



# Report on the recognition of informal learning

**January 2004**

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## ***Executive summary***

In late 2003, the Victorian Qualifications Authority [VQA] and the Adult, Community and Further Education Board [ACFEB] agreed to a joint project to assess the feasibility of granting recognition for informal learning within the qualifications system administered by the VQA.

This study was commissioned with the aim of:

- defining informal learning
- outlining the scope of informal learning in Victoria
- examining the issues associated with recognising informal learning
- providing an outline of potential models for recognising such learning.

This reflects the growing interest in learning that occurs outside the formal education and training system and how this contributes to lifelong learning and the development of cohesive and resilient communities.

These two matters are central to the government's vision and targets for Victoria that are articulated in *Growing Victoria Together*.

### **Project methodology**

The information used in this feasibility study was gathered through an environmental scan, that comprised a literature review and consultations with key stakeholders.

The outcomes of the environmental scan were used to develop an 'issues and options' paper that provided the basis for discussion in a focus group and subsequent consultations.

The material gathered through these sources was then incorporated in a draft report that was circulated to the Project Steering Committee and key staff in the VQA and ACFEB for consideration prior to the preparation of this report.

### **What is informal learning?**

Informal learning refers to personal and employment capacity building that occurs outside the formal recognition system. In Victoria, this is any learning that does not lead directly to either a full qualification or credit towards a qualification accredited by the VQA or higher education providers.

As such, informal learning occurs when people develop their personal and employment capacities through:

- active participation in work, family and the community
- pursuing activities and interests as individuals or in groups

- engaging in non course-based learning activities, such as discussion groups, meetings and workshops, provided in response to the expressed or potential interests and needs of individuals and communities
- taking part in non recognised but planned and structured programs, such as locally accredited short courses and other programs, conducted in educational settings or in the workplace.

### Developments in recognising informal learning

The Australian Qualifications Framework [AQF] describes the recognised post compulsory qualifications offered in Australia. All qualifications in the Framework allow for the recognition of informal learning through the provision of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). Whilst this policy supports the recognition of informal learning, a series of recent studies have highlighted the low uptake of RPL and its failure to provide a pathway for disadvantaged and discouraged learners.

These problems, coupled with the growing importance of lifelong learning and the need for multiskilling and reskilling the Australian workforce, have stimulated interest in the development of new ways of providing recognition and building qualifications based on different combinations of formal and informal learning.

In April 2002, the Australian National Training Authority [ANTA] released a report titled, *Due Credit: Examining the potential to recognise the skills achieved by young people participating in youth development programs*. This report focused on recognising informal learning acquired through youth development programs. However a number of the strategies it posed for recognising such learning, including mapping the outcomes of programs against formal qualifications, establishing a generic skills qualification and developing specialist qualifications for youth leadership skills, have relevance beyond the youth sector.

Paralleling this work at the national level, have been a number of discrete but related initiatives within Victoria. The common feature of these initiatives is the expanded use of credit based approaches to recognising informal learning and building qualifications that incorporate the outcomes of both informal and formal learning. These initiatives include:

- the introduction of block credit arrangements for VET studies within the VCE
- the VCAL Personal Development Studies
- the Credit Matrix

The development of credit based systems that incorporate the outcomes of formal and informal learning in recognised qualifications is not unique to Australia. National qualifications systems that are built on credit accumulation and transfer systems, which incorporate the capacity to

accredit achievement gained through informal learning, are in place in Scotland, Ireland and New Zealand and are under active consideration in other places.

### Provision of informal learning in Victoria

Informal learning takes place in a variety of settings in Victoria. These include dedicated learning environments such as Adult and Community Education [ACE] providers, Adult Education Institutes [AEIs] and TAFE Institutes as well as other settings including work places, community centres, youth development agencies, professional associations, industry organisations, voluntary groups and community development projects.

It is difficult to estimate the provision of informal learning. This reflects the scale and diversity of the programs and activities as well as the nature of informal learning which is often both a part and a product of seemingly non-educational activities.

One indicator of the extent of the provision of informal learning is the delivery of non recognised programs by ACE providers, AEIs, TAFE Institutes and private providers. The Office of Training and Tertiary Education estimates that there were over 240,000 enrolments in such programs in 2003. This accounted for over eight million student contacts hours of training and education or 8.0% of the total delivery of Victorian ACE, AEI, TAFE Institutes and private providers.

This does not take into account the significant provision of informal learning that occurs through government sponsored community capacity building initiatives, such as the Learning Towns and the Neighbourhood Renewal programs, or the programs and activities provided by:

- youth development organisations
- professional and industry associations
- sporting and recreation organisations
- social service and welfare agencies
- community and environment groups
- businesses
- church organisations.

A comprehensive approach to recognising informal learning would enable the outcomes of programs and activities offered by this diverse range of providers, as well as the outcomes of learning attained more broadly within the family, work and community, to be recognised within the formal qualifications system.

## Key findings from the environmental scan and consultations

The environmental scan and consultations revealed that:

- the development of recognition arrangements that are comprehensive and may be applied across the diverse range of agencies and settings in which informal learning takes place is a key challenge.
- most people consulted agreed that learners would benefit from improved arrangements for recognising informal learning. Amongst other things it was seen as a way of boosting the status of informal learning, increasing participation in education and training, promoting lifelong learning, fostering social inclusion and enhancing social capital and community development.
- there was a small number of people in the consultations who questioned the need for recognising informal learning and the value of developing new approaches to recognition. Their concerns focused on the potential for improved recognition arrangements to devalue informal learning outcomes, the absence of a need for new arrangements given existing RPL processes, the costs associated with recognition and the failure of existing recognition mechanisms to enhance social inclusion.
- there is widespread dissatisfaction with the effectiveness of existing approaches to recognition. In general, RPL processes were seen to be too complex, expensive and difficult to access for most learners. As a result take up rates are low with many participants noting that it is cheaper and simpler 'to do the training'.
- there is strong support for improved guidance and advice for learners on recognition services. Both the literature review and consultations showed that currently too much emphasis is placed on providing information on recognition services when learners really need guidance and advice.
- a significant factor in the uptake of recognition services is whether learners have access to intermediaries who are able to provide advice on recognition processes, mediate with education and training providers and assist with pathways development.
- the development of Learning Towns and the Local Learning and Employment Networks have highlighted the importance of partnerships in improving people's access to and understanding of recognition arrangements.
- recognition services should be part of a learning pathway. For example, for many people having their informal learning recognised may be the first step towards achieving entry to a general preparatory course, the VCE or VCAL, a TAFE or university course, voluntary work or the paid workforce.

## Key issues from the environmental scan and consultations

The key issues raised through the environmental scan and consultations were:

- while most people consulted felt that all learners should be able to have their learning formally recognised there was general agreement that such arrangements should be voluntary
- some of those consulted argued that the introduction of new recognition arrangements may have an adverse impact on providers and their capacity to deliver programs required by their clients. Their concerns centred on the costs associated with complying with the administrative procedures that may be associated with any new recognition arrangements. These concerns need to be balanced against the potential benefits to learners of such arrangements.
- there was general support for the expansion of credit based approaches to recognition. These were seen to be more accessible and cost effective than existing RPL processes. However a series of questions were raised concerning the criteria for determining credit, quality assurance and the capacity to attach credit values to non program informal learning activities.
- the quality assurance arrangements required to support credit based recognition arrangements is a critical issue. It is proposed that a set of quality assurance criteria based around the identification and verification of learning gain in informal programs and activities be further investigated.
- the purpose and structure of qualifications have a significant impact on both the approach to recognition and the level of recognition that can be awarded for informal learning. Qualifications with broad purposes and flexible structures, such as the VCE, seem to have more potential to accommodate credit based approaches to recognition than more tightly defined qualifications, such as most VET certificates and diplomas. Consideration should be paid to the development of a more flexible, credit based qualification framework that would facilitate recognition of the outcomes of both formal and informal learning. It is proposed that consideration be given to the development of a credit based Adult Learning Framework to support the recognition of informal learning – this is discussed in more detail in the full report.
- one of the key problems confronting people seeking recognition for informal learning is the mismatch between learning gained in informal situations and the learning prescribed in qualifications. Existing RPL processes are often unable to address this issue and as a consequence candidates who can competently perform the functions associated with a particular job or occupation may be unable to meet all the requirements of the relevant qualification. There is a clear need for a

new more streamlined approach to RPL that is based on a broader view of equivalence and risk assessment principles – this is discussed in more detail in the full report.

- the development of generic skills is a key outcome of informal learning. However it can be difficult to provide recognition for generic skills as they are often not described in outcome terms in formal education and training qualifications. Any new set of recognition arrangements must include provision for recognising different types and levels of generic skills.
- the absence of an effective way of funding recognition services is seen as one of the major reasons for the low uptake of RPL and the reluctance of providers to offer effective recognition services. The question of funding needs to be addressed in any new set of recognition arrangements.

### The key features of an approach for the recognition of informal learning in Victoria

The study revealed that no single approach is likely to provide a way of recognising the outcomes of all forms of informal learning. It is proposed that the VQA and ACFEB give consideration to establishing a recognition framework that incorporates a number of mechanisms for recognising informal learning.

This framework would be based on a set of principles that are detailed in the full report.

It is envisaged that a recognition framework based on these principles will comprise three key components, namely:

- Learning pathway - central to the proposed framework is the learning pathway. This recognises that learning should be purposeful and that learners need opportunities to identify and review their learning goals and how these are likely to be achieved. It is envisaged that learners will be encouraged to develop individual learning pathways that provide them with an opportunity to reflect on the scope, direction and pace of their learning and how this fits with their family, employment and other goals.
- Credit for learning – this component of the framework incorporates four different ways in which learners may gain credit for their informal learning. These are:
  - Block credit
  - Recognition of prior learning
  - Credit transfer
  - Learning credits

It is envisaged that the framework will incorporate a simple means of rewarding people for learning – this is the block credit proposal.

