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# A CASE STUDY ON THE RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING (RPL): PERCEPTIONS OF UNIVERSITY FACULTY

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## Abstract

*The recognition of prior learning (RPL) has been implemented to varying degrees across Canada in secondary schools and post-secondary institutions, through workplace training models, businesses, sector councils and industry groups, apprenticeship, the military, and professional accrediting/regulatory bodies. RPL however remains fragmented and seriously under-supported at Canadian universities. As a key driver, RPL can play a leading role in addressing labour force changes, economic competitiveness, facilitating access to post-secondary education, and in the recognition of foreign credentials. While RPL challenges the university hierarchies of knowledge, learning and power, there are significant social and economic consequences for failing to address the increasing amount of unrecognized learning. This doctoral case study explored the general perceptions of RPL role-players at a western Canadian university during the summer of 2017. The results revealed there were lost opportunities and differences in understanding RPL. Additional findings relate to the invisibility of RPL, roadblocks to implementation, an intrinsic belief in the value and benefits of RPL, and some constructive ideas for moving forward. These findings point to directions for future research.*

## Résumé

*À divers niveaux, la reconnaissance des acquis (RDA) est intégrée dans les écoles secondaires, les établissements postsecondaires, les modèles de formation professionnelle, les entreprises, les conseils sectoriels, les groupes d'industrie, les programmes de formation en apprentissage, les forces armées, les organismes de réglementation et les agences d'agrément à travers le Canada. Malgré ceci, la RDA demeure fragmentée et très peu soutenue au sein des universités canadiennes. À titre de moteur essentiel, la RDA peut assumer un rôle déterminant pour aborder les changements dans la main-d'œuvre, la compétitivité économique, l'accès à la formation postsecondaire et la reconnaissance des compétences acquises à l'étranger. Alors que la RDA remet en question les hiérarchies des savoirs, de l'apprentissage et du pouvoir au sein des universités, il existe d'importantes conséquences sociales et*

*économiques découlant de la non reconnaissance de la part croissante d'apprentissages non reconnus. Cette étude de cas doctorale explore les perceptions générales sur la RDA exprimées pendant l'été 2017 par des intervenants dans une université dans l'ouest canadien. Les résultats révèlent des occasions manquées et des différences dans la compréhension de la RDA. Des résultats supplémentaires abordent l'invisibilité de la RDA, les obstacles à sa mise en œuvre et une conviction intrinsèque de sa valeur et de ses bienfaits, puis suggèrent des idées constructives pour l'avenir. Ces résultats suggèrent aussi des voies de recherche futures.*

## Introduction

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), the practice of awarding formal recognition and credit for non-formal and informal learning that adult students have acquired through active use of relevant life and work experiences (Harris & Wihak, 2017) has existed for decades. Also referred to as PLAR (Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition), RPL has been implemented to varying degrees across Canada in secondary schools and post-secondary institutions, through workplace training models, businesses, sector councils and industry groups, apprenticeship, the military, and professional accrediting/regulatory bodies. RPL is a logical consequence of experiential learning theory where experience acts as a transformational process, bringing about learning based on process, not mere outcomes.

As a learner-centred process, RPL can function as a mechanism for granting access to formal study, gaining exemption from certain courses or parts of courses or programs, and awarding credit or advanced standing for learning that may have taken place outside an academic context. An important distinction is that review of course or program equivalencies such as transfer credit do not provide for the assessment of individual learners rather, it is the instruction in a previous course or program that is being evaluated or recognized. RPL is not about the learning a student has, nor the learning an institution is willing to uncover; it is the ability of the student to describe that learning (Pitman & Vidovich, 2013).

RPL has much potential to grow the population of qualified or credentialed applicants, particularly those without a formal education background but with relevant life and/ or work experience. A cluster of approaches and initiatives comprising RPL have been developed and implemented at post-secondary institutions to foster, recognize, and utilize the full range of skills and learning that individuals have acquired through both life and work experience, and formal education and training, with generally greater acceptance among colleges (Conrad, 2014). These approaches and initiatives however, remain sporadic, fragmented and seriously under-supported at Canadian universities (Bélanger and Mount, 1998; Conrad, 2010, 2014; Kennedy, 2003; Peruniak & Powell, 2006, 2007; Van Kleef, 2011; Wihak, 2006, 2007), and faculty resistance is a challenge (Wong, 2001, 2014), especially in research-intensive institutions. This article addresses the core issue of marginalization of RPL at a university across different areas of study which formed my doctoral study.

In view of the marginalization and resistance to RPL, the purpose of this paper is to examine the general perceptions of RPL among study participants within a single university to shed more light on the issue. The paper's findings are insightful as to why RPL has not been generally accepted within the university context, and how it can be more widely

implemented as a legitimate learning and assessment process, and in turn, be of benefit to more learners. The article begins by setting the context for RPL as a driver for addressing key social and economic priorities. Next, I discuss RPL as a contested concept that challenges the university in view of the hierarchies of knowledge, learning and power. This is followed by the methodology, the presentation of findings and discussion, conclusion, and further research.

## The Drivers of RPL

There are two drivers of RPL that underlie the tension between key social and economic priorities (Cameron, 2011; Wong, 2014). One driver is the belief that education and training systems must be flexible enough for people to engage and re-engage with learning at various points throughout their careers if modern societies and economies are to develop as part of the knowledge economy and globalization. These systems must also be relevant to changing labour needs of the workforce, to society and the economy where traditional forms of knowledge are, in many cases, replaced by new ones. New forms of knowledge should be recognized and play a more central role in the post-secondary sector. RPL can be a critical mechanism for improving pathways to training and work in a setting where skilled worker shortages are a major concern for government and the broader economy (Canadian Chamber of Commerce, 2015; Conference Board of Canada, 2016; Simon, 2014; Smith & Clayton, 2009).

The Conference Board of Canada's Brain Gain Reports (Bloom & Grant, 2001; Grant, 2015) identified a major learning recognition gap that presents obstacles to career advancement for learners resulting in significant costs to Canada. It was estimated that if the learning gap was eliminated through RPL, the Canadian economy would stand to gain between $13.4 billion to $17.1 billion resulting from improvements to learning recognition. Since 2001, more than 844,000 Canadians have been affected by learning recognition challenges, and the problem has become significantly more severe resulting in stranded human capital. Grant (2015) recommended that RPL be used to improve Canada's dwindling labour supply to address an aging workforce and economic competitiveness within the global economy. Insufficient RPL capacity however, remains an ongoing challenge among post-secondary institutions, especially universities.

