Chapter 5
Skills Recognition and Recognition of Prior Learning for Workforce Development: Challenges and Possibilities

Lisa Davies

Abstract In this chapter, the terms 'skills recognition' and 'recognition of prior learning' are unravelled and some complexities involving the concept of competence are also examined. Current research in pedagogical and policy practice is considered and, more specifically, the role of adult educators who are skills recognition/recognition of prior learning assessors and trainers. The literature and a two-and-a-half year qualitative research project undertaken in Australian industry revealed that the use of skills recognition assessments to identify and formally recognise previously unrecognised skills, knowledge and experience of employees could increase workers' engagement. However, some problems emerged. People in assessor roles are driven by multiple factors including educational policy, idiosyncratic individual and organisational needs, and socioeconomic forces. The potential ethical concerns related to how adult educators can reconcile the tangential drivers of relevant policies, the managers who pay for their educational services, their own employers, and those of their adult student/applicants for skills recognition are discussed. Some approaches which can mitigate these difficulties are also identified. The principles of sound skills recognition (and recognition of prior learning) practice are also outlined and the means by which they can be used to enhance workforce capability with confidence and in an ethical manner are explained.

Skills Recognition

Skills recognition and recognition of prior learning have been frequently identified as processes that can be used to increase the productivity, engagement and satisfaction of workers (Bateman and Knight 2003; Leary 2009). There are several reasons associated with this: skills recognition formally recognises not only the skills and knowledge that people have acquired through formal education, but also those that have been developed during work and life experiences, informal learning

L. Davies (✉)
School of Education, University of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia
e-mail: lisa.davies@unisa.edu.au

and non-formal learning. Identifying these formerly unrecognised skills and potentially granting formal qualifications to people who have the relevant skills, aptitudes and knowledge has been cited in numerous literature as being highly beneficial for employees and employers alike (Andersson and Guo 2009; Skills Australia 2010).

However there are various views about what skills recognition is and what processes may be involved. In Australia, the process has generally been referred to as recognition of prior learning (RPL) and recognition of current competencies (RCC). To make this a little more complex, both here and internationally, additional terms are used to describe aspects of skills recognition. These include, among others: learning assessment of prior learning, accreditation of prior experiential learning, accreditation/assessment/recognition of prior (experiential) learning, accreditation of prior learning and achievement, prior learning assessment and recognition, recognition of non-formal and informal learning and validation (Maher and Morrison 2010, p. 7–8). In this chapter I will use the term 'skills recognition' as it encompasses all of the above activities.

Recent research also indicates that the concept and process of recognising skills goes beyond the conventional notion of programs designed to accredit prior learning. It is also a useful component of assessment, training, human resource management and workplace development (Morrison et al. 2010). Moreover, skills recognition processes also often go unnamed or are used while not being identified as such during activities such as recruitment, knowledge management and training needs analyses and so on. Another often neglected aspect is that these are often used informally within a workplace. This is exemplified by giving people more senior acting positions in response to their demonstrating increased skills levels that they may have developed on the job. This is not a formal recognition that will lead to a qualification, but it is the recognition that some employees have developed their skills and expertise. Similarly people may rise through salary brackets based on strong performance in their workplaces; they may be invited to mentor more junior, less experienced employees or facilitate internal training. All of these processes can fall under the generic umbrella of informal skills recognition, and are often referred to as RPL or skills recognition in internal human resource documentation.

In this chapter however I focus on the formal use of skills recognition which may lead in part or completely to a formal qualification, depending on what qualification is being sought.

The Rubbery Concept of Competence

There is simultaneously a demand in Australia, as elsewhere, for adult workers to undertake continuous learning as it is assumed that their resultant increased competence will lead to increased economic productivity. What constitutes desirable workplace competencies that are identified as integral to such continuous learning—and which may or may not relate to increased productivity—has however been a contentious issue as the key notion of 'competency', which is embedded in skills recognition, is often defined inconsistently.

Le Deist and Winterton (2005) examined the differing interpretations of what constitutes competence in the UK, USA, France and Germany, with the intention of developing a richer and more holistic interpretation of it. They noted that, in each instance, what are often referred to as softer skills were being added to the purely functional skills that earlier, narrow definitions of competence included. There were also differences between each country's constructs, which suggests that some cultural factors come into play.

Competencies can also be referred to as generic competence, or skill, knowledge and ability, which could apply to anyone in an organisation. These would include having the requisite skills and ability to train people in an organisation. In other situations, such as assessing the competence of people in high-risk occupations (surgery, nursing, food preparation, transport and so on) there are clearly some very specific, high order competencies that are required, which need a greater degree of assessing and testing to ensure competence and hence human safety.

