been 'quite a challenge' but who was now doing very well as a typist and receptionist for a high-profile business. Jenny responded warmly to the question and the conversation merged naturally into her experiences in managing various groups: her family, religious and community organisations, and the accounting firm. Ian was then able to point out that she was a partner rather than a subordinate in his accounting firm (uncertificated though she

might be), being jointly involved in all important decision making and having full responsibility for the management of the six other staff members. He also mentioned that she ran tutorial classes on accounting and business at the local university from time to time.

Throughout, with the help of the RPL facilitator, the RPL assessor was able to ease in questions about what Jenny had learned from her work and life experiences and on how this ability matched the learning outcomes in the *Organisation and Management* prescription. Occasionally, as appropriate, Ian lent support to Jenny's answers.

After 50 minutes the interview concluded. As an example of RPL assessment, Jenny's case proved straightforward. The RPL assessor was able to state on the spot that he would have no hesitation in recommending to the Academic Committee of The Open Polytechnic that Jenny receive full credit for *Organisation and Management*. However, what they would or could do about it was the big question.

In fact, at the time they could do nothing. National Certificate in Business Studies regulations, it was pointed out by the Chairperson of the Academic Committee, did not allow for the recognition of experiential credit. However, the possibility of granting an aegrotat pass after other students had sat the final examination for the course in November (a couple of months after Jenny's RPL interview) was not ruled out.

November came and went. Jenny was resigned to the fact that she had missed out on just one more thing in 1992. Then came the news. It was that she had been granted an aegrotat pass (with some manipulation of The Open Polytechnic's system at the time). She had been credited with the learning outcomes of *Organisation and Management*; she had completed her National Certificate in Business Studies.

She was elated. Rightly so. She was a deserving case.

## *New schemes and possible dreams*

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Jenny's case is set in the early days of strong interest in RPL in New Zealand. A trigger for interest was a clause in the Education Amendment Act 1990, section 253(1)(c)(ii), which called for the New Zealand Qualifications Authority to be responsible for recognising 'competency already achieved' in a new National Qualifications Framework. Members of the education, industrial training, social services and nursing sectors were quick to explore the possibilities.

The Palmerston North College of Education produced two reports on RPL (Griffin, 1990; Griffin & Brooking, 1991). At much the same time, Nena and Richard Benton of the New Zealand Council for Educational Research became keenly interested in the potential of RPL and were contracted to provide reports to the Maori Caucus of the New Zealand Council for Education and Training in the Social Services (Benton, N., 1991; Benton, R. et al., 1991; NZCETSS, 1991). The Bentons and their colleagues pointed out that a 'possible dream' could be realised through the replacement of 'hegemony by symphony'.

Significant, too, was a paper by Glenys Patterson (1991) of Massey University on credit transfer, that is, on cross-crediting and similar opportunities between tertiary institutions in New Zealand and overseas. It greatly helped put the jigsaw of experiential learning opportunities together.

For its part, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority appointed Nancy Mills, an expatriate American, as its RPL project officer. She commissioned research on behalf of the authority and reports followed on

- policy and procedures for New Zealand polytechnics that would allow the awarding of credit by RPL (Nelson Polytechnic, 1992, authored by Gunn & McDougall)
- a case study approach to RPL with an emphasis on group activities (Sheehan, 1992)
- changes required for a comprehensive RPL system in a New Zealand university (Harre Hindmarsh et al., 1992)
- making a case for RPL at a distance (Hornblow, 1994).

NZCETSS maintained its interest and produced a further report in the early 1990s (Hopkins, 1993).

Also, in the early 1990s, workshops on RPL that attracted much interest were offered by Colin Gunn and Julie McDougall at Nelson Polytechnic and Jennie Harre Hindmarsh at Victoria University of Wellington, with Sally Davis of Broadmeadows College of TAFE as the invited facilitator in the latter instance.

### **NZQA conference**

A conference on RPL was run by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (coordinated by Nancy Mills) in April 1993 and attracted 150 participants. There were three keynote speakers from overseas: Norman Evans of the Learning from Experience Trust, United Kingdom; Margaret Brownlie-Marshall of the Scottish Vocational Education Council; and Andrew Gonczi of the University of Technology, Sydney, Australia. Among the topics covered were

- implications of the extension of academic authority (Evans, 1993)
- flexible assessment systems and their implications for providers (Brownlie-Marshall, 1993a, 1993b)
- RPL in the context of the competency movement (Gonczi, 1993).

In addition, New Zealand-based presenters covered a wide range of topics (Benton, R. et al.; Brownie & Milne; Burleigh et al.; Coleman et al.; Gunn & McDougall; Harre Hindmarsh; Harre Hindmarsh & Mackintosh; Hornblow; Hunt; Ker; Meade et al.; Merrick & Lodge; Mills; Pohl; Sheehan et al.; Sheehan; Townsend, all 1993).

The need to address problem areas was emphasised. As stated in the foreword of the conference proceedings (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 1993a: second unnumbered page): 'At the conclusion of the conference, the 150 participants expressed enthusiasm for the concepts but recognised that there were many issues yet to be resolved before formal implementation.'

Key issues, it was agreed by the participants, related to funding, fees and costs and the impact of funding regimes 'on educational access and equity'. The participants unanimously supported a recommendation that NZQA seek an urgent meeting with the Ministers of Education, Labour and Employment 'to set up a task force to investigate the resourcing and funding of the implementation of RPL'. The specific issues the task force was asked to address were:

- resource requirements to provide an RPL advisory and assessment service

- costs associated with assessment in specific contexts
- alternative funding regimes
- the impact of each funding regime on educational access and equity
- the impact of each funding regime on Study Right, Student Loans, Student Allowance, and Training Benefits
- the impact of each funding regime on viability of courses, taking into account different forms of provision and awards
- any other issues the task force identifies as relevant.

