Skills recognition 'could help achieve accord target'

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Recognition of prior learning is feasible at scale if done systematically and could generate new business for universities, experts say

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Recognition of the unheralded skills of Australian workers, both locals and migrants, appears set to play a role in meeting the Universities Accord target for a more qualified populace.

Participants in the first day of the closed-door [economic reform roundtable](#), on 19 August, reportedly reached consensus on the need for better skills recognition across state and national borders.

This could include improved processes for assessing the credentials of foreign-trained professionals – including doctors, nurses and engineers – and streamlined state and territory occupational licensing schemes. Finance minister Katy Gallagher [told the ABC](#) that there had been "furious agreement" on the subject, although the *Sydney Morning Herald* [reported](#) that union representatives had raised concerns about recognising foreign degrees.

Meanwhile, recognition of prior learning (RPL) is taking centre stage in the government's push for a "joined up" tertiary education system. Education minister Jason Clare told the *Australian Financial Review* Higher Education summit, also on 19 August, that a "more seamless" tertiary sector would help boost productivity.

"Cracking the code of credit transfer and RPL will make it easier to get the skills [we] need quicker and cheaper," he said, adding that he and skills minister Andrew Giles had asked the [Australian Tertiary Education Commission](#) (Atec) to "plot out a roadmap". They also plan a Tertiary System Advisory Council chaired by Jobs and Skills Australia commissioner Barney Glover.

Glover, who served on the Universities Accord panel and is an interim commissioner with Atec, said Australia needed to "lift the aspiration of young people for tertiary education". He said RPL, credit transfer and advanced standing were handled well by some institutions but not overall.

"We can't afford to have any barriers, any inertia, any drag in the way...people navigate their way through the tertiary system to get the skills they need when they need them," he told the summit. "Employers are increasingly looking for skills, not qualifications. It's not about credentialing anymore. It's about skills."

The Universities Accord recommended [two tertiary attainment targets](#) for achievement by 2050. The federal government [adopted](#) a goal for 80 per cent of working-aged people to have tertiary qualifications at apprenticeship level or above, up from about 59 per cent now. But it has largely ignored the accord's target for 55 per cent of 25-34-year-olds to have degrees, somewhat sidelining universities from its upskilling drive.

A systematic approach to RPL could further reduce the role of educators in delivering qualifications, ceding more of that work to assessors who weigh up the knowledge people have obtained through work and voluntary roles.

In a report produced ahead of the economic reform roundtable, the Productivity Commission said all prospective students should be assessed for credit transfer or RPL as part of the enrolment process. Sources deem this idea unfeasible because the workload would completely overwhelm admissions staff.

But in a submission to the roundtable, Queensland University of Technology floated an alternative proposal. A "National RPL College" would "greatly accelerate progress" towards the 80 per cent target "at much less expense than full training", the submission says.

"RPL...can be expensive and time-consuming when done as one-off assessments by education and training institutions. A dedicated, coordinated, national approach to awarding RPL could utilise technology to make an onerous bespoke process feasible at scale."

Higher education consultant Justin Bokor said mandating RPL for every student would be "extremely burdensome", but a "system level" approach – supported by "some kind of database and AI tool" – could make the process "lean".

Bokor said more RPL – for migrants in particular – was desirable. "You've got extremely qualified engineers or allied health...or finance professionals working 10 grades below their training. Is that the best use of that talent? I wouldn't have thought so."

He said RPL at scale could affect the business model of universities and colleges, by reducing the amount of subjects studied – and hence fees paid – by students who gained credit. But it could also increase revenue by encouraging enrolments from migrants who were not prepared to recommence their studies from scratch, but willing to consider abridged courses.

"It's not a given that you'd have less load in aggregate," Bokor said. "You would probably end up with less load per student, but more students."

Tertiary education expert Tom Karmel, director of the Mackenzie Research Institute, said uptake of RPL had always been limited because it was as expensive as teaching and had rarely been funded properly.

Karmel said a systematic approach to RPL made theoretical sense, but he questioned how it would work in practice.

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