

# APL for Computing Staff in 2005: A Role for NACCQ?

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## ABSTRACT

The ability for a tertiary institution to give a candidate credit for a course by way of Assessment of Prior Learning (APL) has been introduced in recent times. It is suggested that there is a role for the National Advisory Committee on Computing Qualifications (NACCQ) as auditor in an institution's formal quality assurance process for the award of credits to a computing staff member by way of APL. In order to establish a clear (and common) understanding of the various parties' roles, this paper backgrounds the APL process to clarify the responsibilities of the various parties involved in processing Computing Staff APL applications and proposes a set of procedures to better facilitate the process in the future.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the mid 1980's, the main qualification available to technicians wishing to work in New Zealand's fledgling Computing Industry was the New Zealand Certificate in Data Processing (NZCDP). At this time, the content of the qualification, which had been developed for the Vocational Training Council (VTC) in the early 1970's, was arguably well out of date. Although both industry and education providers were calling for course content change (Bridgeman 1993), existing VTC review procedures meant that it would have been a time-consuming process to change the computing content of the NZCDP prescriptions. The National Advisory Committee on Computing Qualifications (NACCQ) worked with industry to develop a number of qualifications that better encompassed the skills and knowledge that industry wanted prospective employees to have. Bridgeman (1993) identifies some of the pressures that there were on polytechnics during the 1980's to meet the demand from the computing industry for computing staff

with appropriate knowledge and skills. Also at this time, work was being done internationally, to identify process that could be used to give students credit for knowledge and skills they already had, prior to enrolling in a new qualification.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The principal author has on behalf of NACCQ been involved for some years in auditing staff applications for APL of qualifications that have been developed by NACCQ. Reflecting on a number of issues that arose while doing these audits has prompted the authors to do a review of the literature to develop a better understanding of the context within which APL is seen as a valid assessment methodology. This has then lead to the development of the recommendations contained in this paper.

## 3. QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS

Within a relatively short period of time during the 1980s, a number of countries, including South Africa (Kgobe 1997), Scotland (Raffe 2003), Australia (AQF 2005) and New Zealand (Tobias 1999), moved towards the establishment of National Qualifications Frameworks for their countries to bring some order to the wide variety of qualifications (or for some industries, lack of formal qualifications) available in their post secondary school education sectors. Once the Frameworks were established, it became apparent that it was desirable for there to be some process for a student to receive credit for previous experience and accomplishments. Different countries referred to the process by different



names. Canada called it Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR), (BCIT 2005), while Australia called it recognition of prior learning (RPL) (AQF 2005) as did New Zealand (Tobias 1999). It was envisaged that the existence of a qualification framework should allow people to carry credit with them from one qualification to another, or gain credit from some other form of prior learning experience, rather than the only method of gaining credit for a course being by way of sitting exams.

## 4. ASSESSMENT OF PRIOR LEARNING

It was recognised that there were a number of people (by the late 1980's) who although they had no formal applied computing academic qualifications, clearly were seen by industry to possess desirable applied computing knowledge and skills. Thus it was felt that some way should be found to acknowledge their possessing these abilities, without their having to enrol in further study. Institutions set up formal processes by which they could assess their students for APL. However, some staff found themselves in the same situation as their students, thus it seemed reasonable that staff should be able to take advantage of their institution's APL process. However, to avoid any appearance of conflict of interest or doubt as to standards applied during the Staff APL assessment process, NACCQ offered to fulfil an audit role for institutions. This was intended to provide them with an independent opinion as to the appropriateness and validity of evidence presented by a staff member as part of the staff APL assessment process. While this was seen as a valid role for NACCQ in the mid 1980s, is it time for a review of what service (if any) NACCQ could/should offer a member institution who may have computing staff wishing to gain credit for a computing qualification by way of APL?

### 4.1 Applying APL

APL for an individual could consist of two parts:

- Recognition of Prior Learning(RPL) – (for previous non-formal learning) and
- Credit Transfer (for previous formal learn-

ing).