(New Zealand Qualification Authority, 1993a, fifth unnumbered page).

It was hoped by the conference participants that such a task force would report by 30 September 1993. (The conference ran from 21–23 April 1993.) However, no task force was set up and no report eventuated. At government level, RPL was discussed in closed fashion by policy development and implementation committees.

### ***Polytechnic and other initiatives***

Despite the absence of a task force, it is clear that RPL initiatives were taking place within many polytechnics (if not universities) throughout New Zealand. For example, RPL was incorporated into a Diploma of Teaching offered by the Central Institute of Technology in Upper Hutt, as a challenge to candidates to reflect on the relevance of their past experiences to their teaching (Hales & Manson, 1993, cited in Kuiper, 1994, p. 3). In Christchurch, the Academic Board of Christchurch Polytechnic (now Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology) undertook a pilot study and implemented RPL procedures (Kuiper, 1994). At The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand in Lower Hutt, the term *Accelerated Assessment* was adopted for RPL and was pilot tested and subsequently adopted as an option for the Bachelor of Business degree course, *Business Communication* (McMurdo et al., 1993).

Late in 1993 NZQA published its own booklet (authored by Nancy Mills), *The Recognition of Prior Learning: Quality and Assurance in Education and Training*. As defined in the booklet (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 1993b, p. 4), RPL is ‘a process of awarding credit for unit standards in the National Qualifications Framework where the outcomes have been achieved outside the Framework’. Principles espoused were the following:

- RPL should be accessible to anyone with skills, knowledge, attitudes and values that can be validated.
- Access to RPL should be supported through a process of referral to those accredited to implement RPL.
- Opportunities for candidates to receive support and guidance should be available throughout the RPL process.
- RPL procedures ensure that assessment is fair, valid and consistent.
- Credit for unit standards should be awarded for current and relevant skills, knowledge, attitudes and values achieved without regard to length, place or method of learning (NZQA, p. 6).

In terms of sound practice, it was suggested that a ‘variety of policies, models and procedures that promote access for all potential candidates will be developed by those implementing RPL’ (op. cit.: p. 14).

Coinciding with the publication of the booklet, NZQA offered workshops to education providers, private training organisations, government organisations, industry, and Maori and Pacific Island groups. These were facilitated by Nancy Mills, with support from Dale Sheehan, who had been instrumental in introducing RPL at Christchurch College of Education, and the author, who was exploring the possibilities of RPL at a distance at The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand.

### ***American visitors***

In 1994, Urban Whitaker of the United States’ Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) ran workshops in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch. In Wellington, he was a featured workshop facilitator at the ICDE/DEANZ (International Council for Distance Education/Distance Education Association of New Zealand) Conference.

In 1995, Susan Simosko (like Whitaker, an American with a long-term involvement in CAEL but who was at the time based in the United Kingdom) also ran workshops in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch. In Wellington she was the featured facilitator of an RPL Institute that attracted 90 participants. The RPL Institute was organised by RPL Services Ltd, a private training organisation established by Nancy Mills on completion of her contract with NZQA. Co-directors with Nancy Mills were Dave Hornblow, Dale Sheehan and John Hopkins. As stated in the proceedings of the RPL Institute (Hornblow, 1995, p. 55):

Participants came to the RPL Institute and associated seminars with hopes and fears: 'How can RPL candidates be assessed in flexible yet sensitive ways?' 'How can recognition be given to both high achievers and those who have been failed by the system?' 'How can good RPL programmes be designed?' 'How can flexible assessment be integrated into existing programmes?' 'Will sufficient focus be given to industry rather than just the education sector?' 'Will niggling questions about the National Qualifications Framework be answered?' 'Will clear indications of financial support and government commitment become apparent?'

Some of the hopes were well satisfied; some but not all of the fears were allayed.

What did emerge out of the activities, on the positive side, were initiatives to better confront the issues and challenges of the current learning environment. Chances to form new relationships were taken. Opportunities to form partnerships of candidates, industry, unions, education providers, trainers, and government were planned. Arrangements were made to establish networks of believers in RPL and flexible assessment.

Importantly from various perspectives, there was refinement of the principles and practices of a process that 'enables people of all ages, backgrounds and attitudes to receive formal recognition for skills and knowledge they already possess' (Simosko, 1991, p. 11).

There was confirmation that what is important in the world of learning is much more than just the gaining of qualifications.

He aha te mea nui i te ao? He tangata. He tangata. He tangata. (What is most important in the world? It is people. It is people. It is people.)

A notable event at the RPL Institute in Wellington was the launching of the first of a series of three books on RPL by Nena Benton (Benton, 1995a, 1995b, 1996). As stated in the foreword, the first book 'provides a broad overview of RPL in its philosophical, international, educational and social contexts' (Benton, 1995a, p. v). The other two books concentrate on the practice of RPL from the perspectives of RPL candidates, providers, facilitators and assessors. Published by the New Zealand Council for Educational Research, they are a fine resource for RPL training and development.

Also in 1995, the Education and Training Support Agency (ETSA) funded an RPL pilot in the Training Opportunities Programme (TOP). This involved YMCA Education Ltd, Invercargill, YMCA Hawkes Bay Ltd, Hastings, and YMCA Education Services Ltd, Wellington, all registered private training establishments, and Nancy Mills as researcher. The study led to recommendations on how RPL can be implemented efficiently and effectively in the TOP context (Mills & Hornblow, 1996).