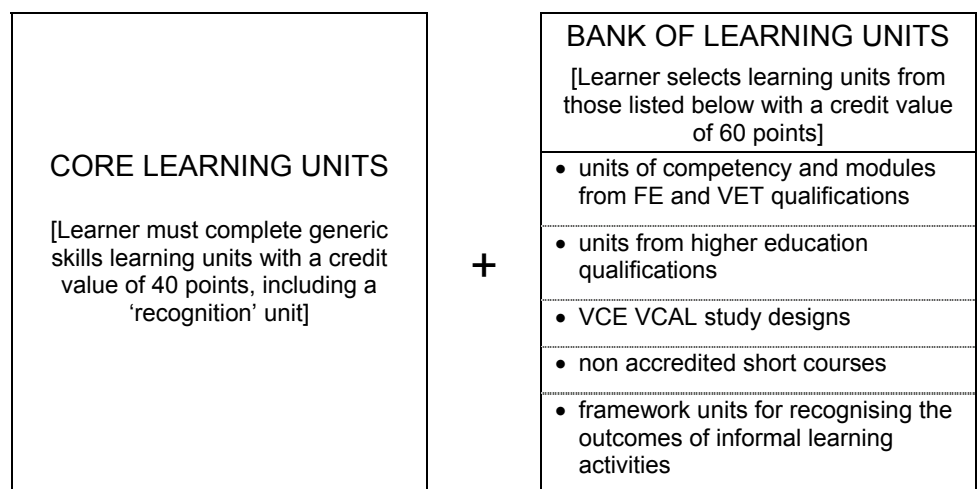
Under this proposal learners would be able to gain credit within the qualifications administered by the VQA, up to a designated value, for learning attained through any form of non accredited education and training, work, participation in the community or other informal learning experience. Provided this learning complies with a set of minimum quality assurance guidelines, credit would be granted virtually automatically – it was felt in the consultations that this would provide a powerful incentive for people to have their learning recognised.

It recommended that the block credit proposal be supported by a new RPL model, that is based on a broader view of equivalence and risk assessment principles; expanded credit transfer arrangements and the introduction of learning credits as the Credit Matrix and credit based qualifications gain acceptance.

- Qualifications - the final component of the framework is the qualifications against which the recognition will be granted. It is envisaged that all qualifications administered by the VQA will be included in the framework. In addition to these existing qualifications, it is proposed that consideration be given to the development of a credit based Adult Learning Framework. This would provide a set of nationally recognised qualifications, from Certificate I through to Advanced Diploma, against which learners could gain recognition for their existing skills and capacities and plan their future learning.

As illustrated in the following diagram, all qualifications in the framework would have a credit value and would comprise a core of generic skills learning units and a bank of content specific learning units.

**Possible structure Certificate III in Adult Learning**



All units in the framework would have a credit value. The framework would include a set of simple, flexible packaging rules that enable

candidates to structure nationally recognised qualifications on the basis of credit points.

The Credit Matrix could provide a useful tool for establishing the credit value of the learning units within the framework and for calculating the credit value of informal learning for which candidates are seeking recognition.

As the proposed framework is cross-sectoral in nature it is recommended that it be developed, accredited and managed through the VQA in a similar manner to the VCAL.

### Recommendations

- That the Board of the Victorian Qualifications Authority and the Adult, Community and Further Education Board support in principle the development of a Recognition Framework for informal learning in Victoria.
- That the Board of the Victorian Qualifications Authority and the Adult, Community and Further Education Board endorse the statement of principles outlined in this report for guiding further work on the development of arrangements for recognising informal learning within the qualifications system administered by the VQA.
- That the Board of the Victorian Qualifications Authority and the Adult, Community and Further Education Board support further development of the framework for recognising informal learning described in this paper.

### ***Background to the project***

In late 2003, the Victorian Qualifications Authority [VQA] and the Adult, Community and Further Education Board [ACFEB] agreed to a joint project to assess the feasibility of granting recognition for informal learning within the qualifications system administered by the VQA.

The feasibility study was commissioned with the aim of defining informal learning, outlining the scope of informal learning in Victoria, examining the issues associated with recognising informal learning and providing an outline of potential models for recognising such learning.

The decision to commission this study reflects the growing interest in learning that occurs outside the formal education and training system and how this contributes to lifelong learning and the development of cohesive and resilient communities.

These two issues are central to the Victorian government's vision for the State that was articulated in *Growing Victoria Together*. This strategy focuses government resources on eleven priority issues that span the conventional divisions of government.

Valuing and investing in lifelong learning is one of the key issues to be addressed through this strategy. The government's priorities in this area are to:

- improve participation and achievement in education and training
- provide better links between schools, business and education
- expand opportunities for training and learning all through life.

Progress in this area is to be measured against four key indicators, namely:

- Victorian primary school children will be at or above national benchmark levels for reading, writing and numeracy by 2005
- 90 per cent of young people in Victoria will successfully complete Year 12 or its equivalent by 2010
- the percentage of young people 15-19 in rural and regional Victoria engaged in education and training will rise by 6 per cent by 2005
- the proportion of Victorians learning new skills will increase.

The introduction of more effective arrangements for recognising informal learning has the potential to increase participation in education and training, promote lifelong learning and contribute to the achievement of the latter two targets.

This was acknowledged in the Australian National Training Authority's [ANTA] marketing strategy, titled, *A national marketing strategy for VET: Meeting client needs*. The consultation conducted for this study revealed that stakeholders saw recognition

*'... as a powerful tool for bringing people into the learning system - it reassures them they don't have to start from scratch and that the skills they already have are valuable.'*

Whilst there are existing mechanisms for recognising skills attained through work and life experience these are often cumbersome and costly and there is little evidence that they are widely used or have promoted social inclusion. What is needed is new ways of linking the outcomes of informal and formal learning and having these recognised within qualifications such as the Victorian Certificate of Education [VCE], the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning [VCAL] and Vocational Education and Training [VET] and Further Education [FE] certificates and diplomas. This would assist young school leavers to re-engage with formal education and training, provide opportunities for people to build qualifications based on combinations of formal and informal learning that reflect both their needs and the needs of their communities and offer an incentive for people to acquire new skills.

Building more cohesive communities is the other key government priority that may be advanced through providing better arrangements for recognising informal learning. The government's priorities in this area, as described in *Growing Victoria Together*, are to:

- support new community building initiatives and develop partnerships with local government around local communities' needs
- enhance community participation and engagement in cultural activities
- encourage employers, workers and families to better balance their work and family responsibilities and their ability to participate in community life
- reduce unemployment and rejuvenate those areas worst affected by social and economic disadvantage
- expand the supply of secure, affordable and appropriate public housing

Progress in this area will be measured against three key indicators, namely:

- the extent and diversity of participation in community, cultural and recreational organisations will increase
- in a crisis there will be more people Victorians can turn to for support
- inequalities in health, education and well being between communities will be reduced

Community development initiatives, such as the Neighbourhood Renewal project, the Community Capacity Building Initiative and the Community Building Initiative, provide a wealth of informal learning opportunities.

More effective recognition arrangements would enable participants in these programs to gain credit for this learning, access further education and training and ultimately gain formal qualifications. This would boost their employability, reduce inequalities and build the skills available in local

communities. It would also serve to support community participation and promote the value of learning and in so doing build social capital and community resilience. There is growing evidence, as illustrated by the work of the Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia (CRLRA)<sup>1</sup>, that communities in which learning is supported and valued appear better able to cope with change and take advantage of new and emerging opportunities for social and economic development.

As such, improved recognition arrangements can contribute to community building and reducing unemployment and assist in advancing the government's target of alleviating inequalities between communities in Victoria.

In summary, by supporting this feasibility study, the VQA and ACFE Boards, have created the opportunity for identifying new ways of recognising informal learning within the formal qualifications system that may contribute to the government's aims of expanding lifelong learning and building more cohesive communities.

### ***Project methodology***

Learning Australia Pty Ltd was commissioned by the VQA to undertake this feasibility study in late 2003. The study involved four key stages. These were:

- project establishment – the consultant met with the Project Director and representatives of the VQA and ACFE to clarify the scope and expected outcomes of the feasibility study.
- environmental scan – the consultant undertook a review of key documents and reports, analysed available statistical information on informal learning and conducted a series of key respondent interviews with representatives of the ACE, VET and schools sector. The key outcome of this stage was an issues and options paper on the recognition of informal learning.
- consultation with key stakeholders – the issues and options paper developed in the first stage of the study was used to guide the discussion in a focus group that was conducted in late December 2003. The focus group included representatives of provider groups, including the ACE, AEI, VET and school providers, policy and planning authorities, including VQA, ACFEB, OTTE and AQFAB as well as industry and community groups. Following the focus group a limited

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<sup>1</sup> See *Learning to manage change: Developing regional communities for a local-global millennium* by Ian Falk [ed], Director, Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia (CRLRA) University of Tasmania, Launceston, Tasmania, Australia, NCVET, 2001

number of key respondent interviews were conducted to clarify issues that emerged in the discussion.

- report preparation – the consultant collated and analysed the outcomes of the environmental scan and consultations and presented a draft report to members of the Project Steering Committee in early January 2004. This report was also circulated to a limited number of staff within the VQA and ACFE for comment. Feedback from these sources was considered and incorporated in the final version of the report.

### ***What is informal learning?***

Informal learning refers to personal and employment capacity building that occurs outside the formal recognition system. In Victoria, this is any learning that does not lead directly to either a full qualification or credit towards a qualification accredited by the VQA or higher education providers.

