

Recognition of Prior Learning

An assessment resource for VET practitioners

2nd Edition 2008

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Purpose

Recognition of Prior Learning: An assessment resource for VET practitioners replaces *Recognition of Prior Learning (Skills Recognition): An assessment resource for VET practitioners* (2005).

It was developed by the Department of Education and Training (the Department) to provide RTOs with an up-to-date, streamlined guide to Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) within VET assessment strategies.

The purpose of the guide is to:

- define the nature and role of RPL in the VET context
- demonstrate RPL's relationship to the other forms of assessment carried out by RTOs
- show how RPL relates to assessment of competency as described in Training Packages
- promote the use of a range of alternative methods of assessment and pathways to achieving recognition of skills
- provide developers with guidelines for the development of quality, holistic assessment tools.

This document has been designed to accompany other Department publications on assessment.

Other products in this series include:

- *A guide to continuous improvement of assessment in VET* (2008)
- *Designing assessment tools for quality outcomes in VET* (2008)
- *Guidelines for assessing competence in VET* (2008)
- *Reasonable adjustment: A practical guide to reasonable adjustment in assessment of candidates with disability in VET* (2008)
- *Troubleshooting guide: Assessment in VET* (2008)

The information in this publication has not been referenced to specific AQTF Standards. However, the information provided is based on current standards, and reflects good practice.

The information applies only to Training Package qualifications and the accredited courses with a vocational outcome.

All publications are available in hard copy and can be downloaded from vetinfonet.det.wa.edu.au.

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Overview

Recognition of Prior Learning (or RPL) is an assessment process aimed at confirming and recognising the competencies a candidate has obtained outside of a formal education and training environment. These competencies might have been gained through informal or non-formal training, or they may have been gained through life or work experience.

RPL assessment enables individuals to forego training and move directly to having their competencies assessed, thus avoiding the need for unnecessary training that brings with it additional costs, including time and effort.

Although it is not necessarily a quick or simple process, RPL aims to provide candidates who do not require formal learning with a flexible and faster way to have their skills and knowledge assessed against the competencies stipulated in Training Packages and vocationally accredited courses. Mature age jobseekers or existing workers with accumulated life and work experiences are seen as primary candidates for RPL.

According to the AQF National Principles and Operational Guidelines, RPL can be used in two ways:

- as an alternative mechanism for gaining access to a course or qualification. A candidate may gain entry to a course or qualification using RPL as an alternative to possessing the prerequisites for entry based on formal education and training. An example of this is a candidate who obtains a place in a diploma course using RPL (based on life or work experience) when they have not completed the relevant prerequisites; and/or
- for the award of unit/s of competency that form part of a qualification, leading to the partial or full completion of the requirements for that course or qualification.

The AQTF and the AQF National Principles and Operational Guidelines for RPL set out the broad parameters within which RPL should be implemented, to ensure that the quality of RPL assessment matches the quality of other assessment procedures. RPL may use different assessment methods, but they should be no less and no more rigorous than conventional methods of assessing competence in the VET sector.

Definitions

RPL has been defined in a number of different ways by practitioners, researchers and policy makers, over the last decade. Nationally agreed, accurate and current definitions of all terms can be found in the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF), the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) and AVETMISS publications.

The *AQTF Users' Guide* defines RPL as “an assessment process that assesses an individual’s non-formal and informal learning to determine the extent to which that individual has achieved the required learning outcomes, competency outcomes, or standards for entry to, and/or partial or total completion of, a qualification”.

The AQF states that RPL “involves the assessment of previously unrecognised skills and knowledge that an individual has achieved outside the formal education and training system”. Similarly, the national AVETMISS (V.6) definition for RPL, which was agreed to nationally and applied in January 2007, states that:

RPL involves the assessment of previously unrecognised skills and knowledge an individual has achieved outside the formal education and training system. RPL is an assessment process that assesses the individual's non-formal and informal learning to determine the extent to which that individual has achieved the required learning outcomes or competency standards.