## ***Cooling of attitude***

However, the institute, book launch and TOP pilot of 1995 coincided with a cooling of NZQA's attitude toward RPL. The contract of the RPL project officer had not been renewed and there was a reluctance to first publish and then promote five RPL unit standards that had been written. RPL was being seen as an assessment methodology that did not need special impetus. Rather, as expressed by an influential faction at NZQA, it should be absorbed within a general recognition of current competencies.

What was being overlooked by these people at NZQA was that RPL is much more than an assessment methodology. It is a process that proactively provides opportunities for disenfranchised groups and individuals to achieve results comparable to the results of those who both have the opportunities and typically find themselves in more fortunate circumstances. RPL provides hope that otherwise might not exist for people such as an unwaged woman, a member of a minority ethnic group, a redundant worker, a person with a severe disability and the Jennies who find their world crashing around them. To say that RPL is no more than recognition of current competencies is much the same as suggesting to Māori that there is only one type of tree in the forest. Life and the creation of opportunities are not so simple.

## ***NZQA-funded review***

In 1996, with the assistance of NZQA funding for only the first two phases of what was originally conceived as a three-stage process, Maureen Reid, Mary Melrose and Phil Ker of the Auckland Institute of Technology (now the Auckland University of Technology) began a review of RPL in New Zealand. This research involved a survey of polytechnics, industry training organisations, private training establishments and colleges of education. Fifty-six education and training providers were invited to take part. Of the 37 who responded to the research questionnaire (19 polytechnics, 12 industry training organisations, four private training establishments, and two colleges of education), 29 indicated that they conducted some form of RPL and eight that they did not. Those that did comprised all of the polytechnics and colleges of education and half of the private training establishments and industry training organisations.

The frequency of RPL assessments with respect to vocational or subject areas, unit standards and National Qualifications Framework levels was examined. Key aspects that arose from the survey were implementation issues and the need for appropriate support services for RPL candidates and training of RPL facilitators and assessors.

'Equity' was given as one of the three main reasons for carrying out RPL in institutions (by 17 of the 37 providers who were surveyed). The other major reasons were, 'RPL is an integral part of education' (22) and 'RPL encourages enrolments' (20) (Reid et al., 1996, p. 2).

On the topic of accessibility of RPL to potential candidates, the researchers commented, 'From the data analysis it is apparent that the level of prior learning assessment activity is relatively low throughout the potential tertiary providers in New Zealand' (Reid et al., 1996, p. 3). Further, they stated that the reason is 'an apparent lack of institutional leadership relating to the implementation of RPL' (Reid et al., p. 7). They stated also that whether or not teachers have a positive attitude to RPL seems to be an important factor influencing assessment practice (Reid et al., p. 6).

On the topic of quality assurance, they pointed to the significant diversity of institutional practices. They stated:

At the one extreme is a complete hands-off approach, with those implementing prior learning assessments being left entirely to their own devices. At the other extreme, one institution has an internal accreditation process - prior learning assessment can only be conducted if the teaching department has demonstrated a basic capability and preparedness to offer the service. In between, another institution has implemented an internal consultant approach to quality - those who are engaged in prior learning assessment can make use of trained specialists in the field, and can be mentored through their initial experiences. (Reid et al., 1996, p. 7)

The researchers found that RPL fees varied considerably throughout New Zealand. They stated:

These range from charging the full course fee to no charge. Many organisations charge on an hourly rate of approximately \$30 to \$50 for assessment. Some organisations distinguish between administrative fees, facilitation services and the actual assessment of evidence of prior learning in their fee structures. (Reid et al., 1996, p. 6)

Significantly, in terms of a partnership approach to RPL (or a lack of one), the researchers commented:

The current scene in New Zealand for prior learning assessment is that it is fragmented, both nationally and within institutions, and even within teaching departments. Further, assessors appear to be practising in isolation within their institutions. Very few assessors know of, let alone have contact with, other prior learning assessors in their institution. (Reid et al., p. 6)

Their findings, overall, suggested that in 1996 New Zealand had a long way to go in the development of a comprehensive, co-ordinated and collaborative RPL system. There is little evidence to suggest that things have improved greatly in the last few years. However, there have been advances.

### ***Recent advances***

The emergence of the Centre for the Assessment of Prior Learning (CAPL), established in 1999 at Otago Polytechnic, is significant and heartening (Day & Devjee, 2000). The centre is being marketed to business, the community and stakeholders, both within the polytechnic and beyond to it. An eight-step procedure is used to move an RPL candidate from application for credit to notification of the assessment decision. Assessment standards and quality assurance are maintained by ensuring that the evidence provided is Current, Relevant, Authentic, Verifiable, Equitable and Sufficient (CRAVES), (Simosko & Cook, 1996). Among the services provided are portfolio development workshops and there is a focus on partnership. Signs are promising for ongoing development, both locally and nationally. As stated by the developers and managers of the centre:

We expect CAPL to grow and expand as this new flexible method of gaining qualifications becomes more widely accepted in both the polytechnic sector and industry. Many industry groups have shown interest in CAPL services.

We believe that by having the Centre for Assessment of Prior Learning we are meeting the needs of adult learners who wish to gain qualifications from their experience. This follows international trends by providing assessment of prior learning services to people in New Zealand (Day & Devjee, 2000, p. 12).

Recently, also, Ker and Reid (2000) have reported on a collaborative venture between McDonald's Family Restaurants, which runs a management development programme, and the Auckland University of Technology, which offers the nationally recognised programme, the New Zealand Diploma in Business. Employees of McDonald's obtain credit from both the fast food franchise and the educational institution via workplace training and

performance appraisal in the first instance and from formal diploma-based courses in the second. It is an example of *corporate credit* being recognised by academia. Such credit is accepted as appropriate 'to those situations in which organisations have developed integrated employee training and development, performance assessment and career progression systems, such that an employee's position within the organisation can lead reasonably to the conclusion that certain learning has taken place' (Ker & Reid, 2000, p. 2).