As such, informal learning occurs when people develop their personal and employment capacities through:

- active participation in work, family and the community
- pursuing activities and interests as individuals or in groups
- engaging in non course-based learning activities, such as discussion groups, meetings and workshops, provided in response to the expressed or potential interests and needs of individuals and communities
- taking part in non recognised but planned and structured programs, such as locally accredited short courses and other programs, conducted in educational settings or in the workplace.

Informal learning occurs in a wide range of settings. It may be planned or incidental, structured or unstructured, facilitated or self directed and generated in response to group or individual needs and interests.

For the purposes of this paper, informal learning encompasses any form of non recognised personal and employment capacity building that takes place, for example, within the government funded and non funded Adult and Community Education (ACE) sector, the workplace, industry and community organisations and the broader community.

### ***Developments in recognising informal learning***

The Australian Qualifications Framework [AQF] describes the recognised post compulsory qualifications offered in Australia. All qualifications in the Framework allow for the recognition of informal learning through the provision of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). This enables people to gain recognition and credit for the knowledge and skills they have, no matter how and where they were attained, including through:

- previous study including courses at school or college, through adult education classes or training programs at work
- work experience including both paid and unpaid work
- life experience for example leisure pursuits, voluntary work or community involvement.

While the RPL pathway is an integral part of the AQF and is incorporated in each of the qualification guidelines of the Framework, it has not provided a major pathway for people seeking recognition for informal learning.

A recent report, titled, *Recognition of prior learning: Policy and practice in Australia*, commissioned by the Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board [AQFAB] concluded that:

*'... there is a large gap between policy and practice, with relatively few students receiving RPL, despite the prominence given to RPL in policy. In 2001, approximately 5% of those enrolled in higher education qualifications reported that they received RPL, while just under 8% of those enrolled in VET qualifications reported that they received RPL.'*

Whilst the authors of this report acknowledged that there may be some non reporting of RPL activity and that in both the VET and higher education sectors the incidence of RPL increases with AQF levels, they went on to note that despite the policy intentions RPL:

*'...has not, by and large, acted as a mechanism for social inclusion for those from disadvantaged backgrounds...indigenous students, students from low socio-economic backgrounds, and those who were unemployed or otherwise outside the labour force were appreciably less likely to receive RPL than were their peers.'*

A number of recent studies [Bowman et al 2003; Byron, J, 2003; Wheelan et al] have attempted to explain the low uptake of RPL. Some of the explanations posed by these studies include:


- a lack of awareness of RPL
- a perception amongst providers that RPL outcomes do not have the same value as education and training outcomes
- the complex, costly and bureaucratic nature of RPL processes
- the existence of funding arrangements which provide disincentives for candidates and institutions to engage in RPL processes
- a lack of assistance and information for candidates on RPL processes
- inadequate professional development for RPL assessors
- a preference by recognised equity groups to participate in training rather than seek RPL.

Considerable effort has been invested in addressing these issues. This includes:

- the use of workshops to support applicants through the RPL processes
- the introduction of 'one stop shop' assessment services
- the provision of pre assessment interviews and direct assistance with portfolio development
- the production of evidence guides for learners making RPL applications.

Whilst these initiatives have undoubtedly assisted many applicants, the problems of low uptake of RPL and its failure to provide a pathway for disadvantaged and discouraged learners remain. These problems, coupled with the growing importance of lifelong learning and the need for multiskilling and reskilling the Australian workforce, have stimulated interest in the development of new ways of providing recognition and building qualifications based on different combinations of formal and informal learning.

In April 2002, the Australian National Training Authority [ANTA] released a report titled, *Due Credit: Examining the potential to recognise the skills achieved by young people participating in youth development programs*. The report identified a framework, which could be applied in the VET, schools and community sectors, for recognising the skills and knowledge that young people acquire through youth development programs. As shown in the chart below the framework identifies eight options for recognising the outcomes of these programs.

PROPOSED FRAMEWORK FOR RECOGNISING THE SKILLS ACHIEVED IN YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS				
Degree of formality	The Vocational Education & Training (VET) sector	The school education sector	Multi-sector	The community sector
Less Formal  More Formal				Enhance brand name awards
	Mapping skills to VET qualifications	Mapping skills to secondary school curricula	Develop a skills portfolio	Develop a youth participation certificate
	Examine the potential to develop a qualification that recognises generic skills	Examine recording of participation/skills on school exit certificates		
	Identify qualifications that recognise leadership skills			

[Source: ANTA, *Due Credit: Examining the potential to recognise the skills achieved by young people participating in youth development programs*, 2002]

Some of these options, such as enhancing 'brand name' awards and issuing participation certificates, are not necessarily intended to provide a

mechanism for linking the outcomes of these programs with formal qualifications. However a number of the other options, including mapping the outcomes of programs against formal qualifications, establishing a generic skills qualification and developing specialist qualifications for youth leadership skills, offer approaches to recognising informal learning and incorporating this in nationally recognised qualifications that have relevance beyond the youth development sector.

ANTA has commissioned a number of supplementary projects to further develop aspects of the framework outlined in the *Due Credit* report.

For example in 2003, ANTA released a report titled *Bridging Links – A practical guide for the mapping youth development skills to units of competency*. As the title suggests, this provided a step by step guide for mapping the outcomes of these programs against units of competency in order to assist participants gain recognition within VET qualifications.

Paralleling this work at the national level, have been a number of discrete but related initiatives within Victoria. The common feature of these initiatives is the expanded use of credit based approaches to recognising informal learning and building qualifications that incorporate the outcomes of both informal and formal learning.

The Adult Victorian Certificate of Education has incorporated defacto arrangements for recognising informal learning for some time. Within the certificate, it is assumed that adults bring experience and knowledge learnt outside the classroom to their studies. The Adult VCE may be completed with eight half-year units of study as opposed to the sixteen units of study required within the standard VCE. To achieve the Adult VCE, a learner must complete:

- two units of an English study at the Units 1, 2, 3 or 4 level, and
- three other studies taken at the Units 3 and 4 level.

In late 2002, the VQA and the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority [VCAA] approved further reforms to the VCE which created provision for block credit recognition within the certificate. Under these arrangements, learners are able to apply for block credit towards the VCE if they have completed, or are completing training in nationally recognised VET/FE programs that are not already recognised VCE VET programs.

These arrangements provide credit towards the VCE for full or partial completion of nationally recognised VET qualifications at AQF II and above. The level of credit within the VCE varies according to the AQF level of the training undertaken. For example, certificates at AQF II attract credit for units 1 and 2 within the VCE, whereas certificates at AQF III and above gain credit for units 3 and 4 of the VCE. The maximum level of credit available for VET/FE programs under these arrangements is eight units, which may include two sequences at VCE units 3-4 level.

Whilst these block credit arrangements apply only to recognised FE and VET programs, this approach could be extended to include a range of non recognised but quality assured programs, such as many of the youth development programs that were the subject of the *Due Credit* report.

The inclusion of the personal development strand in the VCAL provides another way in which the outcomes of these programs may be recognised.

This component of the VCAL aims to develop communication skills, teamwork, self-confidence, self-esteem, and respect for others and the community. Students acquire these capacities through participating in community projects and/or activities that are organised by their school in partnership with community agencies. These include:

- non accredited training programs provided organisations such as the Victorian Youth Development Program and the Duke of Edinburgh's Award
- volunteer work with organisations such as Conservation Volunteers Australia, Country Fire Authority or the State Emergency Service
- local initiatives such as community radio and community service projects.

Arguably the most significant move towards establishing a credit based approach to recognition in Australia is the work that the VQA is undertaking on the Credit Matrix.

This initiative stemmed from the VQA's work on forming linkages between qualifications. The Credit Matrix provides a means of describing and comparing the learning that has been achieved and applying this across different qualifications. For example, the Credit Matrix may be used to determine the credit value of a number of units that a learner has attained within a FE program. This information could then be used in negotiating credits within the VCE ,VCAL or an appropriate VET qualification.

While the Credit Matrix has particular application in establishing linkages between qualifications, the system of ascribing a credit value to learning achieved is designed to be applicable to learning achieved through work, the community or other informal experience.

The VQA has acknowledged the potential for using the Credit Matrix in recognising informal learning. In a consultation paper titled, *The Credit Matrix – Building bridges between qualifications*, the Authority noted that:

*'..in principle the system of levels and points can be applied to all learning, irrespective of whether it is linked to a formal program of study or training, or learning gained through work, in the community, or through other informal experience. However this doesn't mean that all learning can automatically be given a credit value. As with credit transfer, the knowledge and skills gained have to be relevant to the particular qualification. In addition, because the credit matrix*

*is about learning that counts towards qualifications, it must be able to be verified in a way that can be depended upon to be valid and consistent.'*

Even given this cautionary note, the Credit Matrix, is a potentially powerful tool for supporting the recognition of informal learning and incorporating it in qualifications that reflect the needs and interests of learners.

The move to establish credit based systems that have the capacity to incorporate the outcomes of different forms of formal and informal learning in recognised qualifications is not unique to Australia.

National qualifications systems that are built on credit accumulation and transfer systems, which incorporate the capacity to accredit achievement gained through informal learning, are in place in Scotland, Ireland and New Zealand and are under active consideration in other places. For example, the proposed Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales will incorporate measures for '...assigning and awarding credit for all learning including non-accredited learning.'

There is also considerable work being undertaken by the European Commission on the development of a set of common principles for guiding the validation of the outcomes of informal learning.<sup>2</sup> This work will have important implications for the development of credit transfer systems within formal education and training systems, such as the existing European Credit Transfer System developed for higher education and the credit transfer system currently being considered for vocational education and training stemming from the Copenhagen Declaration.

### ***Provision of informal learning in Victoria***

Informal learning takes place in a variety of settings in Victoria. These include dedicated learning environments such as Adult and Community Education [ACE] providers, Adult Education Institutes [AEIs] and TAFE Institutes as well as other settings including work places, community centres, youth development agencies, professional associations, industry organisations, voluntary groups and community development projects.