Recognition of Current Competency (RCC) is a term that in the past has been used interchangeably with the term Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). However, since 1 January 2007, a new nationally agreed definition has been in use in the VET sector.

Recognition of current competency (RCC) applies if a client has previously successfully completed the requirements for a unit of competency or module and is now required, (eg by a licensing authority) to be reassessed to ensure that the competence is being maintained. In this case no extra skill or competencies are nationally recognised. (National AVETMISS (V.6) definition).

Credit Transfer is another term that is sometimes confused with RPL. However, there is an essential difference. RPL is an assessment of individual competencies, while credit transfer assesses a course/ units/modules against one another to determine the extent to which there is a match.

Credit transfer, as defined in the AQTF

.....assesses the requirements of an initial course or subject that the individual is using to claim access to, or the award of credit in, the destination course. The assessment is used to determine the extent to which the achievement of the previous qualification is equivalent to the required learning outcomes, competency outcomes, or standards in another qualification. This may include credit transfer based on formal learning that is outside the AQF framework.

New streamlined RPL assessment processes

To recognise prior learning it is necessary to:

- ensure that candidates know that RPL provides an alternative pathway to course attendance
- determine in consultation with the candidate, the learning, skills and knowledge that the candidate is able to demonstrate against the learning outcomes or performance criteria of the course or qualification for which the candidate is seeking entry or the award of credit
- determine whether any further evidence is needed to support the claim of competence and arrange for appropriate additional learning experiences or gap training where appropriate
- conduct an assessment that confirms competence.

In the past, many RPL processes have followed a fairly predictable pattern. Candidates, having been given written information about the evidence needed to have their skills recognised, have gone away and collected evidence, which they then combined into a portfolio. To prove their portfolio met the evidence requirements, candidates themselves often mapped their portfolio against the unit/s of competency.

Many RTOs are now realising that this methodology was both isolating and excessively demanding. In some cases, the language, literacy and analytical skills involved in these processes may have exceeded the knowledge and skill requirements of the modules/units being assessed or the AQF level of the qualification.

New streamlined approaches to RPL encourage assessment methods that reduce the previous reliance on paper-based evidence and provide opportunity for candidates to gather evidence of their competency in a range of ways that better match the requirements of the unit/units. Increasingly, methods that are being used to gather evidence for RPL mirror assessment methods that are used in a training program. These include self-assessment, interview processes and/or direct observation either on the job in the workplace, or in a simulated environment.

Another important shift has been the introduction of far more interactive processes between the RTO and the candidate so that RPL practices can be personalised to meet the needs of candidates, many of whom have had limited or distant experience of formal learning systems and their requirements. Mature aged applicants, particularly labour market re-entrants and migrants, frequently need additional support to rebuild their confidence. Arms-length processes, such as evidence gathering for a portfolio, are isolating and do not always build confidence in people making tentative steps towards learning and work.

To make RPL a user-friendly assessment pathway, assessors need to adopt a flexible and interactive approach, and provide information, advice and feedback to RPL candidates in the same way that they provide support and assistance to all candidates seeking to have their skills developed and assessed. It is particularly important when candidates are not engaged in a structured learning program that they receive advice about what is required of them and that they not be constricted by inappropriately applied paper-based or knowledge-based assessment methods. The nature of the support provided may differ from that which is made available to other candidates but the level and quality of that support will influence outcomes for candidates seeking RPL in the same ways as it influences other candidates.

In summary, the new streamlined processes, which vary in shape and form, all apply the principles of assessment to RPL and do not necessarily base their assessment on evidence contained in a portfolio. They also provide structured support for candidates to provide them with an experience of assessment that has been 'done well' and to meet the requirements of the AQTF.

These elements of effective practice and others are contained in the following general principles for RPL.

General principles for RPL

The following principles are intended to assist RTOs to implement and maintain good quality RPL and assure the quality of assessments delivered through RPL processes. They should also assist RTOs to demonstrate the quality of their service provision as indicated by the three quality indicators included in the AQTF (Employer Satisfaction; Candidate Satisfaction; Competency Completion Rate).