At The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, Accelerated Assessment has been offered in Bachelor of Business courses such as *Business Communication* and *Business Management*. About five per cent of students enrolled in any particular semester make application for credit through this option. Typically, they produce documentary evidence tied to learning outcomes of courses and then take part in a telephone interview up to one hour long with one or two assessors. Most candidates succeed. However, it is not unusual for them to be asked to provide evidence further to their initial documentation prior to the awarding of credit.

All in all, RPL in New Zealand is alive, if not as well as it might be. Certainly, a person like Jenny, the focus of the case study that introduced this paper, can now find polytechnic institutions in New Zealand that will allow them to proceed through formalised RPL processes. That is an improvement on the early 1990s (when opportunities were few and formalisation was not always in place), but the institutions take some finding and the situation is far from ideal. Some candidates get RPL opportunities; most do not. The RPL movement itself is driven primarily by an enthusiasm that exists in scattered pockets.

So how can the situation be improved? Holistically, as we look to the years ahead, what is needed for RPL in New Zealand? The belief in and implementation of appropriate learning and assessment models is surely a must. Importantly, they must be set in a context that is collaborative rather than competitive from political, economic and social points of view. Let's fix our eyes to the future, short- and long-term, and consider such models.

## *A flexible learning and assessment model*

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Flexible assessment, which can be viewed as a process incorporating RPL and sitting comfortably within open learning, empowers people by facilitating an understanding and acceptance of their knowledge, skills, attitudes and values, both by the people themselves as individuals and by others, and by the granting of formal academic credit or other means.

The process has a series of steps that are well accepted by elite theorists and practitioners (Simosko, 1991), namely, pre-entry counselling, candidate profiling, consideration of learning and assessment options, decision on options, assessment, granting of credit (if appropriate), and consideration of new learning opportunities (Fig. 1).

A key decision that devolves from the first step in the process (pre-entry counselling) is: *Course(s)/Programme(s) appropriate?* (see Fig. 1) If so, the candidate is in a position to move on to the next step (*Candidate Profiling*). If not, it is contended that there is an important referral function to be carried out by the counselling organisation. This may involve pointing the candidate to an institution (or other department within the counselling organisation) that offers more appropriate learning and assessment services, where the candidate is much more likely to successfully move through the steps of the model. For example, an institution that does not offer evening classes may refer a full-time worker to one that does. In another example, a distance learning provider that is essentially paper-based in the way it communicates with its learners may refer a technologically sophisticated candidate to an on-line campus. In yet another instance, it might be an on-line campus that refers a social-interaction-seeking student to a traditional contact institution.

This type of collaborative orientation raises important questions, of course. How is the pre-entry counselling service paid for? How is a network established among institutions that facilitates candidates' access to a wide range of opportunities in an economically viable way? How can multiple-win situations be assured or shaped in such ventures? Education institutions in New Zealand – either through government agencies or their own initiatives – have been slow to provide appropriate services at this stage of the process. A major weakness exists. However, the CAPL initiative of Otago Polytechnic is a huge step in the right direction.