Immigration is another source of skilled-working age people that can replenish the labour force. Despite an immigrant population that is better educated than the domestic population, Canada has not capitalized on the talents of its immigrant labour supply (Conrad, 2008a; Grant, 2015, Guo, 2009; Guo & Andersson, 2006; Houle & Yssaad, 2010; Reitz, Curtis & Elrick, 2014). Immigrants comprise 75% of the more than 844,000 Canadians mentioned above, and stand to benefit potentially between $10.1 billion and $12.7 billion more in annual income (El-Assal & Fields, 2017).

Lack of adequate foreign credential recognition and a requirement to often repeat advanced programs completed elsewhere to qualify for jobs are among the most significant barriers to better social and economic integration (Buzdugan & Halli, 2009; Elgersma, 2012; Moss, 2014). Foreign education credentials and work experience are often devalued denying many immigrants the opportunity to practice their occupation of training (Buzdugan & Halli, 2009; Girard & Smith, 2013; Van Kleef & Werquin, 2013). Problems in the education-work relationship are caused not by inadequate skill levels of immigrants, but in the way

they are recognized and utilized in Canadian workplaces. There is need to grow Canada's labour force through immigration, and RPL can support portability of skills and knowledge.

The second driver of RPL emerges from concerns related to access, equity and social inclusion. Access to appropriate education opportunity is key to breaking down barriers or marginalization, and therefore to social inclusion (Reisberg & Watson, 2011). RPL can facilitate access by opening up pathways and bridging participation gaps among under-represented groups in terms of gender, socioeconomic status, or ethnic background in universities (Peruniak & Powell, 2007; Smith & Clayton, 2009; Wong, 2014). RPL has potential for valuing different types of learning and knowledge in a way that other education processes do not (Pitman, 2009), and this makes RPL important in relation to strategies of access and social inclusion (Cameron, 2006, 2011; Werquin, 2010). In South Africa, for example, RPL became a change-making practice and a form of restitution and healing to rectify some of the injustices of apartheid (Kindred, 2018), and a means of achieving greater equity and redress for those historically excluded from educational opportunity (Cooper, Harris & Jones, 2016).

In spite of more than 30 years of innovation, exemplary practice and positive outcomes, RPL still lacks the strategic and sustained public policy commitment and support needed to enable those traditionally under-represented to participate more fully in further education and training, employment and community engagement (Conrad 2014; Morrissey et al., 2008). As a means to facilitate access to education, however, RPL has traditionally been under the authority of closed circles of academics (Wong, 2011).

### RPL Challenges to the University Hierarchies of Knowledge, Learning and Power

A common thread in much of the literature is that RPL has the potential to compromise the quality of academic standards (Conrad, 2010; Joosten-ten Brinke, Sluijsmans, & Jochems, 2009; Pitman & Vidovitch, 2013; Van Kleef, 2010), and raises questions about inconsistent processes and invalid or unreliable outcomes, creating barriers to implementation (Van Kleef, 2014). Thomas (2000) once described RPL as an instrument of liberation, "a quiet revolution" because it highlights differences between learning and education, and challenges historic distinctions between formal and non-formal education. Attention shifts toward the recognition, validation and credentialing of university level learning rather than to the institution as a "fount of knowledge" (Travers, 2013). RPL forces the negotiation of two worlds – the world of experience and the world of academia (Osman & Castle, 2001, 2002), raising complex issues around knowledge, learning, qualifications and power (Harris & Wihak, 2011).

Wong (2011) maintains that "universities have been given the authority to be the gatekeepers of credentials that reflect the achievement of specific levels of knowledge and skills in disciplinary–based fields of study" (p. 305). Thus, the long-standing suspicion of RPL as being a "lesser form" of the higher education experience has provided traditional educators with a strong base for resistance. To answer why RPL has not fulfilled its promise as a means to access formal education, Cooper and Harris (2013) explored the "knowledge question", or the extent to which the disciplinary or knowledge domain into which RPL candidates seek access determines its feasibility. Whether obstacles to implementing RPL are due to lack of political will or to knowledge and epistemological constraints – or forms of knowledge that academics cannot immediately recognize, remains an open question.

Although the area of study or knowledge domain is important, academics committed to opening up pathways for those historically excluded from higher education can play an equally important role in designing diverse and appropriate pedagogic interventions (Cooper & Harris, 2013). Conversely, academics opposed to RPL on epistemological or pedagogical grounds, may act as powerful gatekeepers to access, irrespective of their disciplinary background. It can be difficult for academics to change their mindset from being gatekeepers of study-based knowledge to becoming mentors of learners whose knowledge has been gained from life and work experiences (Wong, 2014).

RPL creates difficulty because it challenges the university's monopoly as provider of a form of knowledge production that privileges high status learning (Armsby Costley & Garnett, 2006). Using Bourdieu's concept of 'position taking' to analyze RPL policy and practice in Australian universities in which hierarchies of knowledge/power can be exposed, Pitman and Vidovitch (2012) found that Australian universities enact policy symbolically for position taking, rather than for pragmatic reasons. Australian universities are required to address agendas of both equity and quality, widely viewed as discourses in conflict. This results in a cognitive dissonance, or a belief in the importance of equity and the importance of quality, and a belief that one comes at the expense of the other.

Pitman and Vidovich (2013) further argued that informal and non-formal learning do not have the same strategic value for universities as formal learning, and that universities prioritize their credentialing role over their mobilizing one. If prior learning is viewed as a threat to a university's position, it will enact RPL policy to restrict knowledge acquired via non-traditional learning processes. Even when these types of prior learning are viewed per se as having value, the primary purpose of RPL policy will still be to serve the interests of the institution, not the student. Thus, knowledge is mobilized not for its epistemological value, but for its strategic, organizational value.