These have been described as follows:

*“RPL is an assessment process that assesses the individual's non-formal and informal learning to determine the extent to which that individual has achieved the required learning outcomes, competency outcomes, or standards for entry to, and/or partial or total completion of, a qualification; and*

*Credit Transfer assesses the initial course or subject that the individual is using to claim access to, or the award of credit in, the destination course to determine the extent to which it is equivalent to the required learning outcomes, competency outcomes, or standards in a qualification. This may include credit transfer based on formal learning that is outside the ... framework.” (AQF, 2005)*

New Zealand uses similar definitions for APL, RPL and Credit Transfer.

## 5. PROCESSES FOR RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING(RPL) AND CREDIT TRANSFER

A number of different countries have been considering processes that could be used to give a person formal credit within the qualification frameworks for knowledge and/or skills previously gained by way of the formal education system (Credit Transfer) or gained in a non-formal way (RPL) (AQF 2005, BCIT 2005, Tobias 1999).

In the article about the Australian Qualifications Framework, the preamble states:

*“Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) may be defined in a number of ways, some more expansive than others. However, all definitions include the key notion that RPL involves the assessment of previously unrecognised skills and knowledge an individual has achieved outside the formal education and training system. RPL assesses this unrecognised learning against the requirements of a qualification, in respect of both entry requirements and outcomes to be achieved. By removing the need for duplication of learning, RPL encourages an individual to continue upgrading their skills and knowledge through structured education and training towards formal qualifications and improved employment outcomes” (AQF 2005)*

The same article goes on to state:

*“RPL Assessment processes should be:*

- *of a comparable standard to those used to deliver and assess the qualification*

- *be evidenced based, transparent and accountable; and*

- *explicitly subject to the quality assurance processes used to ensure the standard and integrity of assessment processes within sectors or institutions, and be validated and monitored in the same way other assessment processes are validated and monitored” (AQF 2005)*

Clearly, the writers envisage a high standard be maintained when operating the APL processes.

## **6. DEVELOPMENT OF NEW COMPUTING QUALIFICATIONS**

It was in this environment that in 1986, the VTC set up a working group of Polytechnic Tutors and Computing Industry representatives (forerunner of the National Advisory Committee on Computing Qualifications (NACCQ)) to develop new Computing Qualifications to replace the New Zealand Certificate in Data Processing. Thus during the period 1988-1991, the NACCQ published the prescriptions for a wide range of Applied Computing courses, plus the regulations covering the delivery of programmes leading to the award of the Certificate in Business Computing, Advanced Certificate in Business Computing and National Diploma in Business Computing. These three qualifications were approved by the old VTC before it went out of existence to be replaced by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) in 1991.

These qualifications were designed to meet the needs of the computing industry for qualified, work-ready staff, with appropriate knowledge and skills. The development group had managed to achieve in the space of three years what had not been able to be achieved in the previous ten years, namely the development of three relevant, industry accepted, programmes whose regulations contained procedures for regular two yearly content reviews to ensure course content remained current.

The courses and programme regulations for

the Certificate in Business Computing were initially published in 1987 in a document affectionately known for years to come as “the Blue Book” (NACCQ 1987) (thanks to Telecom providing a stack of Blue A4 size card covers which was used as covers the first edition of the CBC course prescriptions).

## **7. PROGRAMME REGULATIONS ALLOW FOR APL**

It was recognised by the development team that there may be students wishing to enrol for these new qualifications (CBC, ACBC and NDBC) who had already gained some credit towards their NZCDP or gained the required knowledge/skills while working in industry. Thus, the programme regulations specifically allowed for an institution to grant APL (RPL or Credit Transfer) to its students. The wording was as follows:

*“9.2.3 Students may be granted credits by the provider on the basis of equivalent qualifications and/or work experience, provided this has clearly resulted in the student having acquired the prescribed knowledge/skills. The provider must ensure that the standards of the qualification do not suffer through the granting of such credits.” (NACCQ 1987)*

It was also felt that it was reasonable to allow a similar APL process for staff, albeit with some extra safeguards, as outlined in the following clause