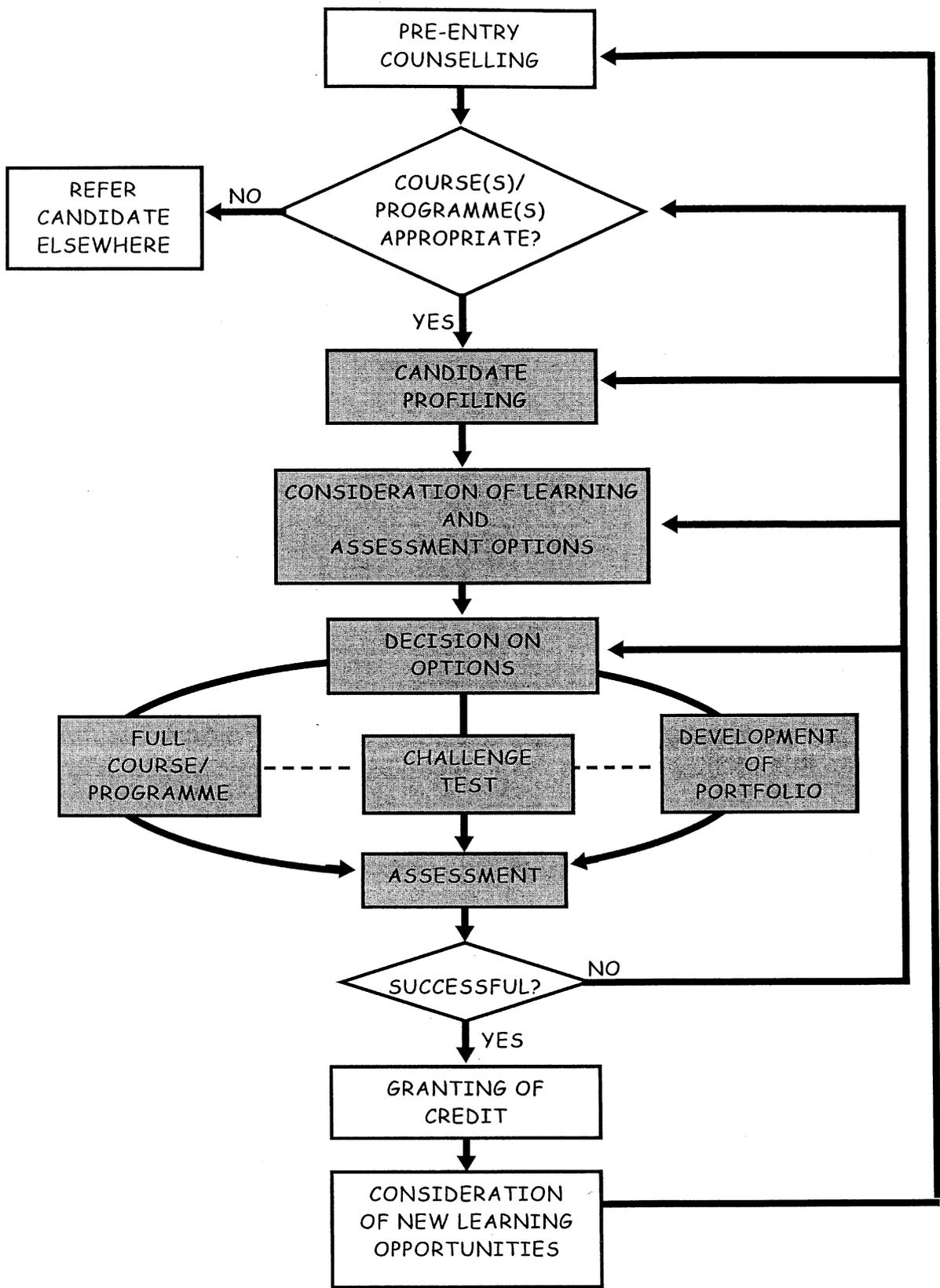


Figure 1: Flexible Assessment Model

Candidate profiling follows pre-entry counselling. Typical of the questions to be reflected upon by the candidate at this stage are: 'Where have I been?', 'Where am I now?', 'Where do I wish to be in the future?' The subsequently shared answers pave the way for sensible decisions by the institution and candidate on learning and assessment options.

A choice of learning and assessment options among *full course/programme*, *challenge test*, and *development of portfolio* is the next important aspect of the model. Being able to take a challenge test or have a portfolio assessed may lead to significant savings for a candidate in both time and money. Alternatively, taking a full course or programme after considering other options may prove beneficial from social and developmental points of view. Essentially, facilitation services should be available for an appropriate range of options. Again, questions of how this can improve accessibility and be done in an economically viable way are significant. For example, does the portfolio development option help a wide range of candidates have their prior learning recognised, or is it beneficial to only particular types of learners at particular levels? Is it genuinely feasible to offer individualised rather than standardised learning and assessment options? Is it a matter of offering one or the other or both? Each institution must decide wisely on its capability.

Next comes the question relating to the success or otherwise of the candidate following assessment. If successful, the candidate is granted credit as appropriate and, importantly, is counselled on new learning opportunities. Consistent with a spiral concept of lifelong learning, success enables the candidate to traverse all the steps of

- pre-entry counselling
- candidate profiling
- consideration of learning and assessment options
- decisions on options
- assessment
- granting of credit, at a higher or different level.

Alternatively if not yet successful, the candidate is given the opportunity to once more be facilitated through the steps leading immediately to decisions on learning and assessment options and the taking of opportunities to demonstrate competence in relation to the selected course or programme.

Feedback loops relating to the alternative outcomes above are built into the model and are a distinctive part of it. They are essential representations of its dynamic and cyclical nature. How these counselling and facilitation possibilities can handle the tensions of accessibility and economic viability again lead to key questions:

- How can candidates remain empowered when the following of learning and assessment options does not lead to initial success?
- How can the ongoing learning and assessment services be paid for as candidates re-enter the system through the short feedback loop?
- How can the ongoing counselling services (relating to the long feedback loop) be financed?

Again, important decisions need to be made.

It is suggested that the answers to the questions raised in this section lie in accepting that the economic viability of the flexible assessment model to both institutions and candidates relies on effective partnerships between and among learners, education and training providers, unions, industry and government. Essentially, a holistic view of the process and its significance must be taken rather than a focus on simple, disparate, cause-and-effect relationships.

## *Mercenaries, missionaries, misfits and mutants?*

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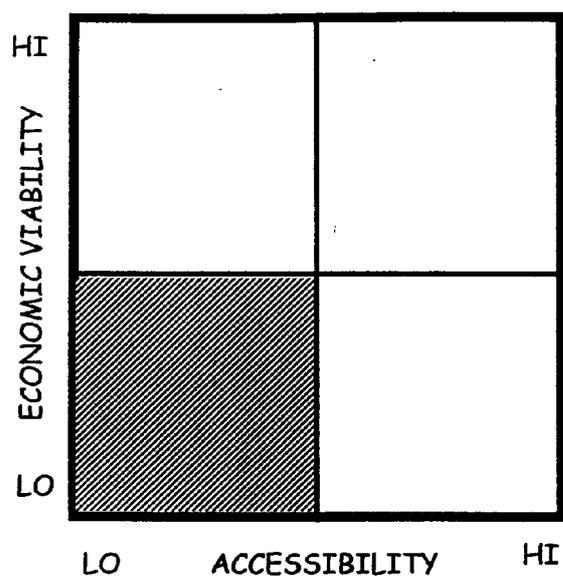
A convenient way of categorising tertiary educational institutions in terms of both their accessibility to candidates for learning and assessment and their related economic viability is shown in Fig. 2. Depending on the extent of evidence of each of the variables, it is suggested that an organisation might be labelled

- *Lo-Lo* (low in accessibility to candidates in general and low in economic viability as an organisation in terms of offering RPL, flexible and open learning services)
- *Hi-Lo* (high in accessibility and low in economic viability)
- *Lo-Hi* (low in accessibility and high in economic viability)
- *Hi-Hi* (high in both accessibility and economic viability).

This constitutes a matrix in which the respective categories are 'misfits', 'missionaries', 'mercenaries', and 'mutants'.