It is difficult to estimate the provision of informal learning. This reflects the scale and diversity of the programs and activities as well as the nature of informal learning which is often both a part and a product of seemingly non-educational activities.

For example, the Neighbourhood Renewal Program, which operates through the Department of Human Services, creates partnerships between government, local communities, businesses and service providers to bridge the gap between disadvantaged neighbourhoods and their surrounding communities. The primary aim of this program is to promote community

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<sup>2</sup> see European Commission, Director General for Education and Culture, Implementation of Education and Training 2010 Work Programme, *Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning Contribution of the Commission Expert Group*

development. However the demonstration projects that emanated from this initiative have also provided participants with opportunities to acquire a range of technical and generic skills and consequently enhance their employability. For example, in the Wendouree West and Latrobe Valley neighbourhood renewal projects, small groups of local residents were trained to conduct and analyse community surveys. These participants were subsequently issued with certificates by local Registered Training Organisations acknowledging the skills they had attained through work. As a direct result, Telstra employed five of the participants in the La Trobe Valley.<sup>3</sup>

Much of the learning that occurs within these programs takes place outside the formal education and training system. As a consequence participants often do not receive qualifications and data on the provision of this learning is not recorded. Learning that goes on outside programs of this type is even more difficult to identify and quantify and as such the ensuing discussion focuses on informal learning that occurs within relatively structured and planned settings.

Traditionally, the key provider of informal learning in Victoria has been the adult and community education [ACE] sector. The Adult Community and Further Education Board [ACFEB], is the major source of government funding for this sector. In 2002, Board-funded education and training programs in ACE organisations and Adult Education Institutions (AEIs), namely the Centre for Adult Education and the Adult Multicultural Education Services, resulted in a reported 6.7 million student contact hours and 190,925 enrolments. These Board-funded programs encompass five broad areas of activity, namely:

- Adult Literacy and Basic Education - literacy, numeracy, and basic education courses for learners ranging from those who are just beginning their return to education to those seeking entry to other forms of education and training
- the Victorian Certificate of Education for learners through full-time or part-time study
- general preparatory programs and bridging programs including return to study and work preparation programs
- English as a Second Language courses aimed at improving the English language skills of learners with a Language Background Other than English
- vocational education programs are offered through ACE organisations

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<sup>3</sup> Broad, C. *The Victorian Government Agenda for Building Stronger Communities* speech delivered to the Centre for Public Policy Melbourne University September 2003.

- general adult education programs such as arts, crafts, health, history, languages, literature, personal development, philosophy, politics, and science

Whilst many of these programs lead to recognised qualifications, such as the VCAL, the VCE and nationally recognised VET and FE certificates and diplomas, a significant number of these programs do not lead to qualifications that are recognised by the Victorian Qualifications Authority.

These non-recognised programs are offered across Victoria through ACE, AEI, TAFE Institutes and private providers in response to community demand. Many of these providers also offer other non-recognised programs that are funded on a fee for service basis. For example, the Avenue Neighbourhood House in Blackburn, which is an ACE provider, offers a mixture of accredited and non accredited programs. Its non-accredited programs cover areas such as computing, arts and crafts, health and recreation, and language and literacy.

The Office of Training and Tertiary Education estimates that there were over 240,000 enrolments in such programs in 2003<sup>4</sup>. Of these just over 150,000 enrolments were in ACE providers, 92,000 in TAFE Institutes and 2,000 in private providers. In total, this comprised 34% of all enrolments in education and training programs in Victorian ACE, AEI, TAFE Institutes and private providers in 2002.

These non-recognised programs accounted for over eight million student contacts hours of training and education. This represents 8.0% of the total delivery of Victorian ACE, AEI, TAFE Institutes and private providers in 2002. As indicated in the following chart the majority of this delivery, some five million student contact hours, was delivered by ACE providers with TAFE Institutes and private providers accounting for 3.3 million and 128,000 student contact hours respectively.

**Victoria: Course enrolments and student contact hours delivered in non recognised programs - 2002**

Non recognised programs	ACE	Private Providers	TAFE Institutes	All Providers
Student contact hours	5,412,415	128,031	3,340,427	8,880,873
Course enrolments	150,675	1,967	92,200	244,842

Source: Office of Training and Tertiary Education 2003 [unpublished data]

As well as funding the delivery of recognised and non-recognised programs training programs, ACFEB supports a range of other programs and initiatives that are directed at either providing or supporting the ACE sector's capacity to facilitate both recognised and informal learning. These

<sup>4</sup> OTTE does not have an exact measure of informal learning provision. In this case, recognised programs comprise nationally recognised courses and Training Package qualifications and any other programs are treated as non-recognised programs.

include the youth pathways program, the managed individual pathways program, the ACE clusters and the mobile computer learning program.

A key initiative of the Board, which was launched in May 2000, is the Learning Towns program. Through this program, nine Learning Towns have been established in regional areas across Victoria. In each case, the Learning Town is auspiced by an ACE provider that is charged with establishing local partnerships between ACE providers, TAFE institutions, schools, industry, local government and community groups in order to:

- improve educational pathways
- enhance access to education, training and learning opportunities
- improve coordination and integration of educational, social and economic planning
- enhance understanding and community commitment to lifelong learning
- improve collaboration between key stakeholders involved in education, training and employment in the local community.

Many of the Learning Towns programs have focused on promoting engagement with formal education and training. However others, such as the Mt Evelyn Learning Town, have adopted a broader view of learning which embraces learning that occurs as part of people's daily interaction with the world as well as more formal education and training. Initiatives such as the Mt Evelyn urban design project, in which community members developed a strategic plan for the town's commercial area, illustrate how people and communities learn and develop capacity through community activities. They also highlight the diversity and varying levels of learning which occur outside the formal education and training system and raise questions about how such learning may be recognised and incorporated with the outcomes of formal learning in the qualifications administered by the Victorian Qualifications Authority.

The Learning Towns program is one of a number of community capacity building projects supported by the Victorian government. Other programs include the Community Capacity Building Initiative, the Neighbourhood Renewal Program, the Community Building Initiative and the Local Learning and Employment Networks. While these programs have different objectives, they all provide significant informal learning opportunities that enable participants to gain new skills and, if appropriate recognition process can be established, access to formal qualifications.

The ACE sector, along with the AEIs, TAFE Institutes and private providers, is a key provider of informal learning in Victoria. However there are many other government and non-government agencies which provide informal learning opportunities through their programs and activities. These include:

- youth development organisations
- professional and industry associations

- government departments
- sporting and recreation organisations
- social service and welfare agencies
- community and environment groups
- businesses
- church organisations.

A comprehensive approach to recognising informal learning would enable the outcomes of programs and activities offered by this diverse range of providers, as well as the outcomes of learning attained more broadly within the family, work and community, to be recognised within the formal qualifications system.

### ***Key findings from the environmental scan and consultations***

The following is a summary of the findings of the review of key documents and reports on informal learning and the consultations undertaken with key stakeholders.

#### The diverse nature of informal learning

The environmental scan and consultations highlighted the breadth and diversity of informal learning in Victoria. While the ACE, AEI, TAFE Institutes and private provider network is a key source of informal learning, there are a broad range of other agencies and settings in which such learning occurs. A key challenge identified in the consultations was the development of recognition arrangements that are comprehensive and may be applied across the diverse range of agencies and settings in which informal learning takes places.

#### The perceived benefits of recognising informal learning

While some people do not seek recognition for the personal and employment capacities attained through informal learning there are others for whom this represents the first step towards a qualification. Further there are many people who would not have considered entering formal education and training without prior engagement in informal learning. As such, informal learning supported by effective recognition arrangements provides an important bridge to formal education, training and employment.

The personal and employment capacities obtained through informal learning are not restricted to entry level and it should not be assumed that people lacking formal qualifications will only seek recognition for entry level qualifications.

While informal learning provides a pathway to entry level qualifications, it also offers opportunities for people to develop higher order skills and capabilities. Examples include the capacities which people acquire through

participation in non-recognised professional courses, taking on leadership roles in the community and developing higher level technical skills through work. It was widely agreed in the consultations that any new recognition model should ensure learners gain recognition at the appropriate level – it must therefore be inclusive of all qualifications within the AQF that fall within the remit of the VQA. This is where the Credit Matrix has an important role to play in that it is able to provide a common measure of the complexity and volume of learning acquired.

As well as developing personal capacity, the consultations highlighted the role that involvement in learning plays in community development. By promoting and supporting the value of learning and encouraging life long learning, individuals and organisations build social capital and community resilience. An effective recognition system was seen as a way of encouraging participation in education and training and in so doing would contribute to the building of more cohesive communities.

It was generally agreed that the recognition of informal learning will ensure that a more diverse group of people have access to a broader range of formal qualifications. This in turn will contribute to:

- increasing participation in formal education and training
- improving the status and profile of the outcomes of non accredited programs
- reducing the overall cost of education and training to government and the individual by ensuring that people are not retrained in skills which they already possess
- enhancing learner motivation and alleviating marginalisation by enabling learners to achieve formal outcomes in less formal settings
- promoting the value of learning and foster life long learning
- promoting equity
- providing pathways for disadvantaged and discouraged learners
- opening pathways for those who have not been able to access the formal education and training system, such as older workers
- fostering community development and broadening and deepening the skills pool in communities throughout Victoria.

### Concerns raised about recognising informal learning

There were a small number of participants in the consultations who questioned the need for recognising informal learning and the value of developing new approaches to recognition.