The principles draw upon the relevant AQTF and the AQF National Principles and Operational Guidelines for Recognition of Prior Learning. All RTOs and practitioners operating under the AQTF and AQF frameworks should strive to work within these principles, which are a distillation of the requirements regarding the provision of assessment.

Table 1: General principles for RPL

General principle	AQTF/AQF correspondence/comment
1. Information about RPL should be actively promoted, and accessible to a diverse audience of candidates	RPL should be actively promoted to all candidates enrolled in VET courses. Where possible, it should also be promoted as widely as possible through industry and community channels, to tap into the adult learning market.
2. RPL should recognise learning acquired in any context	Provided that the learning is relevant to the competency outcomes stated in a Training Package, and that it is still current.
3. RPL assessment should be conducted according to the principles of assessment and in conformity with the rules of evidence	The principles and rules of evidence of RPL assessment are no different from those that apply to regular assessment processes, even if they are pursued through adapted methods. The principles of assessment are: validity, reliability, flexibility and fairness. The rules of evidence are: validity, sufficiency, currency and authenticity.
4. There is no one RPL model that is suitable for all qualifications and all situations	The model of RPL that is implemented must be aligned with the outcome, goals and objectives of the qualification.
5. RPL processes should be timely, fair and transparent	The delivery of RPL should be as expedient and well signposted as regular assessment processes, and the candidate should be kept informed of their status at reasonable intervals.
6. RPL assessment processes should be quality assured to the same level as training based assessment	The quality indicators included in the AQTF apply to RPL as well as any other assessment procedure.

General principle	AQTF/AQF correspondence/comment
7. RPL policies, procedures and processes should be explicitly included in quality assurance procedures within institutions	Quality service means all candidates receive services that meet their needs, which involves the delivery of training/assessment appropriate to candidate skill levels. Identifying skill levels of candidates should be part of the quality measures of training services.
8. RPL decisions should be accountable, transparent, and subject to appeal and review	The outcomes and decision-making process of RPL assessments should be clearly explained to candidates, and mechanisms for appeal made available throughout a candidate's enrolment in a qualification.
9. RPL assessment should be structured to minimise cost to the individual	Costs for RPL processes should take into account the particular resources, labour and time allocations required for each candidate, and be consistent with current VET Fees and Charges policy.
10. Institutions and providers should develop advice and information about RPL for employers of candidates/potential candidates to promote RPL among employers	Those who have gained their skills through experience in the workforce should be made aware of the opportunity to have their skills recognised through RPL; the benefits of this should be promoted to employers.
11. Institutions and providers should include RPL in access strategies for disadvantaged groups	RPL should be considered as part of a wider strategy for appraising and accrediting the skills of those who have been marginalised by the traditional training and assessment model: migrants, the disabled, women returning to the workforce, unemployed returning to the workforce, etc.
12. Funding models should not impede the implementation of RPL	RPL needs to be recognised in funding policies, to acknowledge its role as a growth area in VET provision.

A task-based model for RPL

As part of the 2006-2007 TAFEWA Trade Skills Recognition Project, a process for RPL has been developed that promotes holistic, task-based assessment, and which focuses upon relating assessment activities to actual job tasks. The intention of this model is to streamline and simplify recognition processes for prospective candidates. This process is described below and assessment tools developed to support this approach have been reproduced on the CD included with this resource.

Preparation/information provision to candidate

In planning for any assessment, assessors need to provide adequate information prior to, throughout and after a training and assessment experience. They need to be fully aware of the needs of the candidate, any relevant workplace personnel and the requirements of the Training Package unit of competency or qualification.