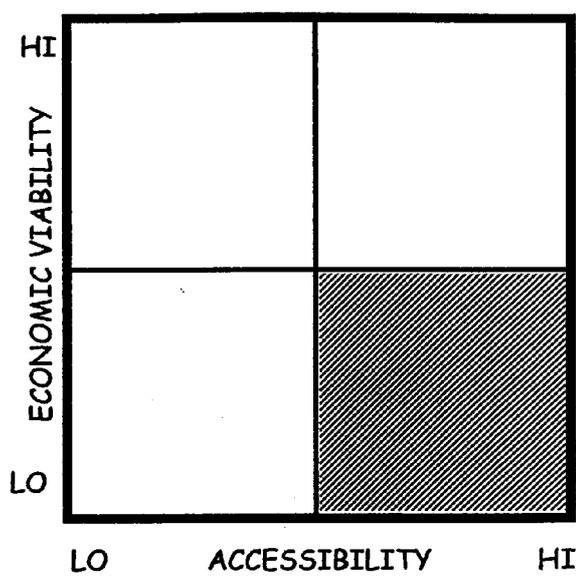
A Lo-Lo organisation is one that has neither the inclination nor the financial resources to apply the principles and practices of open learning, including RPL and flexible assessment. It is likely to offer a limited range of learning and assessment options and be poorly placed in terms of the dollars it has to mount education and training programmes. It can be seen as a 'misfit'. It is comprised of members of academic faculties who don't see a place for concepts such as RPL, flexible assessment, open learning or educational partnerships. What they have done in the past they will continue to do in the future. They believe they already have the right answers and that they should carry on as they have done. To them, the relationship of teacher to student reflects that of master to acolyte. 'Learning,' they emphasise, 'should be institution-centred.' They are the traditionalists of tertiary education.

A Hi-Lo organisation will be in a similar economic situation to a Lo-Lo organisation but will provide flexible learning and assessment options that, among other things, allow for RPL through various means. It can be seen as a 'missionary'. The staff of its faculty are zealous promoters of RPL, flexible assessment and open learning. They promote their causes wherever and whenever they can. They are believers in high accessibility of tertiary education.



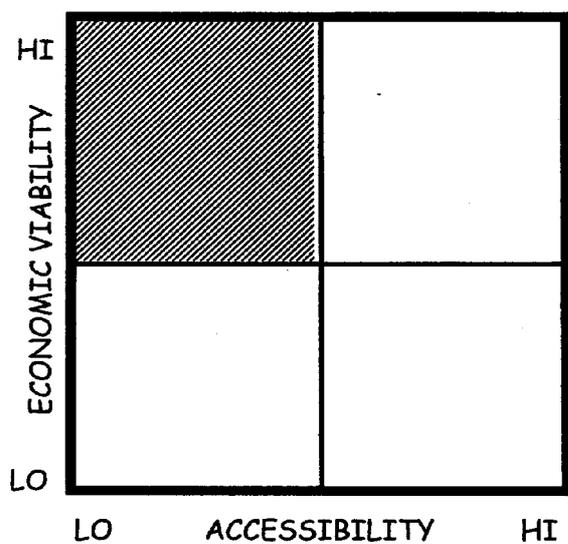
**Lo-Lo Organisation  
'Misfit'**

Low in accessibility to RPL candidates;  
low in economic viability as an organisation



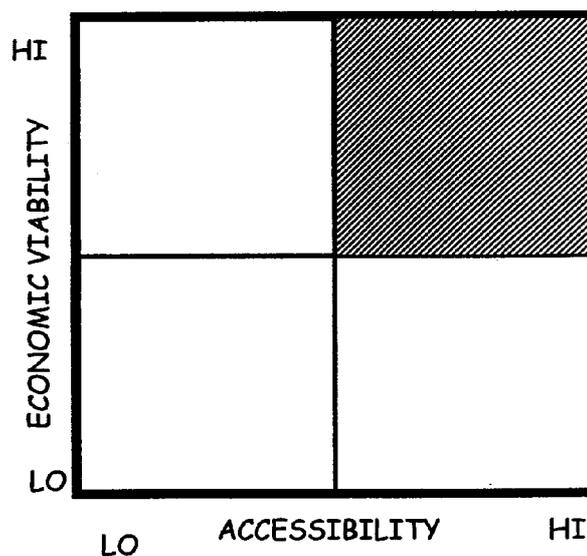
**Hi-Lo Organisation  
'Missionary'**

High in accessibility to RPL candidates;  
low in economic viability as an organisation



**Lo-Hi Organisation  
'Mercenary'**

Low in accessibility to RPL candidates;  
high in economic viability as an organisation



**Hi-Hi Organisation  
'Mutant'**

High in accessibility to RPL candidates;  
high in economic viability as an organisation

**Figure 2: Organisational Types in Terms of  
Accessibility and Economic Viability**

They are strong on rhetoric but not necessarily on the realities of the current educational setting. They are seen by the skeptical as practitioners with a dangerous 'mile wide, inch deep' focus. Social justice is their primary consideration; the economic viability of institutions is clearly secondary.

A Lo-Hi organisation may offer learning and assessment services to a niche market (or niche markets) of learners, such as people in employment who are moving from operational to management positions, but will not make its services accessible to learners in general. By focusing on its niche market, it is able to fund its operations with little if any outside assistance. It can be seen as a 'mercenary'. The mercenaries of tertiary education, by definition, apply the maxim 'Money first, people second.' What is over-ridingly important to them is the bottom line of business, not the quality of education. In the United States, for example, many of them have an exclusive focus on adults-only courses. Simply put, if potential students can pay their fees up front (preferably through business sponsorship), they're in. Conversely, with a focus on variables that are inconsistent with that approach, if potential students are under the age of 25, they're out; if they haven't got two or more years of work experience, they're out; and if they want to study something other than business or management or some other area popular to large numbers of adult learners, they're out. Social responsibility is not a consideration of the mercenaries.