The key issues raised included:

- the potential devaluing of informal learning outcomes that do not lead to formal recognition

- the potential for agencies to be pressured to modify existing informal learning programs and activities to meet the requirements for learners to gain recognition
- the potential administrative burden and costs imposed on agencies that may be associated with the introduction of new recognition procedures and quality assurance arrangements
- the need for further work on recognition when existing RPL and credit transfer arrangements within the AQF may be accessed by people who wish to gain recognition for informal learning
- the failure of existing recognition arrangements, such as RPL, to promote social inclusion and the likelihood that any new arrangements may promote inequalities by benefiting those who already have ready access to formal education and training rather than indigenous students, students from low socio-economic backgrounds and the unemployed.

### The effectiveness of current ways of recognising informal learning

Two broad approaches are commonly used to recognise the outcomes of informal learning. These are:

- credit transfer – this is when credit is granted in a recognised program, such as VCAL, the VCE or FE and VET certificates and diplomas, on the basis of the equivalence between a 'block of learning' and the learning outcomes in a recognised program. The 'block of learning' in this case is usually a non-accredited course but could conceivably be any identifiable informal learning activity. Credit transfer may take a number of forms. These include:
  - specific credit transfer this is where outcomes of a block of learning, such as non accredited course, match the outcomes of the recognised program
  - alternative credit transfer this is where outcomes of a block of learning are seen as being a relevant alternative to the learning outcomes specified in the recognised program
  - unspecified credit transfer this is where a block of learning within another program or activity gives a block of credit towards the recognised program.

The distinguishing feature of credit transfer is that it is the block of learning that is assessed for equivalence rather than the learner.

- recognition of prior learning – this is when the skills and knowledge that a person has attained through informal learning are equated with the learning outcomes of the recognised program. In this case, equivalence is determined through assessing the learner.

Credit transfer approaches are most likely to have application when informal learning outcomes are attained within a structured program delivered by a quality assured provider. In this situation, the recognition given to the outcomes of informal learning rests on the integrity of the provider and the program.

A key issue confronting those involved in establishing such arrangements is determining what level of quality assurance is required for the organisation granting recognition to have confidence in the outcomes of the organisation seeking recognition for its programs. There are different quality assurance systems operating in the ACE, VET and schools sector. This has led to a situation where programs that may be considered to meet adequate quality standards in one sector, for example ACE, may fail to meet the requirements in another sector, such as the schools or VET. The absence of agreed minimum quality standards for programs and providers across the sectors is a significant barrier to establishing effective credit transfer arrangements between providers of formal and informal programs.

This point was reinforced in the review of linkages between the ACE and VET sectors, undertaken in 2001 by Saunders for NCVET, which noted that

*'...pathways and linkages between ACE and mainstream VET are important in that they enable students to move between the two sectors to pursue study paths which are more advantageous to them than study restricted to one sector. However, in their responses and comments, participants in this study indicated there was a number of issues which needed to be addressed. For example, more than half of the providers responding saw availability of linkages and credit transfer as being very limited, some saw mainstream VET as being reluctant to participate to any large extent in linkage processes, and some complained of the demands that linkage processes placed on their time and resources. More than half of providers responding indicated that they had encountered difficulties in arranging credit transfer from ACE to mainstream VET.'*

Credit transfer approaches generally have less application when informal learning outcomes are achieved through unstructured programs that lack specific learning outcomes and the provider is not quality assured.

In such cases, it may only be possible to recognise informal learning outcomes through an RPL process. In this situation, the nature of the program and the provider are seen to be neutral and the focus is on the skills and knowledge that the individual has attained.

RPL processes may be used to recognise informal learning outcomes gained in any learning environment. However it is usually easier and more efficient to use credit transfer approaches, where possible, as these are standard arrangements that do not require an appraisal of the individual's learning – hence once established credit transfer arrangements generally provide a less costly and more time efficient way of providing recognition.

Whilst both 'credit transfer' and 'RPL' approaches provide legitimate ways of recognising informal learning, a recurrent theme in both the consultations and the review of recent reports was the relative ineffectiveness of the existing arrangements for providing recognition for the outcomes of informal learning.

The consultations confirmed that the existing arrangements are too complex, expensive and difficult to access for most learners. As a result many people do not seek recognition or if do they require formal qualifications simply enrol in the relevant training program and relearn what they already know.

This has led a number of commentators to argue that learners need training and support in using RPL processes and a number of recent reports have called for the inclusion of a 'recognition' unit in all qualifications. This approach is currently in use in Entry to Employment and University for Industry programs in the United Kingdom.

This would provide learners with skills in self assessment, pathway development and the preparation of RPL applications. As Byron argued in his address to the 2003 National Conference of ACACA

*'...the existing approach to RPL assumes that there is a relatively straightforward process of 'translation' between the student's prior learning and the learning outcomes or competency standards against which they are being assessed. However, personal learning is not neatly packaged for comparison with academic or course requirements. The assessment process often, assumes that it is, or that it can be made to be without difficulty. The paradox of RPL is that it is assessing an individual's learning that has occurred mostly outside formal education and training, but it requires high levels of knowledge of these formal education and training contexts and the structure of qualifications and language used in education, to prepare a successful RPL application. This is because students often need to 'unpack' the qualification, the learning or competency outcomes, understand what evidence is, how much evidence they need, and how to present that evidence. They often need to be able to translate their own learning and experience to the formal requirements of the qualification. Examination of Australian and international RPL literature shows that there is a lack of focus on the way in which people are supported to learn the skills they need to engage in RPL, particularly those who have had limited experience in post compulsory education and training. Overcoming this obstacle may contribute to increasing the extent to which RPL is implemented. In this context, it may be useful to consider offering a subject or module in RPL to help students to prepare for and undertake diverse RPL assessment processes.'*

### Guidance and advice for learners on recognition services

A key theme that emerged in the consultation was the need for learners to have access to guidance and advice on recognition services. As one participant in the consultation noted:

*'...learners need access to advice and guidance, provided by trained and committed staff if they are to make effective use of recognition services and make informed choices about their learning pathway. These services are best delivered in face in informal, face to face settings. People who have had limited experience in the formal education and training system, lack access to the Internet and do not have confidence in dealing with institutions are unlikely to make much use of websites, user guides and help lines.'*

The need for a greater emphasis on guidance as opposed to information on recognition services was confirmed in a recent study undertaken by NCVET, CURVE and the University of Ballarat. A report on this study noted that

*'...RTOs in the ANTA study, place considerable emphasis on print based and web based RPL information to students. Interestingly, three quarters of learner informants stated that had found about RPL through personal interaction in face to face interviews, information evenings, through work colleagues or by directly asking teachers or course advisers. Only a fifth found out about RPL purely by accessing printed materials such as brochures, handbooks and module guides. Thus, more consideration needs to be given to building in oral communication strategies to encourage learners to engage with the RPL process.'*

The need for effective guidance and support for learners is a critical component of any recognition system.

The recently released, *Career and Transition Services Framework*, developed by the MCEETYA Taskforce on Transition from School, describes a number of strategies that may be used to assist youth transition. The approaches outlined in this Framework appear to capture many of the critical factors that need to be incorporated in a guidance and support service for learners seeking recognition. The ten strategies outlined in this framework are:

- learning pathways plan
- transition plan and portfolio
- exit plan
- follow-up support
- career education
- brokerage: VET, structured workplace learning, vocational education
- career information, guidance and counselling
- brokerage: placement or referral
- individual support approaches
- monitoring and tracking.

## The role of intermediaries in improving access to recognition services

In the consultations, discussions about the support that learners require to access recognition services almost inevitably turned to the role of key people or intermediaries.

These people play a critical role in informing, motivating and advising learners about the benefits and procedures involved in gaining recognition for their informal learning and acting as intermediaries between the learner and formal education and training providers.

While these people may be education workers they may also be community workers, volunteers or others who have knowledge of the education and training system and more importantly the trust and confidence of the learner.

## The importance of partnerships

The development of Learning Towns and the Local Learning and Employment Networks have highlighted the importance of partnerships in improving people's access to and understanding of recognition arrangements. As one participant in the consultations observed

*'... the increased emphasis on lifelong learning and the move to broaden participation in education and training requires schools, TAFE Institutes, ACE providers, volunteers and community groups to work closer together, develop a better understanding of our respective systems and see the learner as our primary concern. We have got to form partnerships that establish linkages between the sectors if we expect learners to build qualifications based on the outcomes of formal and informal learning'.*

## Learning pathways

Another key theme that emerged in the consultations is the importance of seeing recognition as part of a learning pathway. For some people having their informal learning recognised may be the first step towards achieving entry to a general preparatory course, the VCE or VCAL, a TAFE or university course, voluntary work or the paid workforce.

If the recognition process reveals gaps in the learner's skills and knowledge, pathways may include action to address these gaps, through:

- further training
- structured work in a community or industry setting with mentor or coaching support
- directed self-study with a tutor or coach
- counselling on career options.

## ***Key issues from the environmental scan and consultations***

### Voluntary participation in recognition arrangements

Whilst acknowledging that all learners should be able to have their learning formally recognised, many participants in the consultations argued that such arrangements should be voluntary.

There was near unanimous agreement that participants in informal learning programs and activities should not be pressured, either directly or indirectly, to pursue recognition. This acknowledges that not all learners want or need formal recognition for their learning and that for some learners any level of assessment or verification of their learning may present a considerable barrier to participation.

This concern was also noted in the consultations for the *Due Credit* report. The consultants who undertook this study observed that

*'... many of those consulted indicated that their experience in both the VET and school sectors shows that once formal qualifications are introduced, there is a strong roll-on effect. As formal qualifications become the norm, there is pressure on others to conform; pressure would be placed by parents, schools, host organisations and government bodies on young people themselves to participate in formally recognised activities. As a result those organisations, or parts of them, that do not feel that more formal recognition is warranted, believe they would run the risk of being perceived as offering second-rate options. There was also a fear, particularly expressed at the national forum, that recognition could get tied to government support and their organisations becoming focussed on only producing outputs required by government rather than having a broader community role.'*

### The impact of recognition on providers of informal learning

A further concern that emerged from the consultations was the need to minimise the impact of any new recognition arrangements on organisations involved in providing informal learning activities and programs.