RPL practices at universities are embedded in matrices of power that differentiate between, and challenge different forms of knowledge, where learning situated in one particular context may not be valued in another (Michelson, 2006). RPL forces us to question our assumptions about knowledge itself. What counts as learning? What is valuable knowledge? Who has what knowledge? How do we determine when something is learned? From a position of differentiated knowledge, RPL becomes 'specialized pedagogy' and a process of "knowing the borders and crossing the lines" (Cooper, et al., 2016). Inevitably, RPL brings these knowledge struggles and contestations to the fore. The extent to which the 'politics of knowledge', the political and institutional power to determine which sites of knowledge production and forms of knowledge will be included and excluded in curriculum and pedagogy can influence the degree of inclusivity of RPL (Cooper, Ralphs & Harris, 2017).

The conceptualization and purposes of RPL are closely linked to the assessment of learning, sometimes described as a continuum of methods ranging from highly individualized to highly formalized formats (Frick, Bitzer & Leibowitz, 2007). The more formalized methods such as standardized examinations and challenge exams have helped legitimize RPL for admission purposes, or for advanced study through the Advanced Placement examinations. While formalized methods of assessment are efficient and open the door of education opportunity to a broad range of students, learners are obliged to tailor their prior learning to earn credits that fit into predictable knowledge clusters (Conrad, 2008b). This is an acceptable RPL model, but not one that gives learners

opportunities to build new knowledge acquired through incidental learning, informal learning or prior experiences (Starr-Glass, 2016).

Developing a portfolio, on the other hand, allows for the recording of a wide range of experiential learning and helps learners connect prior learning to higher education programs or qualifications (Frick et al., 2007). Working through the portfolio process is closely associated with growth in personal and professional competencies such as increasing self-knowledge, self-discovery and personal empowerment, motivation, self-confidence and critical thinking (Brown, 2001, 2002; Brown, McCrink & Maybee, 2004; Conrad, 2010; Hoffmann, 2013; Klein-Collins & Hain, 2009; Rust & Ikard, 2016). To that end, portfolios allow candidates to document the kinds of learning they possess and are an exploration of what has been learned, rather than a demonstration of what has been done (Starr-Glass, 2016).

## Methodology

Designed as a qualitative case study, the research aimed to answer questions related to participant perceptions of RPL at a university from an area of study perspective. Qualitative case studies generally share with other forms of qualitative research the search for meaning and understanding, the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, an inductive and investigative strategy, with the end product being richly descriptive (Stake, 2010). Case study research starts with the same compelling feature: the desire to derive a close or otherwise in-depth understanding of a single case (Yin, 2014). This research fits the description of a case study because it involved the study of a case within a real-life contemporary context or setting, and was bounded within certain parameters (Creswell, 2013) i.e., by time (six months of data collection), place (situated at a comprehensive research-intensive university in western Canada), and participants (having a current or former connection to RPL).

Two sources of data were obtained: documents and semi-structured interviews. Documents are often drawn upon in a qualitative study to uncover meaning, develop understanding, and discover insights relevant to the research question (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Documentation was gathered on background, content, objectives as well as context within which RPL operates across three areas of study. These materials included annual reports, strategic plans, academic calendars, information bulletins, journal and newspaper articles, webpages and documents. The evidence was analyzed to elicit meaning and develop empirical knowledge about RPL by area of study.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather data by capturing interviewees' experiences and perceptions about RPL. To be selected for interviews, participants had to be university employees, or RPL "role-players", including administrators, faculty, instructors, facilitators or assessors that either had responsibility for, or worked directly with RPL in a current or a previous position. Snowball and purposeful sampling were used to identify referrals to include in the study. To ensure confidentiality, all identifying information was removed from the data, and pseudonyms were used. The interview protocol received approval from the University's Research Ethics Review Board.

In summer of 2017, I conducted 13 in-person interviews among participants who were distributed among three areas of study: Extended Education (3), Faculty of Social Work (4), Gap Training and Bridge Programs (6) (see Appendix A for participant details). Among

the Gap Training and Bridge Programs, the following fields were represented: Agrology, Education, Engineering, Dentistry and Medicine. The areas of study were not randomly selected from a sample, but were those found to have a connection to RPL.

The interview data was transcribed and analyzed to search for underlying themes. The analysis began with preparing summaries of the interview transcripts and making notes to keep track of initial impressions, insights and patterns. The next step was to form codes based on emerging ideas and reflections, build descriptions, and develop themes (Creswell, 2013). The coding process involved developing a short list of tentative codes, expanding these to several categories and then reducing and combining them to a manageable number of themes. Codes were contrasted and compared with new ones emerging and old ones disappearing until reaching saturation, or the point at which no new insights were forthcoming (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The last step was to interpret the data by organizing the themes into larger units of abstraction to make sense of the data (Creswell, 2013).

## Results and Discussion

The following section presents the results and thematic ideas obtained from documentary analysis and interviews. The themes were based on participants' perspectives, and are supported by their quotations and findings in the literature.

A brief description of each of the three areas of study follows:

*Extended Education* coordinates a wide range of programs through several degree courses and non-degree or certificate courses drawn from various faculties, colleges and schools primarily for adult learners. There are options to use transfer credit, exemption and challenge for credit, but not for informal or non-formal methods of assessment, i.e., portfolios. For this study, Extended Education refers to an adult learning unit closely associated with the term, continuing education that serves primarily adult, lifelong learners.

Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) is a 123-credit hour, four-year degree program. In addition to completing courses, BSW students with two or more years of social work employment experience within the last five years may register for an RPL self-study course as an exemption from the first of two field placements.

Gap Training and Bridge Programs for Internationally Education Professionals offer a Qualifications Recognition (QR) pathway for internationally educated professionals (IEP). Gap training is specialized programming to fill gaps in knowledge and skills, and helps meet regulatory requirements that enable IEPs to be eligible for professional registration and career entry. QR is associated with assessment of foreign credentials and competencies, and incorporates assessment of formal and informal learning (Riffell, 2006), as does RPL. For purposes of this study, Gap Training and Bridge Programs were included under the umbrella of RPL.

To address the research question, data was analyzed to reveal the following themes: opportunity lost, differences in understanding, invisibility, roadblocks, intrinsic belief, and moving forward, as discussed below.

### Opportunity Lost

The "Opportunity Lost" theme largely reflected Extended Education's loss of a government-funded RPL Coordinator position and lack of success with portfolios. Participants shared

their thoughts about the limited success of the Coordinator's ability to promote and implement RPL across the university. From his recollection, Ron stated: "I remember hearing from a colleague of mine who also worked with [the RPL Coordinator] that [the RPL Coordinator] had essentially left in frustration…[The RPL Coordinator] was very good and…definitely, was starting to hit a lot of brick walls."