Information is to be provided to the candidate about the assessment process. It will give particular advice regarding how the candidate can demonstrate their competence and any documentary evidence a candidate may wish to gather to support their application. Each industry has unique documents that can provide evidence of experience and competence. **However, the focus of the new streamlined holistic assessment process is to focus on demonstrated skills and knowledge and not to rely on documentary evidence as the main source of evidence.**

Some examples of documentary evidence that can support the process include:

- licences
- brief CV or work history
- certificates/results of assessment
- tickets held eg forklift, crane etc
- photographs of work undertaken
- diaries
- task sheets/job sheets
- log books
- site training records
- pay slips
- membership of relevant professional associations
- references/letters/third party verification reports from previous employers/supervisors
- industry awards
- performance appraisals.

These items may be used to support the candidate's claim to competency throughout the RPL process. However, they should not be seen as a sole or sufficient determinant of competence, which is more properly and effectively assessed through interaction, dialogue and the practical demonstration of tasks.

The task-based requirements for RPL are equally as rigorous as the requirements for regular assessment. It is therefore essential that the methods and tools developed for implementing assessment meet the requirements of the Training Package, the principles of assessment and rules of evidence, and any industry-specific workplace requirements.

First, it is necessary to extract from the Training Package the job tasks involved in the demonstration of competence, and then to group these job tasks into clusters or “skill sets”. These will form the basis of the content of the assessment templates to be used throughout the different steps in the assessment process (as set out below).

It is usually appropriate to cluster competencies into more holistic assessment tasks, or task-based clusters, to generate accurate evidence. Competencies that are conceived as separate in the Training Package might, for some candidates, be intimately connected in practice, and thus not easy to separate out from one another. An approach that clusters units of competency where there is commonality in content prevents duplication of assessment, and can provide for a more realistic demonstration of competence. This requires looking at a whole picture of a particular job role as it happens in industry and assessing holistically. This approach saves valuable time in the assessment process.

After reviewing all the information, the candidate may still decide not to progress with the formal RPL assessment process by not applying for RPL.

The steps

Following this preparatory stage of providing information to the candidate about the assessment process, and determining the job tasks and any clustering of competencies appropriate for the candidate, four steps toward RPL assessment are recommended.

Step 1: self assessment completed by candidate

Step 2: interview with assessor

Step 3: demonstration/observation of tasks

Step 4: provision of further supporting evidence.

Step one: candidate self-assessment

Upon first applying for RPL, the candidate is supplied with a self-assessment tool—such as a checklist or proforma—with questions/criteria based upon real job tasks, as interpreted from the Training Package unit/s of competency, and written in plain English (not Training Package terminology). The self-assessment tool provides an opportunity for the candidate to self-determine their level of experience and knowledge in the relevant industry. It also provides an overview of the level of the candidate’s background experience to assist the assessor to determine if the candidate is likely to be a successful candidate for RPL. It is also an important first step in identifying where the candidate may have gaps in training skills and knowledge. For information on sample self-assessment tools, see page 16.

If a written self-assessment form is not appropriate to the task, or does not suit the particular needs of the candidate, they should be given the option of providing a verbal self-assessment before a qualified assessor. In some cases, a support person may also be used.

Step two: interview

If, according to the information provided by the self-assessment, the candidate demonstrates potential for recognition of prior learning, the next stage involves undergoing further evidence gathering via an interview. The purpose of the interview step is to determine that the candidate is in fact entitled to skip the training process and is ready to be assessed.

This component of the RPL assessment process provides an opportunity for the candidate and the assessor to have a professional conversation about the candidate’s required knowledge and skills. It may comprise a series of direct questions or could be a list of topics for discussion drawn from the list of required skills and knowledge. Discussion around topics may provide an opportunity for candidates to demonstrate a broader area of knowledge and experience and may elicit more information than direct questioning. Appropriate responses to questions or topics that should be covered in the conversation should be included as these will support the assessor in probing for more specific information.

It is preferable to conduct this interview process in a workplace or work-related environment, so that the candidate is able to refer to examples or draw upon their environment to further support the verbal expression of their competency.