This issue was of particular concern to ACE providers, a number of which commented on the demands placed on their organisations by the requirements of AQTF registration.

While most people consulted responded positively to the idea of improved formal recognition arrangements, it was interesting to note that a number were less enthusiastic when they considered the impact that enhanced quality assurance requirements may have on their organisations.

While the introduction of new recognition approaches may adversely impact on some agencies involved in providing informal learning, this needs to be balanced against the significant benefits for learners of improved access to formal qualifications.

## Credit based approaches to recognition

A key issue considered in the consultation was the use of credit-based approaches in recognising informal learning.

In essence, this would involve ascribing a value to learning attained through informal programs and activities that could be accumulated and combined with the outcomes of formal learning to build nationally recognised qualifications.

The discussion in the consultations focused on a range of matters including:

- the criteria for determining credit
- quality assurance
- the compatibility of credit based approaches with existing qualification structures
- the impact that credit based approaches may have on the integrity of informal learning activities and programs
- the relative merits of credit based approaches compared to existing RPL models
- the capacity to attach credit values to non program informal learning activities such as learning attained through community involvement.

While the issue raised a series of questions those consulted were generally in support of a credit-based approach.

## Quality assurance and the recognition of informal learning

The development of agreed quality assurance standards is a critical component of a credit-based approach to recognition. In order for learning attained through informal learning programs and activities to attract credit and gain recognition it must meet a set of minimum standards. The question is – what are these minimum standards?

The consultations revealed that while informal learning providers recognise the need for agreed quality assurance measures, there is a concern that such standards may impact on the integrity of existing programs and activities, divert resources from program delivery and impose administrative and financial burdens on the organisations. A number of participants referred to the difficulties faced by organisations in attempting to meet the *AQTF Standards for RTOs*.

Balancing these concerns with the need to protect the integrity of formal qualifications and maximise opportunities for learners is not a simple matter and further work is required in this area. However the following measures may provide the basis for a set of minimum quality assurance arrangements.

It is proposed that for informal learning programs and activities to attract credit towards formal qualifications, the following criteria must be met:

- there must be a learning strategy – in many cases, especially when learning is managed through an agency, there will be a formal program outline that specifies the learning outcomes and methodologies, however in other cases, learning may not be pre-planned or may occur within a broader framework of goals. In this latter case, it may be necessary to confirm the learning strategy retrospectively – in other words, the learning strategy could be a statement describing the learning outcomes that were realised through the program or activity and the methodologies that were used rather than a statement of intentions. It needs to be recognised that in informal learning situations, learning outcomes are not always predictable, the community may be the medium through which learning is organised and the learning gain may come through activity that is not part of a planned curriculum.
- there must be an identifiable learning gain – sometimes referred to as ‘distance travelled’, the learning gain specifies the positive outcomes of the learning -this might be a gain in knowledge, understanding or skill.
- the learning gain must be evidenced – the learner must provide evidence of the learning gain. This could be collected through self, tutor or peer assessment and may take a variety of forms including: a portfolio, a self assessment record, a discussion with a mentor or tutor, a record of an activity, or a product of an activity.
- the learning gain must be verified by an ACE provider or RTO – the learner must have their evidence of the learning gain verified by a person employed or auspiced by an ACE provider or RTO who is competent to verify that a learning gain has taken place. This need not necessarily be a qualified assessor as defined under the Australian Quality Training Framework – the role here would simply be to review the evidence presented by the learner and verify that a learning gain had taken place.
- the learning strategy, evidence requirements and verification arrangements must be reviewed – where the informal learning takes place within an ongoing program or activity, the responsible agency would be required to provide evidence that the program or activity is subject to ongoing monitoring and review.

In many cases, the informal learning program or activity will be conducted or auspiced by an ACE provider or an RTO. In such cases, there would be no need for the involvement of a third party. However, in those cases where the activity is not conducted or auspiced by an ACE provider or RTO, the organisation providing the activity would need to form a partnership with a ACE provider or RTO to verify the learning gain. Involving an ACE provider or RTO in this way ensures that the outcomes of informal learning are

verified by an organisation which has met a minimum set of standards – namely either the AQTF or the eligibility criteria for ACE organisations.

It is envisaged that if the program or activity does not meet these minimum standards, learners may still seek recognition through recognition of prior learning processes.

### Qualification structures and recognition arrangements

Qualification purpose and structures have a significant impact on both the approach to recognition and the level of recognition that can be awarded for informal learning.

Qualifications with broad purposes and flexible structures, such as the VCE, are able to incorporate learning attained through other sources provided that it meets the quality assurance requirements of the qualification. In such cases, the critical question is whether the level of learning, the volume of learning and the mix of theory and practice in the learning is comparable with the requirements and overall intent of the qualification. The recent joint VQA - VCAA decision to provide block credit for VET and FE studies within the VCE provides an example of how learning achieved outside the qualification may be recognised within a broadly based qualification such as the VCE. This type of qualification is particularly suited to credit based recognition arrangements.

Other qualifications, such as most VET certificates and diplomas, are more tightly defined, comprising prescribed sets of units of competency or modules of curriculum. In such cases, recognition within the qualification is dependent on whether the learning attained outside the qualification is comparable with the learning outcomes or competencies that are specified in the qualification. The flexibility of this style of qualification is often enhanced by the incorporation of electives or specific rules that allow for learning from other sources to be recognised within the qualification.

As noted in the final report on the *Credit Matrix Initial Design*, qualifications structures may limit opportunities for recognition, for example

*'...a student may accumulate many credit points at the unit level which have little exchange value for particular qualifications even in apparently related areas. This is less so in broadly based generic and flexible qualifications, such as upper secondary certificates, some degrees and possibly the new Associate Degrees, than in courses with a high level of specified content, where skills and knowledge are sequential, where units may be integrated and where performance in specific contexts may be required such as workplaces or live performances.'*

Given the impact which qualification structures have on recognition arrangements, the VQA and ACFEB could give consideration to the development of a more flexible, credit based qualification framework that would facilitate recognition of the outcomes of both formal and informal

learning. This notion is discussed at more length in the proposed recognition framework that is outlined later in this paper.

### Equating informal and formal learning outcomes

One of the key problems confronting people seeking recognition for informal learning is that there is often a mismatch between the learning gained in informal situations and the learning prescribed in qualifications. So even though a candidate may be able to competently perform the functions associated with a particular job or occupation, he or she may not be able to meet all the requirements of the relevant qualification.

For example, suppose a person who has successfully organised a variety of community and sporting events, including community festivals, sporting carnivals and fund raising activities, without any formal training, decides to seek recognition. The person is able to provide evidence of their skills in event organisation, such as records of events organised in the past and testimonies from community organisations. A conventional approach to recognising this informal learning would involve an assessor in matching the candidate's experience with the units of competency in the relevant VET qualification. If for instance, the relevant qualification is the Diploma of Event Management from the Tourism Training Package, this would involve matching the candidate's experience with forty units of competency, covering functions ranging from performing office procedures through to managing contractors and developing a concept for an event.

While the task of matching the candidate's informal learning with the requirements of the units of competency may be relatively straightforward, it is almost inevitable that it will not fully correspond with the content of the Diploma qualification.

This problem would be compounded if the person applied for recognition against a qualification in a similar but related field, such as the Certificate IV in Business [Project Management]. Not only is it likely that the person's skills and knowledge would not match all of the qualification requirements, it is also possible that learning gained through managing events may not be relevant to the skills and knowledge required to perform similar tasks in project management. For example, is the learning gained through negotiating with contractors in managing an event, such as a community festival, comparable with the skills and knowledge required to negotiate with contractors in a project management context?

The problem here is that the knowledge and skills gained through informal learning are context dependent and are not strictly equivalent to the requirements of formal qualifications. As such a simple matching of experience with qualification requirements is unlikely to provide either a fair or efficient way of recognising the 'know how' gained through informal learning.

Given this situation, consideration should be given to developing recognition arrangements based on a notion of 'deeming' rather than matching experience with course requirements. Deeming provisions are widely used in the higher education sector and in the recognition of international qualifications. Within this approach there is an acceptance that learning acquired in different contexts, for example through involvement in a community project as opposed to a training program, may be equivalent but need not have exactly the same learning outcomes. As such, a person who has been a volunteer, coordinated a volunteer group and has completed informal training programs on working with volunteers may be deemed to have achieved the Certificate IV in Community Services [Volunteer Management] even though the person's experience may not match exactly with the qualification requirements.

Further there is growing acceptance that formal qualifications do not produce fully competent workers and that competence in this sense is only developed after graduates have applied their skills in real work situations.

This has led some observers to conclude that there is a need for a different approach to matching the outcomes of informal learning with the learning prescribed in formal education and training. As Hager argues, current recognition models see

*'...the course as providing all that a practitioner needs to know in order to practice. On this model, RPL simply consists in ascertaining what, if any, parts of the course candidates already know and then requiring them to take the remaining parts of the course. An alternative model, which I will call the 'lifelong education' model, sees the course as merely preparing candidates for the early stages of practice. On this model, RPL focuses on a different issue, viz what parts, if any, of the initial course do these experienced people need? What other things not in the initial course do they need?'*

This approach has considerable merit. It places an emphasis on recognising the learner's capabilities and identifying his or her needs, directs assessment activity at the critical components of a qualification and facilitates the development of learning pathways.

### The need to provide recognition for generic skills

The development of generic skills is a key outcome of informal learning. Through participating in non recognised courses, community projects and other informal learning experiences participants develop a broad range of generic skills. In many cases these include higher order capacities such as the abilities to define and solve problems, think critically, acquire new knowledge, manage relationships, communicate new ideas and concepts and evaluate solutions to problems.