How competence can be measured will vary, often as a result of differing philosophical underpinnings. Street (1995) proposed that an autonomous model of the assessment of a competency such as, for example, literacy, reflected purely positivist practice, exemplified by workplace psychometric testing. By contrast he stated that there was also an ideological model characterised by a postmodern approach in which context, socio-cultural practice and critical discourse are embedded. Within this framework, education to increase competence was promulgated with the intention of reducing discriminatory social activities.

Further to this, Londsdale and McCurry (2004, p. 14) proposed that there are three major notions about the specific 'competence' of, for example, literacy extant in Australia, which they summarised as:

- a cognitive model associated with a psychometric tradition, with quantifiable levels of ability, and a deficit approach to non-competence;
- an economics-driven model generally associated with workforce training, multiskilling, productivity, 'functional' competencies, and notions of gaining more human capital with increased competence; and
- a sociocultural model which is most commonly associated with contextualised and multiple (literacy) practices, a valuing of the 'other', and a strong critical element.

In addition to this, in their research in New Zealand, Cowie et al. (2009) found that the context in which demonstrations of competency were undertaken was crucial for reasonable assessment judgements to be made.

Research that was undertaken in 2010–2012 in the Australian rail industry found that there were varying concepts of what competence actually meant. These inconsistencies highlighted the differing knowledge and understanding held both by people in training and assessment roles and non-educators across interviews and organisations in this sector. For example, several people referred to the notion of currency of competence, which led to some discussion about what currency was. One participant in a group interview queried rhetorically that if her driver's licence expired

today, would that mean that she was no longer competent to drive tomorrow. It appeared in more than one instance that there was some confusion about the meaning of competence and the concept of something being 'legal' or associated with licences and certifications. Other participants were concerned that two people could both be assessed quite legitimately as 'competent' according to the assessment criteria, but that this did not highlight the difference between a person who was competent to do their role, and one who had outstanding abilities.

Other assessors suggested that the emphasis on identifying knowledge (the theory) and skills (the practical ability) ignored the 'behavioural' skills or soft skills that they considered to be crucial in all areas of the workplace. People needed to know how and when to make decisions and what to take into account when they were under pressure, irrespective of their roles. In some rail organisations, all workers were put through full training, irrespective of previous relevant education, certifications and work experience. This was done in an attempt to mitigate what they perceived to be organisational risk. That is, if litigation occurred following an 'incident' and it was found that the person involved had undergone competence assessment through skills recognition and had been deemed competent—rather than attending formal training—they feared that their organisation would be deemed at fault.

In essence then it could be determined that how you define competencies is reflected in your responses to perceived social and/or economic needs and current context. It is useful to look at a defining framework of what constitutes competence that, while based in an organisation perspective, is somewhat more holistic than some others and is neither a deficit model nor one that is too narrow to be practicable.

Using a Practical Definition

The Australian Skills Quality Authority defines competency as: 'The consistent application of knowledge and skill to the standard of performance required in the workplace. It embodies the ability to transfer and apply skills and knowledge to new situations and environments' (ASQA 2012, p. 42).

To reduce the potential problem of limited understandings of what competency is, and to increase awareness about what skills recognition can be used for, in this chapter I focus on the ASQA definition as it is practical in its clarity and general applicability. Furthermore, when proposing the use of a more holistic approach to skills recognition processes—in which assessors use evidence from multiple sources to map skills and knowledge gained through informal, non-formal and formal learning against defined competencies or capabilities—this definition works well. The assumed goal of a skills recognition process is to assist an applicant to gain all or part of a recognised qualification if they indeed can demonstrate that they can apply their current skills and knowledge to new situations and contexts. If not, tailored gap training can be undertaken.

But what if there are more covert agendas at play?

What are the Motives that Drive Skills Recognition?

Now let us examine a potential conundrum: is adult education and training intended to achieve social justice for the individual, is it socio-cultural engineering, or is it solely embedded in economic imperatives? In the specific case of assessing skills, is this an employer's method of determining whose skills are lacking or atrophied to identify who would benefit from gap training? Is it a method for identifying skills gaps to determine who can be made redundant or demoted to make way for more skilled workers? Is it something else? The second and third (a frightening unknown) motives have been identified as a very real concern for employees and their unions in both Australia and the United Kingdom.

Overt and Covert Motives

There is currently an acknowledged need to educate people to ensure a steady supply of skilled Australian workers, particularly in currently expanding sectors such as mining, resources, power supply and to replace ageing baby boomer workers. This is not in itself invidious. In 2012 the then Australian Prime Minister and Minister for Skills, Julia Gillard, cited Skills Australia as having estimated that between 2012 and 2015 Australia would need an additional 2.1 million people in the workforce with vocational and education training (VET) qualifications; this from a 2013 total Australian population of 23 million people.