As the adult education organization originally associated with RPL (Thomas, 2000; Wihak, 2011), it might be expected that RPL would be more actively pursued in Extended Education, but lost opportunities such as the Coordinator who had "left in frustration", and failed attempts at offering portfolios characterized most of the perspectives. Research shows Extended Education programs are making little use of RPL as university-based adult educators suffer from some or all of the influences that have impeded RPL implementation in Canadian universities generally (Wihak 2006, 2007). This was apparent in concerns about "faculty resistance", "dwindling faculty resources" and "academic freedom" as potential explanations for limited RPL at Extended Education.

Adult education divisions based on revenue generation or cost recovery face significant challenges in increasing programming due to infrastructure limitations and limited financial capacities (Kirby, Curran & Hollett, 2009). The public sector financial model of the continuing education era has been replaced at most universities with an expectation that extension units operate as entrepreneurial models based on tuition revenues and external contracts (McLean, 2008).

Adult education units with research-intensive universities tend to have marginal status, as not all adult educators are familiar with RPL and some may actually resist RPL. Some faculties have expressed interest in RPL in part because of student demands, but the reward system works against those who invest time and energy in advising and supporting candidates (Wihak & Wong, 2011). Adult education units need a stronger theorization of RPL to increase degree-level program availability, to overcome faculty resistance, and to take leadership for implementing RPL within the larger university community (Wihak and Wong, 2011). When using RPL to grant admission and/or advanced standing, a tension may exist because adult education curriculum stresses honouring the learner while the university context stresses honouring academic standards (Kawalilak & Wihak, 2013). Finding a way to approach RPL that theoretically and pragmatically reflects both of these influences for university-based adult education programs should be considered.

In addition to offering formal methods of RPL, Extended Education had previously allowed students to prepare portfolios to demonstrate RPL. Participants were unanimous in their opinions about Extended Education's lack of success with using portfolios. Heather commented that completing challenge for credit was simply easier for students than working through the portfolio.

> As for students putting together their portfolios…it [RPL] was more work to put the portfolio together than it was to take the course, so they [students] gave it up which is really unfortunate…The portfolio process was pretty onerous. It was so expensive in terms of time and money… Students would often challenge for credit…That was easier than just bringing in a whole portfolio…It has to be rigorous but I would have liked to have found a way to have it not so onerous for students that they actually just chose not to do it.

Past experiences with using portfolios were described as "onerous", "too expensive", and "time-consuming", with responsibility resting squarely on students to put their portfolios together. Given the difficulties with implementing portfolios, it was simply easier for students to take courses, reflecting not only the practitioners' negative experiences with portfolios but also the challenges students faced in accessing and obtaining credit for non-formal RPL. Portfolios are one of the best instruments for visualizing and evaluating competencies acquired in informal and non-formal contexts (Brown 2001, 2002; Joosten-ten Brinke, Sluijsmans & Jochems, 2010). As mentioned earlier, the process of preparing a portfolio can increase self-confidence, critical thinking, and self-reflection (Brown et al., 2004; Pokorny, 2013), but portfolio preparation can take significant time and effort (Gambescia & Dagavarian, 2007; Thomas, Collins & Plett, 2002), be difficult to create and manage (Cameron, Travers & Wihak, 2014), and is labour-intensive (Bélanger & Mount, 1998).

The difficulty that students experienced in creating portfolios reflects the need for instruction in preparation, mentoring and coaching (Conrad 2008b; Conrad & Wardrop, 2010; Rust & Brinthaupt, 2017). This reflects gaps that likely exist between the grasp of experiential learning and the ability to capture that learning thoughtfully and appropriately in accordance with the language of the academy (Conrad, 2014). Ideally, this should be negotiated with students to increase their chances of success and to contribute to fairness in assessment (Frick & Albertyn, 2011; Frick et al., 2007).

### Differences in Understanding

Participants expressed some differences in understanding commonly associated with RPL within the university community, for example, that transfer credit processes and the recognition of formal credit-based learning are the equivalent of RPL. Julie offered this perspective:

> If you look at the University as a whole, it [awareness and understanding of RPL] would be low because the University is used to recognizing transfer credit. We have a huge recognition of transfer credit from international institutions but I don't think they [the University] see the relationships between different kinds of learning. It has to be learning in something that they can identify with…People see RPL in a different way. They see it as recognition of prior learning from formal institutions.

University-level applications of RPL practice often suffer confusion around process and terminology (Conrad, n.d.; Morrissey et al., 2008; Pitman, 2009). Conrad (2010) describes the language of transfer credit as an "audit" type of language that does not recognize twin notions of individual meaning making and achievement. From this web of misunderstandings comes the downgrading of experiential learning activities that can be earned through a portfolio-learning format to gate-keeping activities. Differentiating between RPL and transfer credit is critical to the success of RPL as an academic venture and therefore, to its perceived value and importance (Conrad, 2014).

Another way of understanding RPL is as an easy way to earn a credential and lacking in rigour. Ron offered the following perspective:

> I don't get a sense there's a strong understanding of the rigour involved
> in RPL. There is a concern which…is potentially misplaced that RPL just
> means somebody comes in and they've had a job before so we give them
> a bunch of credit and that's not what RPL is about…If it [RPL] is not
> rigorously followed and if people have the mistaken view that RPL is an
> easy way to get credit, then you could have problems…It is usually the
> misinformed and the uninformed who don't understand RPL, see it as a
> shortcut, and don't see it as rigorous.

RPL as a credit 'give-away' or 'lesser' form of the higher education experience has provided traditional educators with a strong base for resistance to implementation (Bélanger & Mount, 1998; Conrad, 2014). Closely related to the "easy credit" idea is that RPL lacks credibility and rigour, and faces opposition from those citing issues around credential integrity and academic standards (Conrad, 2010; Joosten-ten Brinke et al., 2009; Pitman & Vidovitch, 2013). Lack of understanding the rigour associated with RPL causes unease among some in the university community (Kennedy, 2003), as universities are more likely to question the credibility of RPL practices and less likely to have policies that could ensure consistent application and validity of practices.