Assessor instructions should indicate which questions/topics are critical to the assessment. An appropriate recording mechanism should be included—such as a purpose-built form and/or a digital recorder—to create a reliable record of the interview for later reference. For information on sample interview/topic bank tools and templates, see page 16.

The RPL interview – Christine Cooper, Challenger TAFE

Whenever possible it’s best to conduct the RPL interview at the candidate’s workplace. This is because it’s easy for them to illustrate their statements with handy documents and processes. Candidates are usually more relaxed in their own environment and are more forthcoming with their stories. The assessor can see what they are talking about and may be able to move around the worksite with the candidate to see different aspects of their work.

The style of interview is also important. A rigid question bank is very limiting in eliciting comprehensive responses, so it may be better to use a list of topics that are targeted at aspects of the candidate’s work. An example in horticulture, is to ask the Council Parks and Gardens Manager to talk about ‘street trees’. This very open topic brings in information about tree species and their particular problems, safety issues, pruning requirements, specialised equipment and machinery, working with contractors, relationships with rate payers, budgeting and financial management, and much more. If any aspect is omitted, the assessor can prompt with direct questions. Experience has shown that this style of topic-based interview has allowed the candidate to tell their story with personal experiences, rather than use ‘text book’ style answers. The conversational nature of this style helps the candidate relax and encourages them to illustrate their story with relevant items from their portfolio of evidence – some of which they may not have thought to provide otherwise.

It is very difficult for the assessor to take comprehensive notes, ask questions and listen at the same time. To overcome this problem, it is a good idea to use a digital recorder to record the interview. These are small, unobtrusive and easy to carry around if you conduct the interview on the move. The interview can be then stored by the assessor on computer or CD. The assessor needs to remember to ask for the candidate's permission to record the interview and to remember to turn the recorder off if the candidate is discussing anything that may be sensitive or have security issues.

Recording the interview means that if the assessor is unsure after the interview that all aspects were covered adequately, they can easily check and arrange to reassess those topics. It also provides a good source of evidence if there is any dispute about the outcome of the RPL process.

The interview conducted in this manner is an informative and enjoyable experience that provides the assessor an opportunity to network with industry and communicate the RPL concept with others. It quite often encourages others at the workplace to also enrol in RPL. It shows the professionalism of the well-prepared RPL assessor and the connection of the VET provider to the real workplace.

Step three: demonstration/observation

If the interview demonstrates the candidate's verbal and theoretical knowledge to a sufficient standard, the next stage is to observe and assess the candidate's performance in practice, through the observation of practical tasks performed either in the workplace or simulated workplace environment.

Practical tasks provide the opportunity for the candidate to demonstrate the application of skills and knowledge of a qualification. These practical assessments must be designed to reflect job tasks and be developed using the elements extracted from the units of competency. Developers will need to refer to the Training Package for specific industry requirements. To assess in actual workplace situations, processes will need to be put in place to enable assessors to gain permission to access workplaces. A list of resources required for the practical tasks also needs to be included. Observation and questioning on the job will speed up and streamline the assessment process.

As stated earlier, in some cases it might be more effective to group separate competencies into certain task-based clusters. For instance, in assessing a candidate for the hospitality package, the assessor might cluster the following competencies into a single, multi-stage task (such as the preparation of a banquet); work with colleagues and customers; work in a socially diverse environment; follow health, safety and security procedures; follow workplace hygiene procedures; organise and prepare food; present food, etc.

Observation checklists should be used to provide a record of the practical assessment. The checklists must provide opportunity for sufficient detail of the on the job assessment to be recorded. This documentary evidence provides sources of evidence to external sources, (eg auditor, fellow assessors) that support the assessor judgement. For information on sample demonstration/ observation tools, see page 16.

Step four: provision of further evidence

To complement the record of steps 1-3, the candidate might provide further documentary evidence to support their competency profile as demonstrated in the prior stages of assessment. The types of documentary evidence that may be provided to further support the candidate's claim to competency are the same as those listed at the preparatory stage above, for instance, third-party verification reports, job logs, or photographs of work undertaken. For information on useful templates, see page 16.