These skills are highly valued in further education, industry and the broader community. This was highlighted in the ministerial statement on vocational

education and training, *Knowledge and Skills For The Innovation Economy*, in which the Minister argued that

*'... in the innovation economy people will still need specific technical skills to carry out occupational functions. But employers will be looking for a broader range of skills, both technical and generic, and people will need to go on developing these skills during their working lives. Employability will depend on generic skills. Competitive edge will depend on high performance skills, such as design, relationship management and entrepreneurship.'*

Whilst generic skills are becoming increasingly important, it can be difficult to provide recognition for these capacities as they are often not described in outcome terms in formal education and training qualifications. Such capacities, which to some degree are encompassed in the Key Competencies, are often embedded in the subject specific modules, study designs and units of competency that comprise most senior secondary school, FE and VET qualifications.

Some post compulsory qualifications, such as the Certificates of General Education for Adults and the personal development strand in the VCAL, incorporate explicit generic outcomes. However these programs are often limited in scope, either in terms of AQF level or the range of generic skills, and are not able to cater for the breadth and depth of such skills that may be developed through informal learning. Any new set of recognition arrangements must include provision for recognising different types and levels of generic skills.

### Funding recognition arrangements

Funding is a critical issue. A number of recent reports have identified inadequate funding arrangements as one of the major reasons for the low uptake of RPL and the reluctance of providers to offer effective recognition services.

The issue of funding must be addressed. To this end it is proposed that the VQA and ACFEB consider the provision of extending funding to cover aspects of the recognition arrangements outlined in the final section of this study. These are:

- funding the provision of support for learners in the preparation of credit applications under the proposed block credit arrangements
- funding the development of a 'recognition unit' for inclusion in relevant qualifications administered by the VQA. This would be designed to:
  - provide learners with information on the recognition arrangements
  - foster learner abilities in identifying their existing capabilities and learning needs
  - provide learners with the skills to evaluate their own learning progress

- provide support and guidance to learners in preparing recognition applications
- enable learners to develop and monitor their own learning pathways.

***Principles to guide the development of arrangements for recognising informal learning***

The following principles, which reflect the key issues discussed in this paper, are proposed to guide the development of arrangements for recognising informal learning in Victoria.

- Integrity of informal learning - Recognition arrangements will maintain the integrity of informal learning programs and outcomes
- Quality assurance - Recognition of informal learning will be conducted within a quality assurance framework
- Voluntary - Participation in recognition of informal learning arrangements will be voluntary
- Generic skills - Recognition of informal learning will provide for the formal recognition of generic skills
- Learner guidance and support - Recognition of informal learning procedures will incorporate guidance and support for learners which focuses on equipping them with the abilities to identify their current skills, assess their learning needs and evaluate their own progress
- Recognition - Recognition of informal learning will lead to a full or part qualification administered by the VQA
- Cost effectiveness - Recognition of informal procedures will be cost effective
- Pathways - Recognition of informal learning will form part of a learning pathway
- Partnerships – Arrangements for recognising informal learning will facilitate partnerships between formal and informal providers of education and training.
- Credit – Arrangements will for recognising informal learning will incorporate ways of allocating credit for the outcomes of learning attained.
- Monitoring and review - Recognition of informal learning procedures will incorporate ongoing monitoring and review processes.

***The key features of an approach for the recognition of informal learning in Victoria***

No single approach is likely to provide a way of recognising the outcomes of all forms of informal learning.

As such it proposed that the VQA and ACFEB give consideration to establishing a recognition framework that is based on the principles outlined in the previous section of this paper and which incorporates a number of mechanisms for recognising informal learning.

As discussed in the following section of this paper, the different approaches for recognising informal learning are not intended to be mutually exclusive and could be used in combination to assist learners gain recognition for the personal and employment capacities that have attained through informal learning.

It is envisaged that the recognition framework will comprise three key components, namely:

- learning pathway
- credit for learning
- qualifications

### Learning pathway

Central to the proposed framework is the learning pathway. This recognises that learning should be purposeful and that learners need opportunities to identify and review their learning goals and how these are likely to be achieved.

It is envisaged that learners will be encouraged to develop individual learning pathways that provide them with an opportunity to reflect on the scope, direction and pace of their learning and how this fits with their family, employment and other goals. The learning pathway should assist learners to establish linkages between their informal learning and the formal education and training system. As such a key aim of the learning pathway is to identify ways in which learners may gain recognition for their informal learning and establish a plan to guide their future learning.

Learners will need support in this process. As such there is an important role to be played by key individuals in informing, motivating and advising learners and acting as intermediaries between them and formal education and training providers.

It is envisaged that all learners seeking to utilise the 'block credit' arrangements described in the ensuing section of this paper will be required to identify a learning pathway as part of the conditions for obtaining credit.

### Credit for Learning

It is envisaged that the framework will incorporate a number of ways in which learners may gain credit for their informal learning. These are:

- Block credit
- Recognition of prior learning

- Credit transfer
- Learning credits

#### BLOCK CREDIT

Under this arrangement learners would be able to gain credit within the qualifications administered by the VQA, up to a designated value, for learning attained through non accredited education and training, work, participation in the community or other informal experience.

Learners would need to provide evidence to an ACE provider or an RTO that:

- they had participated in an informal learning activity or program,
- there had been a learning gain, and
- they had identified an appropriate learning pathway.

Once the ACE provider or RTO verifies this claim, through a desktop review, the learner would be granted credit in the appropriate recognised program.

It is proposed that a maximum level of credit would be established regardless of the amount of learning attained and that the limited block credit system would initially be restricted to one unit of study within the VCAL, the VCE and VET and FE programs. In effect, this would mean that the learner would have to complete one less unit of study in order to gain the full qualification.

Within this arrangement, learners would be granted one hour of credit for each nominal hour they were engaged in informal learning. For example, a learner who completed a sixty-hour non-accredited course would be able to claim automatic credit for one unit of study of up to 60 hours within the VCAL, the Adult VCE or a VET or FE program up to AQF Certificate II. It is envisaged that learners would be able to aggregate the time spent in different informal learning activities and programs to ensure that they have adequate credit.

In recommending this level of credit, consideration has been given to both ensuring that the level of recognition is worthwhile and that the integrity of the qualification is not compromised.

This risk of devaluing the qualification needs to be offset against the significant benefits and encouragement this proposal offers learners, the improved access which it provides for disadvantaged and discouraged learners to formal qualifications and the relative ease with which it could be implemented.

Whilst there may be some risks associated with this proposal, the threat to the integrity of formal qualifications is minimal given the relatively low level of credit that is proposed under this component of the framework.

In order to support the learner, it is proposed that provider who issues the credit would attract the funding allocated to the unit of study for which the learner gained credit. This funding could then be used to cover the costs of the initial desktop assessment and the provision of guidance and support to the learner.

The advantage of this arrangement is that it provides a simple and inexpensive way of providing an albeit limited level of recognition for informal learning. More importantly it provides a highly accessible pathway for learners wanting to move into formal education and training.

#### RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING

It is proposed that a refined RPL model be developed for inclusion in the Recognition Framework. This model would be based on the 'lifelong education' model proposed by Hager that was described in an earlier section of this paper.

The key features of this model would include:

- the use of deeming to determine the equivalence between the outcomes of informal learning and the requirements of formal qualifications
- a focus on risk assessment principles in awarding recognition
- focusing evidence gathering on the critical aspects of the qualification
- the development of a learning pathway.

#### CREDIT TRANSFER

Credit transfer arrangements may be established by mapping the outcomes of informal learning against the specified learning outcomes of formal education and training programs. This component of the framework is suited to situations where people are seeking recognition for learning attained through structured programs offered by quality assured providers.

Whilst this approach is less flexible than the learning credits approach, it may be attractive to providers who offer non accredited courses that are conducted over a long period of time and have relatively stable learning outcomes.

Once the mapping has been completed and the agreement has been reached between the providers on the level of recognition to be granted, these arrangements provide learners with clear and consistent advice on the recognition which may be gained for informal learning.

#### LEARNING CREDITS

Learning credits are a key component of the proposed framework. This involves allocating a value or learning credit to informal learning. In simple terms, the learning credit is like a single currency that is used to value

learning in different education and training settings. The learning credit is not dependent on the specific content that is learned. Rather it reflects the level and amount of learning.

The learner may accumulate learning credits through undertaking different informal learning activities and could use this to gain credit within the qualifications administered by the VQA. It is likely that this component of the framework will have greatest application when people are seeking credit for learning obtained through structured programs delivered by quality assured providers.

Learning credits could be used to gain recognition beyond the minimum levels available through the proposed limited block credit arrangements. The idea of learning credits aligns with the work currently being undertaken by the VQA on the development of the Credit Matrix - this would provide the basis for calculating learning credits for informal learning activities.

### Qualifications

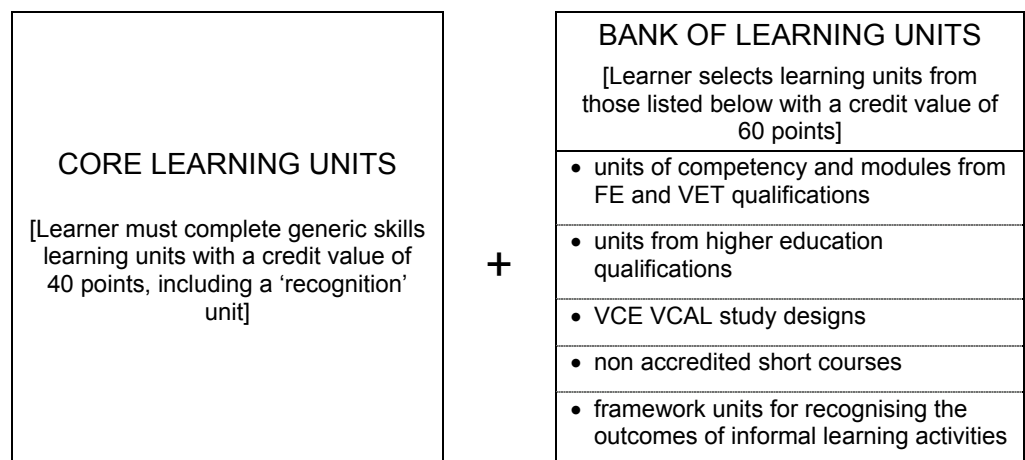
The final component of the framework is the qualifications against which the recognition will be granted. It is envisaged that all qualifications administered by the VQA will be included in the framework.