A Hi-Hi organisation is one that provides flexible learning and assessment options to people in general and is successful in establishing a formula that makes it economically viable on an ongoing basis. It can be seen as a 'mutant' (or, if preferred, a 'monolith' or 'megasite'). Mutants are fusions of mercenaries and missionaries (and perhaps misfits), who seek to ease the tension between accessibility of learners to formal education and the associated economic viability of provider institutions. An example (yet to be found in New Zealand) might be a university that has established such a reputation for excellence in providing a wide range of programmes and courses that learners of all types and persuasions are attracted to it. It would offer pre-entry and post-programme counselling services, probably at no direct cost to learners, and flexible assessment options that would minimise the wastage of time and money that is typical of the approaches of many traditional institutions. It is likely that both the counselling and flexible assessment services would be offered on a loss-leader basis and that costs would be recovered through appropriate supply and demand costing of full courses and programmes. The organisation would have to be large and diverse in terms of functions, staff and full- and part-time learners in order to bring economies of scale into play.

Overall, in terms of the categorisations, it is suggested that most single organisations that survive in today's world are either Hi-Lo or Lo-Hi in nature. They are the missionaries or mercenaries. Through subsidy or wise selection of niche markets, they are able to provide effective learning and assessment services. In contrast, Lo-Lo organisations by their very nature and definition are unlikely to survive on an ongoing basis. They are misfits. It is suggested, also, that the Hi-Hi situation will be a rarity among single institutions but is achievable among consortia and partnerships of organisations. How to make such consortia and partnerships work is the key to economically viable and accessible learning and assessment practices.

## *Open learning partnerships*

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A holistic, partnership concept is needed if learning and assessment services are to be accessible and economically viable. The complexity of such a model is represented in Fig. 3, where a mixture of educational, training, and industrial organisations rests within a part-partnership, part-market-based environment in which government acts as a safety net for opportunities and challenges that are otherwise unmet.

Entity A might be an assessment centre that is funded and shared by a consortium of education and training providers, B, C, D and E. There will be formal agreement among the members about what financial, human, and material resources each will put forward for facilitation, assessment, administrative and managerial services. It may work in a way similar to that of public tertiary institutions in Vermont in the United States (Sargent, 1985).

Organisations F and G might be universities that do not have firm, ongoing, joint venture relationships with other organisations but what arrange partnerships on an ad hoc basis. For example, F might provide its own facilitation and assessment services on most occasions but might enlist the services of assessment centre S and university G for courses and programmes where learner enrolments are high and lecturer resources are relatively low. Similarly, G might establish partnership arrangements when required with university F, colleges/polytechnics H, I, J and K, industrial organisations O, P, Q and R, and assessment centre S.

Organisation H might be a large tertiary institution (such as The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand) that provides a wide variety of courses and programmes at various levels for adult learners. In terms of accessibility and economic viability, it might come close to being a Hi-Hi organisation. It might provide its own counselling services free of charge to prospective students and facilitation and assessment services on a loss-leader basis. However, in its open learning environment, it will seek partnership opportunities in certain instances (for example, joining with a private training establishment with state-of-the-technology expertise in telecommunications or with an educational broker with strong overseas contacts) and will receive some subsidy from government for programmes that are not self-funding (for example, employability programmes for workers who have been made redundant).