Developing RPL assessment tools

In accordance with the AQTF, RPL assessment tools must:

- be designed in accordance with the principles of assessment and the rules of evidence
- meet the requirements of the relevant Training Package or accredited course
- meet workplace and, where relevant, regulatory requirements.

They should also incorporate the assessment of generic employability skills and be validated to the same standard as regular assessment processes.

Principles of assessment and rules of evidence

Your assessments are required to conform to the principles of assessment. Will your assessment methods result in outcomes that are:

- Valid (assesses what it says it does)?
- Reliable (other assessors would make the same judgement with the same evidence)?
- Flexible (the needs of the candidate are taken into account in terms of the methods, the time and the place)?
- Fair (for all candidates and avenues of appeal should be open to candidates)?

Your evidence gathering needs to comply with the rules of evidence, ie your assessment methods, and the tools that you design to accompany them must ensure that your evidence is:

- valid (covers all requirements of the unit of competency)
- sufficient (enables you to make a decision about competence over time and in different situations)
- current (competent performance is contemporary)
- authentic (is the candidate's own work).

Evidence matrix

An evidence matrix may be developed to demonstrate how units of competency are assessed within the RPL assessment tool. The components of the units of competency are to be cross-matched in this table with the corresponding component of the assessment tool (self assessment, interview questions, and practical tasks). The evidence matrix validates the assessment process against the qualification. For information on sample evidence matrices, see page 16.

Developers are to include records as required to provide evidence of the assessment process.

Industry consultation and validation

To deliver outcomes relevant to the context of employment, assessment tools are required to be developed in consultation with the relevant industry. This is the case both for paper-based tools such as checklists and questionnaires, and for the development of simulated and actual workplace assessments.

RTOs should consider forming partnerships with local enterprises who might provide access to a workplace or equipment, authentic workplace documents or advice on how to create a realistic simulated environment.

Employability skills

To ensure that RPL assessment processes are responsive to the needs of industry, it is also necessary to incorporate into the assessment tools the eight employability skills contained in the *Employability Skills Framework* (communication, teamwork, problem-solving, self-management, planning and organising, initiative and enterprise, learning, and technology), as specified in the relevant Training Package.

These employability skills and their facets are now built into most Training Packages, and assessment tools should incorporate assessment of these employability skills alongside the assessment of mandatory units of competency. As the *Employability Skills from Framework to Practice; An Introductory Guide for Trainers and Assessors* states: “Where employability skills exist within a Training Package and are explicitly embedded within a unit, they should be assessed within the context of that unit – not assessed separately. This holistic approach of combining technical and Employability Skills is more relevant and closely aligned to real job expectations and practices. Employability skills are most appropriately assessed in direct relation to the criteria, knowledge and skills described in units of competency”.

Validation processes

To ensure the overall quality and consistency of RPL assessment practices, it is necessary to submit the RPL assessment records to the same process of self-auditing and validation as all other assessment procedures.

With respect to RPL, it is important that assessment conducted as part of RPL is validated alongside samples of regular assessment processes, to ensure consistency and parity of assessment across all instances of assessment, whether undertaken at the end of a course of training, or as a result of RPL application.

These validation processes should aim to ensure the transparency, accountability and consistency of RPL procedures in terms of the provision of information, the preparation and assessment of candidates, and the delivery of assessment outcomes, and their parity with regular assessment procedures in terms of confidence and rigour. For further information see *A guide to continuous improvement of assessment in VET* (2008).

Assessment tool templates and examples

In 2006 a Trade Skills Recognition project was completed producing a series of tools and templates supporting the task based RPL model in this book. For examples of the industry specific (Carpentry and Joining, Automotive, Bricklaying/Blocklaying) Tools developed in this project they are available on a CD titled "Trade Skills Recognition Project 2006" available from Westone at www.westone.wa.gov.au catalogue no. VET 689.