There are however differing and tangential drivers for using skills recognition to assist people to gain formal VET qualifications. These include the potential benefits for the individual worker who participates in workforce development processes, the socio-cultural value of undertaking workforce development and the economic benefits of workforce development for enterprises. These are all underpinned by the urgent need to identify skills, atrophied skills and skill gaps by using skills recognition and related training to educate Australian workers in general. This is being supported by the Australian government's initiative to provide funding to increase the availability of free or reduced cost VET, with the intention of ensuring that approximately an additional 375,000 people will have completed formal qualifications over the following five years in Australia (Gillard 2012).

A tension becomes apparent when examining the differences between the motives that underpin government-supported and promulgated social policy and subsequent action. Some aspects are based upon an economic imperative in which workforce development is perceived to be essential to maintain or increase employee productivity and enterprises' profits. By contrast others are centred in a social justice perspective—commonly associated with respect to the social milieu, multi-layered educational practices and a valuing of the 'other', in which education is intended to overcome an individual worker's—or group of workers'—social and/or economic paucity and/or lack of social capital. Such education is intended to reduce the social constructs by which people could be stigmatised or discriminated against.

While the training reforms referred to by Prime Minister Gillard were described as being undertaken to 'help Australians get the training they need to get a job, change careers or boost their chance of getting a better-paying job' (Gillard 2012), that is, benefitting those people whom the government should serve, there are additional agendas at work. Another layer is that such action is driven not only by the dual desire to increase both an individual's social capital and income and businesses' profits to support economic stability, but also by the less acknowledged desire to reduce the number of people who are receiving government support and to increase the base of taxpayers. This kind of difference between the rhetoric and reality of social policy is a problem that is familiar to many adult educationalists.

Where do Ethics Come into This?

This raises the questions: What are the purposes of education that are being promoted? Whose interests are being served? Whose voices are and are not being heard? What are the implications for educational practice? Are we making ethical decisions when following policy and/or the demands of the people who employ us? What are ethics and morals? Are they the same thing?

At its simplest, ethics is a system of moral principles. It affects how people make decisions and lead their lives. Ethics is concerned with what is good for individuals and society and is also described as moral philosophy. It covers the following human dilemmas:

- How can we live a good life?
- What are our rights and responsibilities?
- What is the language of right and wrong?
- And what is good and bad moral decision making?

To avoid becoming mired in the complexity of overlapping and contradictory ethical theory, a practical explanation of the forces that drive our current moral questions follows.

Consequentialism

The moral theory of consequentialism suggests that whether an act is right or wrong is dependent upon the consequences of that act. The greater the number of good consequences that are produced determines the goodness of the act. From this moral perspective, the process is less relevant than the final outcome. While attractive in some respects, there are flaws inherent in this approach as it does not provide us with guidance about how to weigh up which processing actions to take when faced with moral dilemmas. Consequentialism can also lead to some uncertainly, as we are not always in a position in which we can assess what the final outcomes of our decisions will be. An immediate short-term solution may appear to be highly merit worthy; however it may trigger an unpredictable chain of events that leads to morally questionable outcomes.

Deontological (Duty-Based) Theory

This is a theory in which adherents posit a universe that is proscribed by clear rules which are inviolable, irrespective of the context. For example, a deontological perspective would be that it is wrong to tell lies, or it is wrong to steal irrespective of the context. In short, someone who is adhering to duty-based ethics is more focused on adhering to the process, the rules, rather than the outcome. A strength of this system of thinking is that it underpins some aspects of human rights by respecting all individuals and not just a group outcome. It focuses on the individual's right not to be killed, not to have their goods stolen and not to be lied to. It provides structure and comfort in an ambiguous world. However, like consequentialism, it has its flaws. It does not take into account that meeting the need of an individual may lead to problems for the whole group. Moreover, it does not assist in situations in which your 'duties' are at odds with each other.

Situation Ethics

Yet another theory that can impinge on the work of educators and assessors is situation ethics, in which each case is individual and can therefore have individualised moral decisions made about it. It presupposes that it is possible that ethical decisions can be made with contextualised, very flexible, if not idiosyncratic, guidelines. The rightness of an action does not reside in the act itself but in the loving configuration of the factors in the situation including the motive, means or process and any foreseeable consequences (Fletcher 1967).