That formal learning must take place in a classroom was another understanding expressed. This implies that RPL occurring outside the classroom is something lesser than. Nancy stated the following:

> There seems to be this sense that the learning that happens in other
> contexts…is not the same as the learning that happens within a university
> system, within a classroom, or within a supervised practicum. That we,
> whoever "we" is, is teaching, can control and assess. RPL is not really
> looked on favourably from many within…this University system. There
> is almost a bit of snobbery around it.

Academics perceive knowledge as valid if presented in an academic or classroom format was also revealed in the study. Resistance of faculty to learning occurring outside the formal education system as unworthy of academic recognition is supported in the literature (Wong, 2011). While academics may concede that learning can occur elsewhere, it is different in substance as opposed to what is taught in formal education. Successful RPL practices feature both inclusion and transparency, measures that can result in meaningful engagement within institutions (Conrad, 2014).

### Invisibility

The "invisibility" theme captured the range of participant's views about RPL, i.e., the general lack of awareness and understanding among faculty and students, localized knowledge, and need for information and greater visibility. RPL was better known and of interest to some staff, such as faculty and admissions, more than others. In general, participants conveyed the insignificance and invisibility of RPL within the context of the university. As Jim revealed:

> It [RPL] is just not part of the landscape here. If they [the University] had
> some personal knowledge or interest in it [RPL] because of some other
> encounters they have had, they might know something. In terms of the
> University, they would wonder what you are talking about…It is not that

people would not understand it or know what it is, but it's a pretty foreign concept here.

Despite the general feeling about RPL's lack of distinction among participants, it needs to be better known and made more visible, especially across faculties. Linda offered details about ways to get information out more efficiently to students and faculties: "We just have to be better at advertising, having things on our website, getting students to have a better understanding of RPL." Staff who understand RPL most clearly are closely involved with the process, fully understand the issues and take it seriously The most successful processes take place in faculties where RPL is specifically mentioned in course information, application forms, with guidelines attached and step-by-step procedures outlined (Frick et al., 2007).

Students were also uninformed about RPL, as Linda commented:

> Students are definitely not knowledgeable…They understand…they have got something there that they [students] want to be measured on but have no idea…what it [RPL] is, or they don't have an understanding of how we measure it or why they have to go through this big process… Students come thinking that they should be getting it [RPL].

That students were generally unaware and uninformed about RPL suggests that learners do not understand differences between transfer credit and RPL. This blurs a basic tenet of RPL that separates the concept of doing from the concept of knowing (Conrad, n.d.). Thomas et al., (2002) found that most students encountered RPL by accident, with only a few students initially setting out to make use of learning opportunities with RPL.

The lack of clear, accessible information on university websites and prospective students' lack of knowledge seems almost certain to ensure that demand for RPL will stay low (Wihak, 2007). Increasing student awareness is critical in gaining acceptance for RPL, with information readily available to staff and students that is user-friendly and updated regularly (Frick et al., 2007). Increasing information that is easy to find is key in moving RPL forward in the Canadian university sector, as inadequate communication not only hinders growth of RPL processes but also the quality and degree of acceptance across the institution (Conrad, 2010).

### Roadblocks

Building on the 'invisibility' theme, there were many explanations as to why RPL does not play much of a factor at the university. These roadblocks to RPL included lack of resources, the university as gatekeeper, and lack of fit with the University's core mission, values and program standards, and policy constraints.

Practical challenges of staff time and resources are roadblocks to RPL implementation, as resources are already stretched or "maxed out", with no room for more responsibility. Nancy was clear in her assessment of lack of resources and dedicated staff for RPL:

> There are probably faculty members with expertise who could assist in that process [to implement RPL]…Are there dedicated people that could be pulled out of where they are to do that? No, there is not. They would have to do it off the side of their desk…You have to have a dedicated administration that wants to have it in place and then dedicate staff to it…I don't think RPL can really get off the ground without additional

> resources, particularly around practicum. Somebody has to put together
> the policies within that local unit and…perform the work.

Participants expressed concerns about lack of time for RPL, often feeling overwhelmed by university system demands. RPL may be perceived as one more demand that faculty need to deal with, and not considered critical to their role, which tends to get bumped to the margins of faculty workload and concerns (Taylor & Clemans, 2000). Financial viability and lack of structural funding was a major obstacle in developing RPL. Effective implementation demands clarity in terms of allocation of resources (Frick et al., 2007) and solutions for time-consuming procedures (Joosten-ten-Brinke, Sluijsmans, Brand-Gruwel & Jochems, 2008).

Heather alluded to the "fear" of RPL and the traditional role of the university as "gatekeeper" of academic knowledge and credentials as significant challenges to RPL. In her opinion, the "rule-bound" institutional culture needed to change.

> One of the things that holds RPL back is fear…Universities are gatekeepers…[and] have very particular notions of how one achieves standing in any area of study in which the University engages. There is a bit of the culture that is closed. It is fairly glacial to opening to new ideas and avenues of acquiring knowledge, of demonstrating knowledge… There is that rule-bound kind of culture of universities…However, it is too closed. It needs to open up. We are all in the business of taking down barriers but when you look at the organizational culture of universities, some [barriers] are still there and are very firmly entrenched.

Universities are sometimes described as "gatekeepers" of credentials reflecting achievement of specific levels of knowledge and skills by fields of study (Conrad, 2010; Pitman & Vidovitch, 2013; Wong, 2011). Faculty and administration are often cautious about RPL because it raises questions about maintaining program standards (Frick et al., 2007), and concerns about quality, risks of inconsistent processes, and invalid or unreliable outcomes (Van Kleef, 2010, 2012, 2014). Promoting RPL to its critics depends to a meaningful pedagogical level on demonstrating a system that is rigorous, sound, and capable of initiating self-reflection and critical thinking (Conrad, 2014).

Some Gap Training and Bridge Program participants spoke of the difficulties of implementing RPL in order to meet program standards. Carol shared the following: "We look at it [RPL] purely on admissions because they [students] do not get exempted from any course because we want to make sure that their standards are the same as a Canadian standard." Alison emphasized the importance of defending existing policies: "We are a high stakes organization for our applicants which means not only do we want to be internally fair and parallel to the Canadian system, but we also have to have defensible policies."