The CD inside the cover of this book contains examples and templates which may be useful to assessors in following steps described in the task based RPL model in this book.

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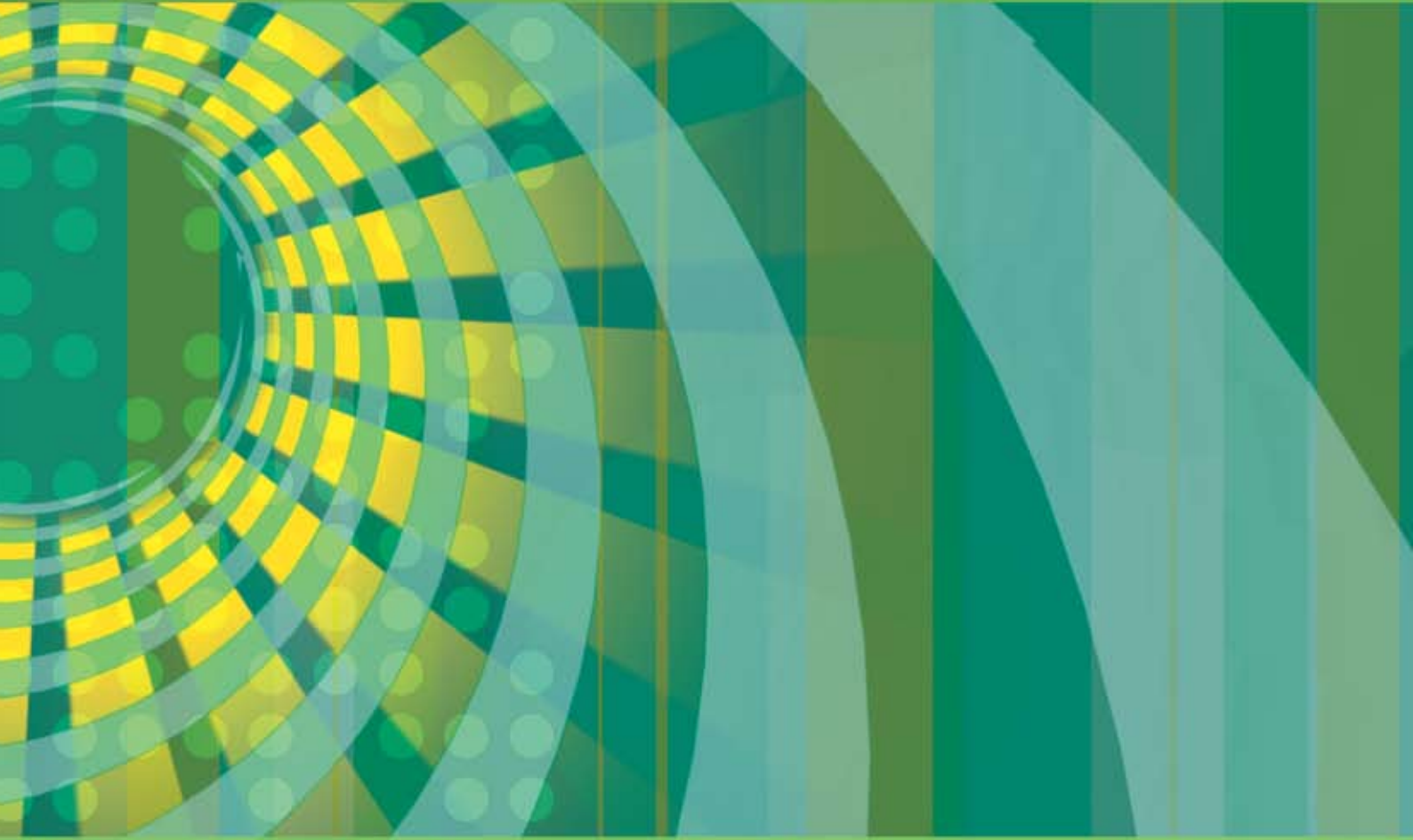
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