Multiple Ethical Responses to Many Dilemmas

With the above theoretical frameworks in mind, what follows reflects the multiple responses to the kind of ethical dilemmas that educators, and in particular assessors, may face on a regular basis.

Again, there is more complexity. Our ethical responses to the conundrum about the gap between socio-political rhetoric and reality are shaped by differing factors. For example for some people a personal sense of morals will inform their actions, while others may rely on their religious beliefs or professional experiences in their approach to ethical dilemmas and making ethical decisions. Others rely on external codes of conduct and prefer clear rules to define their decision making (Kohlberg 1973). Arguably, a person's gender can also be influential when social and moral judgements are made (Gilligan 2011). There are also difficulties that can arise if you unwittingly violate the unspoken and unwritten codes of conduct in an organisation, or conversely use the fact that such codes are not published as a justification for your actions.

In the late 1980s and 1990s the function and purpose of adult educators had been examined at length; the central question of whether adult educators were tasked with providing services that would empower the individual—as opposed to an organisation and its shareholders or society in general—was appraised. In 1988 Sork focused on what he identified as the ethical quandary of basing the content and intent of adult educational training on needs that were potentially neither understood nor acknowledged by the adult learner and were instead driven by the requirements of employers. In their research into the ethical concerns that adult educators experience regularly, Gordon and Sork (2001) found that educators were disquieted by issues pertaining to evaluating their students, because of the inherent problem caused by their desire to maintain equitable evaluations and the conflicting organisational pressure to allow students through a training course to ensure that success rates were high. High student success rates in institutions that were competing for students were seen as highly desirable from a marketing perspective.

Gordon and Sork's (2001) participants were also asked whether they thought that a code of ethics would assist them in their practice. This proposal was endorsed by many who considered that such a code would give them the clear guidelines that they needed to undertake their roles with confidence, would potentially increase ethical behaviour among assessors and would simultaneously decrease their own accountability for the determinations that they made. However, several dissenting voices emerged. One person suggested that if someone had an internal set of moral codes they would not require a prescriptive set; another that even if there were a code, people uninhibited by such matters would be unlikely to follow it. Others were concerned about the nature of any embedded enforcements, that is, if the code were breached, wittingly or otherwise, it could lead to punishment in one form or another. Moreover, others were concerned about who would develop the code's content, and that it would lead to yet more bureaucratic limitations on their practice. There was also a questioning of some extant codes of conduct in which following the code's rules was explicitly underpinned in the policy. As Gordon and Sork (2001) point out, such codes were invariably developed by the dominant power group whose intention was to maintain the status quo, and so would preclude the activities of people who challenged oppressive rules and laws regularly in the pursuit of social justice.

In short, the following question emerged: How could adult educators reconcile the potentially diverging concerns of policy-makers, manager-clients who purchase educational services for their own enterprise and the formal institutions that employed the assessor-educators, with those of the applicants for skills recognition (Lawler 1996; Wilson and Cervero 1996)?

Some Mitigating Strategies

In response, Brockett (1990) and Lawler (1996) recommended some approaches that could be undertaken by adult educators who were uneasy about this dilemma which could increase their sense that they were engaging in ethical practices. These

strategies included using self-reflexivity: Caffarella and Merriam (1999) suggested that we could learn by critically examining the judgements that we had made in complex and multifaceted situations. Our prior experience of similar situations, about which we had amassed a great deal of knowledge—a virtual toolkit—means that in comparable situations we could access our toolkit of prior experience and our decisions could be made more readily. But reflective practice is itself a contentious concept, as it assumes that the practitioner is focused on problem solving in an ethical manner by contextualising the situation and, importantly, being very aware of the power discordances that may be at play. This requires a highly developed sense of personal critical insight.

Given this, it is very useful for adult educators to practice examining their personal values and reflecting on the ethics of their own practice, in a manner not dissimilar to that undertaken by qualitative, interpretive researchers. In brief, you examine the situation in which external intentions, actions and desired outcomes challenge your own values. You need to examine how your own experiences have developed your values, and hence examine your own intentions critically. Are you adhering to a set of values that puts another, less powerful person in a difficult situation? Are you being stubborn or making judgements based on personal biases? Are you willing to take risks at work to ensure that you are behaving in what you regard as an ethical manner? This is particularly the case if you accept the premise that our knowledge and values are socially constructed; they are inevitably influenced by and filtered through our own social, historical and social-political perceptions (Patton 1990; Hammersley and Atkinson 1995).