Sharon explained why RPL did not fit in with meeting the standards of the engineering profession, nor the standards of the regulator:

> No matter how we thought about it, talked about it, whom we talked to…, and probably our engineer way of looking at things, we could never see how we could…integrate that [RPL] into the Qualifications Recognition process in a regulated profession. The regulatory body gives us the right to title and to practice. There is so much focus…on an approach

> that is founded on measurability and so-called objectivity. That is very much an engineering world view that you have to make decisions that are defendable and being defendable means it is something that can be measured…Objectivity is very important.

Sharon elaborated by explaining that maintaining alignment with university program policies would take precedence over instituting RPL in order to sustain credibility, given policy constraints.

> To the extent that our program might reflect RPL, we have developed internal program policies, but…If we want to be recognized by our colleagues as a credible program, we have to align our policies…to those of the other programs in the Faculty…As a publicly funded institution, there are some currents that are hard to escape from…, the accountability for funding and the defendability (sic) of choices…Even decision-makers that maybe very supportive of it [RPL] may find the policy structure does not allow them to be as much as they may want to be…What you want to do and what you can defend doing is sometimes different.

Using RPL to make the university more inclusive but not at the expense of quality was also a concern. For knowledge or learning to be recognized by the university, it must be presented according to norms and regulations laid down by the institution. RPL procedures are generally implemented through the process of matching learning to the existing learning outcomes drawn up within the institution (Peters, 2005). Wihak (2007) pointed out the importance of alignment with university-based policy such that: "in the process of aligning such learning to University-defined standards of valued knowledge, any learning that does not readily conform may become distorted and/or devalued" (p. 98).

Meeting the standards of a regulator, in this case, engineering, was also a concern. Program specializations associated with a regulatory body can actually work against RPL by leading to fewer opportunities for people to access an appropriate level of the labour market to gain experience and specialized knowledge that can be recognized via RPL (Harris & Wihak, 2017). In addition to the other roadblocks discussed above, it was clear that RPL presented obstacles to program alignment with the University's core mission and values and program standards, as well as policy constraints.

### Intrinsic Belief

In spite of the roadblocks, participants expressed an intrinsic belief in the underlying value and potential of RPL, as reflected in the following subthemes: an increasing focus on measuring competencies and learning outcomes, the benefits of RPL to students, and the significance of valuing experience. As Nancy stated: "RPL is important and has its place in post-secondary institutions." Gina remarked that, "we need awareness of RPL, and how it will benefit the university community."

Despite RPL's low profile in Canadian universities, Belangér and Mount (1998) found most respondents do not agree that RPL is inappropriate in universities, but should form part of academic credentials in future. Whether obstacles to implementing RPL are due to lack of political will or to knowledge and epistemological constraints, Cooper and Harris (2013) maintained that experiential knowledge was generally valued across university

sites or fields of study. There was also significant evidence of experiential knowledge being drawn upon as standard pedagogic practice within the curriculum to contextualize formal knowledge, critique formal knowledge, enrich both formal and experiential knowledge, and to produce new knowledge.

Alison described how assessment of prior learning through competencies and skills among IEPs in the program for International Medical Graduates is increasing:

> We are starting to do competency-based education. Rather than didactics, we look for competencies in certain skills considered crucial in the overall medical community…We are making it a little bit more open as to how you can get to the destination of being a competent specialist… There is value in assessing people's credentials by direct assessment as opposed to just reviewing somebody's medical diploma…There is a level of expertise that exams will not necessarily address reliably.

Competency-based education focuses on what students know and can do through demonstration of pre-defined competencies, rather than the process and length of time taken to learn it (Klein-Collins, 2013), and participants acknowledged its connection with RPL. Course and program structures and processes can be reconfigured to match the intent and spirit of RPL, recognizing that adult learners can achieve academic-relevant learning from several sources – both formal study and active use of relevant work and life experiences. Learning outcomes are generally viewed as standards integrating knowledge and skills expressed in terms of performance. They are established for courses, and in some cases, programs (Van Kleef, 2011). RPL practitioners recognize the value and need for clear and accessible learning outcomes although universities have been slow to adopt learning outcomes as a viable measure (Conrad, 2014).

In their support and belief in RPL, participants spoke of its intrinsic and extrinsic benefits to students, as Julie stated:

> RPL gives students an opportunity. It gives time to degree. It is cost to degree so very programmatically speaking in human resource terms, that's an advantage…It [RPL] gives them [students] a true sense of self confidence that, "I want this credential at the University, but it doesn't mean that everything that I did before is irrelevant." It is a real sense of self-satisfaction for a student…

Gail spoke about RPL as a flexible option for students, especially for adult learners with busy schedules:

> We are seeing students who are working full time and doing classes part time…and all the different demands that people have. There needs to be some recognition of those students' needs who may have experience and…knowledge that would apply. It [RPL] allows us to make the statement that we value people who come in with a range of skills and experience and we allow some flexibility in our curriculum to recognize that…RPL is a flexible option for some people and is recognizing and valuing that not everybody that comes in is just coming in straight out of high school.

That participants were keenly aware of RPL's intrinsic (self-confidence, self-motivating, empowering) and extrinsic (time, cost savings, flexibility) benefits reflects its potential for producing students capable, not only of learning, but building self-confidence, self-esteem and empowerment (Brown, 2001, 2002; Conrad & Wardrop, 2010; Rust & Ikard, 2016; Thomas et al., 2002). RPL offers flexible program entry and exit points and an individual pace and level of learning (Frick & Albertyn, 2011). RPL is cost-effective for earning credentials by avoiding unnecessary duplication of training, and shortening the time, effort, and money required to obtain them (Klein-Collins & Hain, 2009; Peruniak & Powell, 2007; Smith & Clayton, 2009).

### *Moving Forward*

Participants offered the following ideas for moving forward with RPL: consider institutional commitment and support, make RPL more visible in university strategic plans or mandate, establish RPL policy, engage in consultation and education, involve experts, consider advocacy, promotion, collaboration, and dedicate resources.

Obtaining support and direction from senior administration was a key aspect of moving forward. Nancy spoke about the importance of "institutional commitment", adding that: "there are faculty members with expertise…and dedicated people…even before dedicated staff, you have to have a dedicated administration that wants to have it [RPL] in place and dedicate staff to it." Jim shared the following:

> If universities are going to make meaning of it [RPL] and be serious…
> then you have to be operating at a fairly high level, probably…out of the
> Vice President (Academic's) Office. There would have to be some clear
> statement that this is something we want to do as an institution and then
> put whatever processes make sense in place…and state what purposes…
> to use those for.