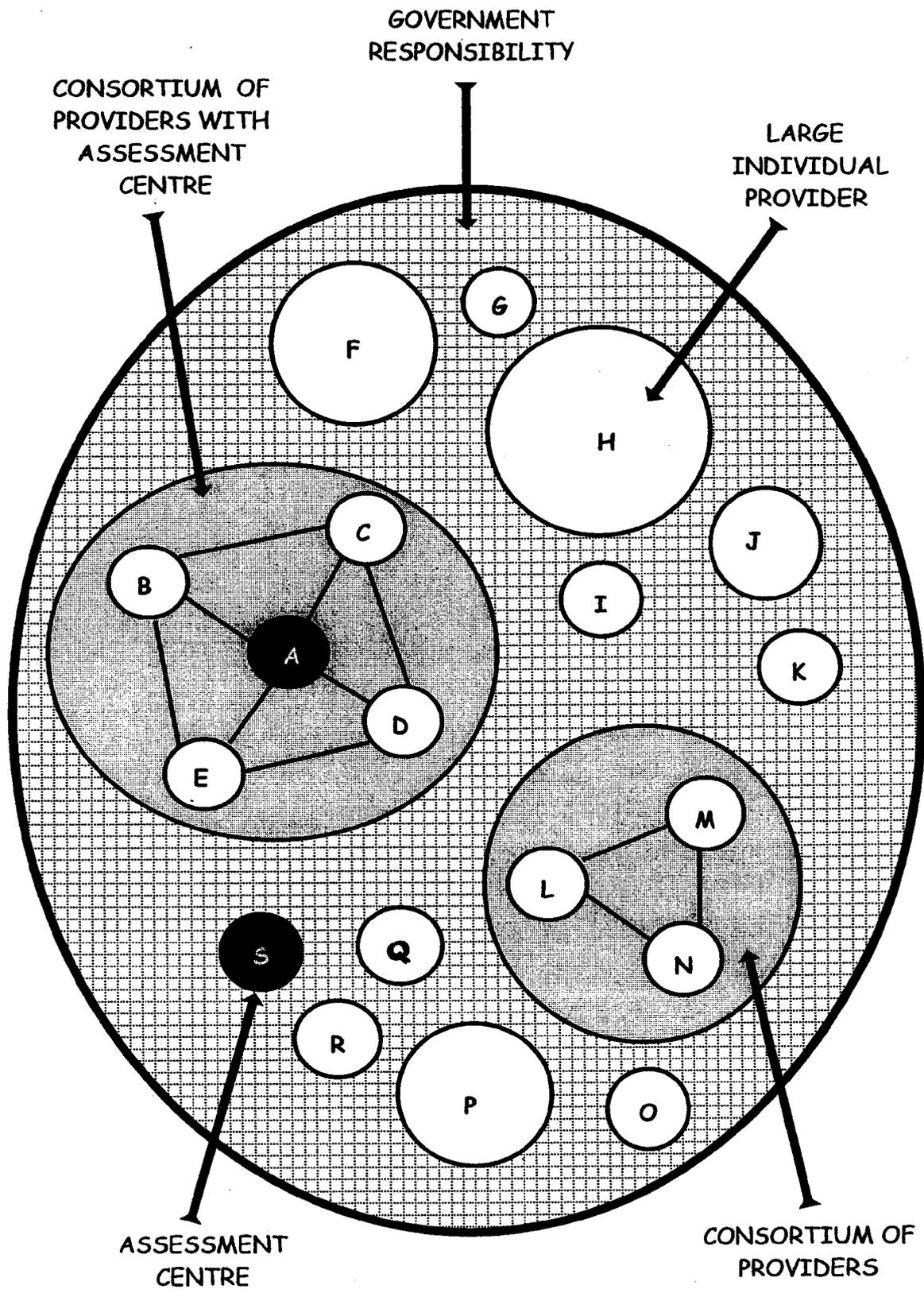


Figure 3: Pockets of Entrepreneurship and Partnership within an RPL System based on Accessibility and Economic Viability

Colleges/polytechnics I and J might fit the Hi-Lo categorisation, requiring heavy subsidisation from government and industry, while college/polytechnic K might be a Lo-Hi organisation that concentrates on markets of full-time employees in business and management. Because it is a relatively small college/polytechnic, K might make frequent use of assessment centre S for RPL services.

Organisations L, M and N might be a consortium of a college/polytechnic, an industrial organisation, and a private training establishment in a rural community. They will have established formal agreements about how they will operate in partnership – perhaps having a corporate credit arrangement as in the case of Auckland University of Technology and McDonald's (Ker & Reid, 2000). They may use the services of other organisations such as assessment centre S from time to time. Subsidies from government may well be involved.

Industrial organisations O, P, Q and R will provide work-based assessment and will establish different types of short-term formal and informal arrangements with universities, colleges/polytechnics, private training establishments, assessment centres, and one another. They will have particular interests in management and vocational qualifications. However, in the interests of the employability of their workers, they may sponsor educational opportunities that are based on the choice of the learners and are not necessarily vocational in nature (for example, study towards a liberal arts degree).

Assessment centre S might be run as a profitable venture, as is the Centre for the Assessment of Prior Learning, CAPL, in Dunedin (Day & Devjee, 2000), or might be government-funded. It will be contracted to do work by educational and training providers, industry, and government. Also, it may act as a broker in providing advice to learners on what institutions will suit their educational, career, and life needs best. As a provider of such services, it may test people on their learning and assessment styles and preferences.

Essentially, this is a model where the mercenaries, missionaries, and mutants (and perhaps some misfits) of tertiary education can come together in a meaningful way. Individually, the various organisations might appear to have a selfish, piecemeal approach to education and training needs. As a whole, however, with government as the essential back-up for programmes and services that are needed but not self-funding, they provide a system that is easily accessible to learners and economically viable to institutions.

## ***From dreams and schemes to reality and opportunism: Conclusion***

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There is an ongoing quest for appropriate policy, principles and practice in relation to Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in New Zealand and other parts of the world. This quest typically focuses on how there can be a resolution of the tension between accessibility to opportunities for RPL candidates, on the one hand, and the associated economic viability of tertiary educational institutions, on the other. Necessarily, the place of quality assurance in this relationship is taken into account.

It is suggested in this paper that potential solutions to key RPL issues involve an interplay of situational and universal factors (sets of circumstances that cannot be generalised versus those that can) and direct and inverse relationships (such as a burgeoning accessibility for RPL in many institutions, in the first instance, and the availability of government funding in relation to perceived needs for accessibility, in the second).

But how has the quest been proceeding in New Zealand? There was much rhetoric and many foundation-setting activities by such people as Nancy Mills (then of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority) and Nena Benton (then of the New Zealand Council for Educational Research) in the early 1990s. But what solutions have been put in place to address well-understood and much-debated tensions and issues? Is the situation at the beginning of the new century healthy or unhealthy? Are people like Jenny and other deserving RPL candidates getting appropriate opportunities? What yet needs to be done?

Essentially, the place of the learner should be paramount. But is it? Are educationists too willingly being led down an economically competitive path that places the accessibility of candidates to RPL services in jeopardy? Are social justice considerations taking second place to economic considerations?

Based on case studies, nation-wide research findings and an extensive review of the literature, this paper considers such questions and points the way to multiple-win situations for potential partners in the promotion of RPL – education and training providers, industry, unions, government and the learners themselves – and a consequential healthy future for the process of RPL and its growing host of candidates.

The initiatives of institutions such as Otago Polytechnic in establishing an RPL assessment centre, of the Auckland University of Technology in offering corporate credit, and of The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand in providing RPL opportunities are to be applauded. However, more needs to be done. For example, pre-entry counselling services should be available to adult learners contemplating what programmes they should take and at what institutions. Also, in the interests of equity and accessibility, it is important that universities as well as polytechnics provide RPL services in a co-ordinated way.

Let the pockets of enthusiasm expand and deepen.

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