*9.2.7 Academic staff wishing to be granted a qualification may likewise be given cross credits on the basis of their experience and/or qualifications. If they believe they are eligible for an entire qualification they may apply to the National Advisory Committee to have their Assessment of Prior Learning portfolio assessed. The NACCQ will make their recommendations for the award of all or part of the qualification to the CEO of the ITP concerned. (NACCQ 1987)*

### **7.1 Computing Staff APL – Roles of Different Parties.**

When reading the above clause, it may be open to interpretation as to what role the staff member, the sponsoring department, NACCQ

and the institution may have when it comes to the implementation of a process for staff APL. A possible interpretation could be:

- The role of the staff member could be to prepare the APL evidence portfolio
- The role of the sponsoring department could be to evaluate the APL evidence portfolio
- The role of NACCQ (as an independent expert) could be to audit the APL evidence portfolio presented by the computing staff member to the sponsoring department for evaluation, prior to it being progressed through an institution's APL process.
- The role of the institution is to ensure that its APL process is complied with, including identifying what percentage of a qualification it is prepared to credit by way of APL, as it is the ITPNZ Member Institution who actually award qualifications, be they earned by completing coursework to the appropriate standard, or by APL (RPL or Credit Transfer).

## **7.2 Computing Staff APL – Portfolio Content**

Keeping in mind the comments made about RPL in the AQF (2005) document, one would expect that, prior to the award awarding credit by way of APL, an institution would be looking for a portfolio from the staff member which includes for each course:

- A clear statement of achievement outlining what prior learning has been demonstrated and/or knowledge or skills have been gained by the applicant that warrants the applicant being given APL credit for a particular course by way of Credit Transfer or RPL.
- Authenticated, documentary evidence from an independent third party that verifies the statement of achievement claims (above) that the applicant has made.
- Evidence that the above has been appropriately evaluated by the sponsoring department using the institution's processes, and
- An independent audit of the portfolio (such as that provided by NACCQ for computing courses) which validates the judgements of the sponsoring department.

## **8. IS THERE STILL A NEED FOR A COMPUTING STAFF APL PROCESS?**

In the late 1980s, NACCQ member institutions gained NZQA authority to offer the newly developed qualifications (CBC, ACBC and NDBC). This resulted in an increase in the number of people needed to staff these new courses. At this point of time, it was mainly staff with industry experience only (as opposed to academic qualifications) who were hired to teach the new courses, as there were few appropriate qualifications available that potential staff could have gained. The need for staff to have some formal qualifications was partly behind the thinking of the Development Team when it made allowance in the Programme Regulations for staff to APL the newly developed CBC, ACBC and NDBC qualifications, based on RPL of their industry experience.

However, over the last 15 years, many NACCQ Institutions have gained the right to offer computing degrees, and no longer offer the 3 Year NDBC, so the question could be asked is there still a need for a Computing Staff APL process?

There are now quite a variety of appropriate computing degrees available to potential staff members at the Bachelor level (with UNITEC offering a Master of Computing, and a Doctor of Computing degree). One of the side effects of NACCQ Institutions offering Bachelors Degrees, is that a new era of upgrading staff qualifications has been introduced, this time to a Masters Degree or PhD, as staff teaching on Bachelor degrees are expected to hold a qualification at least one level higher than the level of degree they are teaching on.

If staff (without a Bachelor or Masters degree) wish to remain employed teaching on a Bachelors degree programme, then they are required to upgrade their existing qualifications, and once again, APL potentially becomes an issue. A number of Bachelor degrees offered by the NACCQ institutes have a standardised APL (credit transfer) processes for people with CBC or ACBC or NDBC. This creates a path whereby existing staff with industry/teaching experience could shorten the amount of formal study they

need to gain a Bachelor degree prior to enrolling in a Masters degree. For the sake of credibility, NACCQ member institutions may feel that it is still desirable to have NACCQ involved in their implementation of any Staff APL of computing qualifications.

## **9. PROPOSED RESPONSIBILITIES AND PROCEDURES FOR THE STAFF APL PROCESS**

It is suggested that NACCQ has expertise within its wider community that could be accessed to provide an effective audit process to enhance any Staff APL process of a member institution.