Implementing RPL depends heavily on the university context, vision and mission (Conrad, 2014, Frick et al., 2007), and will be seriously counterproductive if not accepted system-wide (Thomas & Klaiman, 1992). Post-secondary institutions need to contextualize RPL and take a clear stance on their intended approach(s) to RPL (Frick et al., 2007). This will have a determining influence on incorporating an appropriate RPL model and the practices flowing from such a model. The contextualization of RPL needs to be congruent with the overall mission and vision to be accepted as part of the broader institutional processes. At Athabasca University for example, RPL is firmly rooted in the University's mission statement embracing flexibility, reducing barriers to learning, and enshrined as part of the University's central mandate (Conrad, 2008b, 2010).

Closely related to need for administrative support was that RPL form a larger part of the University's strategic plan. RPL appears as an action statement in the University's strategic plan to enhance student mobility, but participants were clearly looking for specifics in terms of operational statements and guidelines. Julie shared the following:

> If you are really serious about it [RPL], it has to be part of the strategic
> direction…to provide opportunities…to recognize learning…If you look
> at institutions that have a strategy in place, it is very helpful…to see that…

> It is again having a strategic vision of it [RPL] for the University, having a committed group of people that have some decision-making power.

Institutional commitment and support is closely related to mandate and vision (Belangér & Mount, 1998; Kennedy, 2003). RPL can only succeed with the committed participation of faculty and learners who believe their engagement in the process will be valued and recognized (Thomas, 2000; Wong, 2011). As impetus needs to come from within the organization rather than external forces, a critical factor for academic change is the perceived level of departmental/disciplinary support for RPL. As a mere policy without real academic and administrative commitment, RPL will not realize its true potential. An institutional culture that incorporates RPL, implements RPL-friendly policies, and is supported by informed and committed personnel are all factors that influence successful implementation. Careful planning of policy implementation procedures, appropriate selection of assessment instruments, and creation of a truly learner-centred approach can greatly enhance quality and successful implementation of RPL (Frick et al., 2007).

Nancy expressed the need for consultation and education to improve understanding about RPL:

> There needs to be a lot of consultation and education around RPL…We all need to have an understanding of RPL, what it is, and what we hope to accomplish, both at the institutional level, and then within our own units. We need to have general policy guidelines…to establish RPL within a course or with a set of courses at the faculty level…My preferred (sic) is to see the University take a position…favourable to RPL that enables other units to move ahead. Notwithstanding that, some units who believe in RPL have gone ahead and…put policies in place at their faculty level even though there isn't one [policy] at the University.

Heather explained that management and implementation of RPL should involve experts, and include quality control:

> The [RPL] process should be well articulated with adequate quality control…and with very clear guidelines and processes…You would want content experts…[and] curriculum experts involved…adult educators… to translate how knowledge and skills in the professional life of an adult learner translates into the knowledge that the University can recognize… Ensuring that those processes are clear and pretty tight for quality control would be important.

Advocacy and promotion of RPL responds directly to the invisibility theme. Nancy remarked that, "you have to be committed, be open and be an advocate for that [RPL] and believe in that [RPL]." Gina stated that, "we have examples here of what can be done. So, just the willingness to go there…and somebody who can say 'ok, let's promote it' and just making people aware."

Involving outside experts and staff training are important, and universities should aim to incorporate professional development opportunities for RPL advisors, and ensure that advisors are also subject specialists where possible (Brown, 2017). Collaboration should take place with academics and others outside post-secondary institutions with relevant expertise that bring a wider range of knowledge and ways of assessing RPL claims to

counterbalance the perspectives of academics (Peters, 2005). Providing faculty/mentors and evaluators with training and resources is critical (Hoffmann, 2013). An advocate can play an important role where championing the process contributes to RPL success in post-secondary education (Conrad, 2014; Harris & Wihak, 2017), and should engage in ongoing dialogue and activities with institutional personnel at all levels.

Scarce financial resources were a roadblock, but at the same time, essential to supporting RPL, for example the Gap Training and Bridge Program in Medicine. As Alison explained:

> It [the Program] is well supported because it is funded…by the [provincial government] but housed within the University…The employees are University employees but their funding does not come from the University. We use the infrastructure of the University. We assign our administrative support to it but if [the provincial government] stopped funding the program, we would just fold.

RPL is a resource-intensive endeavor, where human resources, training, administrative support and adequate infrastructure are critical to development and implementation (Frick et al., 2007; Kennedy, 2003). Until resources are addressed, RPL will not be integrated into the mainstream of student services at Canadian universities (Wihak & Wong, 2011).

Universities have not yet made a serious commitment to improving learning recognition as measured by priority-setting and resource allocation. As Grant (2015) has argued, post-secondary institutions do not see learning recognition as core to their business model, particularly in attracting additional students. Therefore, they do not invest in creating systems for dealing with students who come through non-traditional channels and instead rely heavily on formal, credit-based recognition of learning for evaluating students. It may be costly initially to implement RPL, but when it leads to qualified applicants who may study for two to three years after receiving recognition, the business case can be made.

## Conclusion

This study revealed several findings that add to the emerging RPL literature. First, approaching RPL from an area of study perspective or disciplinary domain within the university is viable, and builds on recommendations from earlier research (Cooper & Harris, 2013; Harris & Wihak, 2017; Wihak, 2006, 2007, 2014; Wong, 2011). This approach sheds light on understanding differences in faculty conceptualizations, acceptance, and support for RPL, and can be a prelude to generating support for RPL among faculty members (Wong, 2011). The study also shows that RPL is very much localized as participants had little or no knowledge of RPL activity in areas other than their own, but were quite willing to share their knowledge and best practices with others.

Second, the themes and subthemes are confirmed in previous research. From a holistic perspective, the themes underlie the consensus that RPL remains marginalized, invisible, misunderstood, and under-utilized, and to some extent, resisted within university. The study confirmed that RPL remains a contested and challenged terrain in the university. Participants were quite articulate about the misunderstandings and roadblocks besetting RPL, and demonstrated awareness of the enormous challenges of generating support and resources. They were also knowledgeable and well informed about RPL, and maintained a

strong belief in its inherent value and benefits to students, and offered many suggestions on ways to move forward.