In addition to these existing qualifications, it is proposed that consideration be given to the development of a credit based adult learning framework.

This would provide a set of nationally recognised qualifications against which learners could gain recognition for their existing skills and capacities and plan their future learning.

As illustrated in the following diagram, it is envisaged that each qualification in the framework would have a credit value and would comprise a core of generic skills learning units and a bank of content specific learning units.

### Possible structure Certificate III in Adult Learning



The generic units could be based on the Key Competencies. The advantage of using the Key Competencies is that the performance levels could be used to award recognition at a variety of levels of achievement.

This would also provide a useful mechanism for granting credit for generic skills gained through informal learning.

The core would also contain a learning unit designed to inform learners about recognition processes and learning pathways – this would include assistance in preparing RPL applications and provide support for pathway development.

The bank or learning units would comprise:

- units of competency and modules from higher education, FE and VET qualifications
- VCE study designs
- VCAL units
- non accredited short courses such as ACE programs, IT vendor programs, and youth development programs that comply with a set of minimum quality assurance criteria
- framework units for recognising the outcomes of informal learning activities that comply with a set of minimum quality assurance criteria

All units in the framework would have a credit value. The framework would include a set of simple, flexible packaging rules that enable candidates to structure nationally recognised qualifications on the basis of credit points.

The Credit Matrix could provide a useful tool for establishing the credit value of the learning units within the framework and for calculating the credit value of informal learning for which candidates are seeking recognition.

As the proposed framework is cross-sectoral in nature it is recommended that it be developed, accredited and managed through the VQA in a similar manner to the VCAL.

### ***The recognition framework in action***

The proposed recognition framework has the potential to assist a wide range of people gain recognition for their existing skills and develop pathways that lead to further education and training, work or the fulfilment of other personal goals. The framework could play a significant role in assisting:

- young school leavers re-engage with education and training
- older workers make the transition to new forms of employment especially those currently employed in declining industries
- people gain recognition for higher level skills gained outside the formal education and training sector
- disadvantaged groups access training and employment.

The four scenarios that follow are hypothetical but are designed to provide a snap shot of what the proposed recognition framework might look like in action.

### Recognising higher level skills

Sonia is a trained nurse. She has worked in intensive care nursing units but nothing prepared her for the challenges involved in coordinating the community festival.

“I had developed an interest in the local community house because they offer a really good child care program. I was picking my daughter up one day when the coordinator mentioned that the man who had organised the local festival for the previous five years was ill and was unable to take on the task this year. Well one thing led to another and I was volunteered to coordinate the festival – something I had never done before in my life!”

To assist Sonia, Maxine the community house coordinator, set up a mentoring arrangement with the previous coordinator and also agreed to help Sonia deal with the local council and other external agencies associated with the festival, such as sponsors and suppliers.

“Well it was a real learning experience. I had to learn how to deal with contractors and suppliers, negotiate with local government officials, ensure that safety regulations were observed and organise what seemed like a small army of people. I never realised that I was learning – I was too busy doing the work. I’d have to say Joe and Maxine were great – any time I needed advice or support – they were there.”

Following the festival, Maxine asked Sonia if she was interested in gaining recognition for the skills she’d developed.

“I’m a nurse – that’s my job. But I thought why not. I was able to get credit for the skills I learned in organising the festival by using the new recognition framework. As it turns out I was able to get credit for a lot of the units of competency in the Diploma of Event Management. It’s opened my eyes to an alternative career – you never know I might give it a go one day!”

### Older Worker – getting back to work

Frank had worked ever since leaving school at age 14. At 52, he’d spent nearly forty years working in the textile and clothing industry.

“Sure I’d moved from one job to another as places closed down but I’d never been out of work. It came as such a shock when the last place closed down and I couldn’t find another job– there just seemed to be nowhere to go.”

While Frank is a skilled worker he has no formal qualifications – there were no apprenticeships in his industry – people just learned skills on the job.

Frank had tried to find work in the textile industry but found that there were few opportunities, so he decided to try and use the skills he'd gained in stores operations to get a job in the warehousing industry.

"Well stores work is not what it used to be. Modern warehouses are computerised and I'd never used a computer in my life. Then a friend suggested that I do a course in computing. I didn't want to go to a TAFE Institute because I thought I would too far behind the other students. But my wife found an introduction to computers course being run by U3A – I went along and found a lot of other older people there who were wanting to learn about computers'.

After completing this course and building his confidence Frank used the block credit arrangements in the recognition framework to get credit into the Certificate II in Transport and Distribution [Warehousing], he was also given some credit for his previous stores work. With his new qualification Frank was able to get a job with a major warehousing company.

'Noticing that advertisement for the U3A course changed my life and getting credit into the warehousing program gave me the bit of a headstart I needed to start the program – I thought my previous skills were valued and I wasn't on the junk heap'.

Young school leaver – re – engaging with education and training

Julia wanted to leave school and never go back. But now she's back in training and looking forward to choosing a career that's right for her.

Julia at 16 had had enough of school. "I was sick of being treated like a kid. I didn't see how it had anything to do with me. So I left without completing the VCE – I thought I didn't need a qualification. I was able to get casual jobs in the hospitality industry – so I thought I was OK."

At 19, Julie was out of work and finding it difficult to get ongoing employment. Then one day, a friend took her to the office of the Local Learning and Employment Network.

Julia had one unit from the VCE, a range of work experience in the hospitality industry and had completed a couple of non-accredited training programs in food handling and customer service. The staff at the LLEN helped her see what she'd already achieved and how that might help her get where she might want to go.

"I didn't really know what I wanted to do. But I'd liked working in hotels and restaurants and thought I could make a career in the industry – I just didn't have the right qualifications to get a decent job. The people at the LLEN helped me see that you could try to do a job in something you enjoy doing. Not just do any old job that you might hate so you can earn money."

Julia used the block credit in the Recognition Framework to gain credit for her informal learning, her VCE studies were given credit and a simple RPL process was used to recognise her work experience. This enabled her to

enter the VCAL with advanced standing at a local provider. She's happier in an adult environment, and is enjoying developing skills and self-confidence.

"It's different because they treat you like an adult here. And it's good that what you've learned before counts towards what you're learning now. It's not like it's wasted."

Julia hasn't decided if she'll stay on at provider or get a job. If she achieves her qualification, she could possibly get a part-time job and stay on part-time at provider to keep learning and add to her credits. She might choose to do a VET Certificate III in Commercial Cookery and become a chef.

"The best thing for now is that I'm enjoying learning for the first time ever. And if I want to, I can use some of my credits to start studying something else. I'm learning about computers now and that's really great. Maybe I could study to do a job using computers."

### Mature learners – a second chance at learning

Janine thought the future looked bleak. She had no job, no qualifications. Then she started a short non-accredited course at her local ACE provider. She was able to use the block credit arrangements in the recognition framework to get credits that led to the Certificate II in Adult Learning and a job.

Janine was a single mum in her early 40s. She'd not worked since her daughter, Kirsty was born 11 years ago.

"After my divorce I felt afraid to look into the future. I couldn't see what was in store for us. No partner, no job, no qualifications. It all just seemed pretty hopeless. But a friend persuaded me to do a short course at the Neighbourhood House and things happened from there'.

One of the staff members explained how Janine could get credit for her non formal course in the Adult Learning Framework and use the framework to build a qualification that would meet her interests and help her gain employment.

"I realised that people like me can have another chance. That I wasn't the only one who had wasted their time at school and then let things drift. There's loads of people like me, but now there's a chance to do something about it."

"The staff at the Neighbourhood House gave me a lot of support to help me get into a routine of learning. They don't just accept you into the classes and then forget you. There was always someone to talk to when you had a problem with the course."

Janine decided to enrol in another course and completed a Certificate III in Business Services. "Studying suddenly became part of my life. And Kirsty would do her homework alongside me in the evening. It gave us something

else to share. I gained the Certificate and felt really proud. At long last I had achieved something in my life."

And thanks to her qualifications Janine has achieved another ambition. She now has a full-time job working in a local accounting office.

### ***Recommendations***

#### **Recommendation One**

That the Board of the Victorian Qualifications Authority and the Adult, Community and Further Education Board support in principle the development of a Recognition Framework for informal learning in Victoria.

#### **Recommendation Two**

That the Board of the Victorian Qualifications Authority and the Adult, Community and Further Education Board endorse the statement of principles outlined in this report for guiding further work on the development of arrangements for recognising informal learning within the qualifications system administered by the VQA.

#### **Recommendation Three**

That the Board of the Victorian Qualifications Authority and the Adult, Community and Further Education Board support further development of the framework for recognising informal learning described in this paper.

### ***Participants in consultations***

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Amanda Wells	Victorian Qualifications Authority
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Christine Denmead	Geelong Adult Training and Education
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Eric McClellan	ACFE
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Hugh Kiernan	Eastern Metropolitan Regional Council of Adult, Community and Further Education
Jeff Malley	Gateway Local Learning and Employment Network
Kathleen Hurley	Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board
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Madeleine Jenkins	Victorian Qualifications Authority
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