Possible responsibilities of the four parties involved in the Staff APL process are outlined below.

If adopted, then in the future, there would be a clear, (and common), understanding between all parties concerned as to what the responsibilities of staff member, sponsoring department, NACCQ auditor and institution would be.

### **9.1 Responsibility of the Staff Member:**

The staff member applying for APL would:

- find a sponsoring department from an NACCQ member institution, who is prepared to process the APL application through their institute's APL procedures (normally, their employer). Clearly identify individual courses and qualifications being sought by way of APL.

- prepare a portfolio of evidence of sufficient quality to enable an informed judgement to be made on their APL application.

- present their APL Portfolio, including the documentary evidence, in such a way to as to make it quite clear to the reader what supporting evidence is being presented for each course for which APL is sought, for each qualification applied for, with sufficient detail being contained in the supporting documentary evidence to justify credit being given by way of APL (credit transfer or RPL).

- fill out all appropriate sections of any evaluation documents provided.

### **9.2 Responsibility of the Sponsoring Department**

The Sponsoring Department would:

- Write to NACCQ, giving advance notice that they have a staff member who wishes to submit an APL evidence portfolio and the qualifications they are seeking.

- carry out an evaluation of the completed Staff APL evidence portfolio making a judgement as to the adequacy of both the statements of achievement submitted as evidence for justification of APL and the authenticated documentary evidence for each course, for each qualification, APL is sought for. If both aspects are satisfactory, sign-off, otherwise work with the staff member to identify further/alternative appropriate prior learning experiences and/or obtain further appropriate/alternative documented, 3rd party verified evidence.

- Forward the approved APL Application Document to NACCQ.

- When the portfolio is received back from NACCQ, review NACCQ audit report, and work with staff member to remedy any deficiencies (if any) identified with the audited APL Portfolio.

- submit staff APL portfolio (including amendments, if required), plus NACCQ audit report through their institution's APL procedures for APL credit to be actioned.

- arrange for the qualification(s) to be awarded by the staff member's institution (if warranted).

### **9.3 Responsibility of NACCQ**

NACCQ would:

- Receive from a member institution, notification of the name of person and qualification(s) they are seeking for credit by way of APL

- Identify an appropriate person to audit the staff APL application portfolio.

- Receive the approved staff APL application portfolio from the sponsoring department

- Follow NACCQ established procedure to audit the judgements made by the sponsoring department and evaluate the documentary evidence provided to see whether it corroborates the claimed statements of achievement made by the

staff member, and is of an appropriate standard, and is from an appropriate 3rd party.

- Produce an audit report letter containing recommendations arising from the audit of staff APL application portfolio.

- Return staff APL application portfolio plus NACCQ audit report letter to the sponsoring department.

#### 9.4 Responsibility of the Institution

The institution would:

- Receive from the sponsoring department the completed Staff APL portfolio including the audit report letter.

- Follow its APL processes and award the credits as appropriate.

## 10. REFLECTIONS ON THE ABOVE

The development of National Qualifications Frameworks in New Zealand and a number of countries, with the inclusion of some form of APL process (to help minimise the need for students to repeat courses if they can clearly demonstrate that they already possess appropriate knowledge and skills, albeit obtained by some other formal (credit transfer) or even informal (RPL)) has led to the need for the development of robust procedures to ensure transparency and credibility of decisions made. The paper discussing the Australian Qualifications Framework clearly states the importance of the existence of such transparent procedures. (AQF 2005) It is suggested that if NACCQ member institutions

were to implement a process for staff APL of Computing Qualifications (as outlined above) then this would meet the AQF requirement for APL Assessment processes to be:

*“of a comparable standard to those used to deliver and assess the qualification; be evidenced based, transparent and accountable; and explicitly subject to the quality assurance processes used to ensure the standard and integrity of assessment processes within sectors or institutions, and be validated and monitored in the same way other assessment processes are validated and monitored” (AQF 2005)*

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