Third, the study supports some compelling reasons for universities to more actively pursue RPL. The failure to address the increasing amount of unrecognized learning within the context of the globalized knowledge economy has significant social and economic consequences for Canada (Grant, 2015). Increasing dependence on immigrants and refugees to fill labour force needs suggests the need for more efficient methods of recognizing foreign credentials and qualifications to fill education and training gaps (Andersson & Guo, 2009; Guo, 2009).

Research remains scant and fragmented, particularly in Canada (Wihak, 2006, 2007, 2014) where provinces and territories address RPL differently, thus posing a challenging context to make general statements about RPL on a national scale (Van Kleef, 2011). Investigating RPL from a pedagogical or epistemological perspective challenges researchers due to the attention paid more to application and practice. As RPL continues to struggle to gain recognition in the post-secondary environment, it must not only continue to be seen, shared, discussed and debated, but research must continue to evolve and be critically assessed, particularly in the university context.

### Future Research

Building on the results of this case study, there are many opportunities for further research. As a learner-centred process, future RPL research should consider students' perspectives and gather data on aspects such as time to completion, learning outcomes, academic progress, and program experiences. Using the disciplinary approach within the university setting presents many possibilities for conducting RPL research in fields of study such as nursing and pharmacy that can serve as best practices in which portfolios and e-portfolios have been incorporated for assessment of competency (Green, Wyllie, & Jackson, 2014; Haggerty & Thompson, 2017; Lopez et al., 2011; McDuffie, Sheffield, Miller, Duke & Rogers, 2010).

A key theme in the study was the invisibility, lack of awareness and differences in understanding about RPL. This finding points to the need for education and a support system as factors that can contribute to RPL program awareness and student success. Future study should build on existing research that emphasizes the importance of best practices and the need to provide students with the skills, knowledge and guidance necessary to complete portfolios and e-portfolios through use of instructors, mentors and instructional resources (Gambescia & Dagavarian, 2007; Hoffmann, 2013; Klein-Collins & Hain, 2009; Leiste & Jensen, 2011; Rust & Brinthaupt, 2017; Rust & Ikard, 2016).

The use of various technologies to implement RPL is a cutting-edge field with much potential to revolutionize post-secondary education. Digital technologies such as badges enable learners to document and display their skills on websites, social media pages and other multimedia modalities (Shields & Chugh, 2017). These are gaining momentum as educators become more aware of their implications for access, participation, pedagogy and skills recognition (Cameron et al., 2014). Blockchain technology is emerging as a promising opportunity to secure documents through the logging of digital credentials on public platforms or professional networks to issue, store, verify and share credentials (Iafrate, 2017), and further research could help to shed light on these exciting innovations of the future.

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## APPENDIX A
## DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

The following is a brief description of interview participants[1] by area of study as referenced in this article.

### *Extended Education*

Julie previously served in an administrative capacity in Extended Education, and was involved in the promotion and implementation of RPL. Julie had worked closely on developing portfolios in conjunction with the Certificate in Adult and Continuing Education (CACE) Program. Julie was also very involved in using RPL in other jurisdictions.

Jim is in a senior level position at Extended Education and had worked very closely with helping students in preparing and assessing their portfolios. Jim worked with the RPL Coordinator and was active in RPL-related discussions at the time. Jim also collaborated with high schools in promoting and facilitating advanced standing to university admission through dual credit courses.

Heather served in an administrative capacity in Extended Education and was very familiar with the challenges that students faced in putting their portfolios together. Heather was instrumental in developing transfer credit arrangements between the Division's certificate programs and University degree programs, e.g., the CACE Program and the Bachelor of Arts in Integrated Studies Degree.

### *The Bachelor of Social Work Program*

Ron is a senior administrator in the Faculty of Social Work and was responsible for introducing RPL to the Faculty based on an experience of working and training at another university. Ron maintains a supportive role in helping staff implement RPL in the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) Program. He also has oversight for resolving challenges to the process, i.e., student complaints.

Linda works directly with students who apply for RPL in the BSW Program, and works with her colleagues to assess applications. Linda played an important role in developing the RPL process currently in place. She conducts RPL-related research and networks with colleagues in other jurisdictions to remain up-to-date on current developments in the field.

Gail was instrumental in developing a RPL exemption process for the BSW Program. Gail works to promote RPL through orientation and information sessions to prospective students and to Faculty. She also works with colleagues to assess admissions to RPL and advises students about commitments and expectations concerning the RPL option.

### *Gap Training and Bridge Programs*

Nancy worked with the International Teacher Education (IET) Program until it discontinued in 2011. Nancy worked closely with students to help them meet program

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1    Thirteen participants were interviewed for this study.  Of those, quotations from 11 participants are included in this article.  Pseudonyms have been used.

admission requirements, as well as playing a guiding hand in assisting students through the program. Nancy worked in collaboration with education stakeholders (regulating body, school division staff, employment counsellors, and other faculty members) to oversee the IET Program.

Gina worked with the Internationally Educated Agrologists Program (IEAP) prior to its discontinuation. Gina played an active role in promoting the program to the University and outside community, including the agrology industry, regulator, and the provincial government funding body. Gina was instrumental in addressing cultural challenges that students faced, and worked with them to meet program expectations.

Carol has worked with the International Dentist Degree Program (IDDP) for several years. She advises students about the application process and in meeting program requirements. Carol plays an important role in preparing students for meeting the clinical aspects of training including the National Dental Examining Board requirements. She collaborates closely with academics, clinical instructors, and health professionals familiar with the program.

Sharon served in a senior-level role with the Internationally Educated Engineers Qualification (IEEQ) Program and worked on developing and implementing the Program. Sharon promoted the Program through workshops and conferences, and worked closely with University stakeholders including Admissions, Senate, Faculty of Graduate Studies and senior administration to support the Program on a long-term basis.

Alison is a senior-level staff member with the International Medical Graduate (IMG) Program. Alison has expertise in assessing clinical skills and providing training to IMG students based on their qualifications. She educates others about learning culturally appropriate medical practices and using a competency-based approach to training. Alison collaborates with provincial health-related professionals to share expertise and to develop common principles on practice-ready assessments.