Educators also need to ensure that they do have all the information that is pertinent to the situation. They can ask themselves: How would I feel if I were the applicant and this decision were made? How would I feel if information about my decision-making process became (hypothetically) public knowledge to my manager, my co-workers, or even my family and non-work circle of friends? If you had a trainee or graduate shadowing you when undertaking a skills recognition assessment, would you have dealt with the assessment differently? What kind of professional practice values are you modelling for a person who is new to your workforce? Are you putting that graduate in an unnecessarily difficult position, in which your actions are at odds with what they have learned about ethical workplace behaviour? Educator/assessors need to be alert to all of these matters.

In the 1990s educators were also encouraged to find some time for assessor group reflection and discussion about what they perceived to be issues of moral principle to enable the shared identification of ethical dilemmas and conflicts and to investigate ways in which they could be overcome. This legitimising of discussion about ethical matters mainstreams it so that it becomes routine practice and becomes embedded in an organisation's culture. This suggestion was also raised in our research.

Brockett (1990) also recommended that practitioners undertake critical analyses of the ways in which other professions deal with ethical dilemmas, and to undertake research into ethical matters in adult education to further inform themselves. There are also numerous endorsed and recognised certificate courses where people can receive training in how to use effective problem-solving techniques when exposed

to competing value systems. Such education can assist in clarifying poor ethical decision making, for example a reliance on relativism and rationalisation which ultimately serves one's own interest. It also teaches the way in which you can garner courage and use the wisdom that you have gained to make ethical decisions, even if it can be a fearful route to take. Such activities can be very useful in empowering educators and assessors to be more confident about identifying and solving ethical problems.

Building Positive Employee–Employer Relationships

Power dissonances are inevitable in organisations. Those with power are more likely to be in a position of authority whereby they can punish a person who violates their trust and are hence often more trusting, knowing that the people who report to them are fearful of reprimand if they breach their manager's trust. Conversely, the person with little power has limited ways to protest if their managers betray their trust, with the exception of taking strike action or leaving that place of employment, both of which are major measures. Being less powerful, they can feel more inclined to be vulnerable to manipulation, and are less likely to be trustful of their managers and supervisors. However, employee trust in their employer's motives has been extensively described as being a key to minimising employee disquiet about and even rejection of managerial decisions (Covey 2006).

In relation to this, transparent communication in organisations has been frequently cited as a major key to the generation of trust in an enterprise. Such communication is usually defined as being transparent, where managerial motives and strategies are shared openly with all employees, where two-way feedback is encouraged, employees are encouraged to take part in decision making and all policies and procedures are freely disclosed to all employees.

Therefore, as an additional ethical approach, it is useful for educator-assessors to become informed about what the drivers behind the support for skills recognition in an organisation are, to become informed about how they can inform applicants about these motivations, and then to be transparent about these with those people who are applicants, or have been asked in their workplaces to undertake the process. This degree of knowledge also empowers the educator-assessor to know that they are behaving in an ethical way.

Offering the opportunity for employees to undertake a skills recognition assessment for reasons that are underpinned with open and honest motives can assist with the development of positive employer–employee psychological contracts. These are formed through the interactive social process of examining the skills and knowledge that employees have, with the goal of confirming employee competence for a position for which they were not formally qualified or to identify areas in which tailored training would benefit both the recipient and their employing organisation. This is a validating experience for most people.

There is abundant evidence that acknowledging and developing the softer skills in human workplaces, including those of knowing how to identify and undertake ethical behaviour, promotes employee satisfaction and increased productivity. People will stay with an organisation in which they observe that the claims made in words and behaviour align with subsequent managerial actions. This of course all links to transparency in communication.

It should be noted however that, for adult educators who do not hold such concerns and who undertake skills recognition assessments as directed by their employer and client organisations without questioning motivations, such issues would not be of concern. Whether or not such pragmatic approaches are questionable is a highly contentious point and lies at the heart of emerging critical human resources theory.

Skills Recognition and Changing Policy

Unlike some more generic workforce development processes such as internal staff training in customer service and so on, formal application of skills recognition is governed by highly regulated policy in Australia. Only Registered Training Organisations and Enterprise RTOs can use formal skills recognition processes to assess the possibility of attaining and granting an accredited qualification. Like many countries, the underpinning policy has recently changed in Australia and this has had an impact on the way that people interpret and use it.

However, as Hogwood and Peters explained, 'Policies are rarely written on a *tabula rasa* but rather on a well-occupied and even crowded tablet of existing laws, organisations and clients' (1983, p. 1). Moreover, ethical codes of conduct are organic; they will change over time in response to social changes, as exemplified by the antidiscrimination polices that are now routine in many First World workplaces, but which were unheard of in the 1960s.

So, despite these initial potential difficulties, the principles of sound skills recognition practice that I detail shortly have not changed and they can be applied readily in ways that support ethical workforce employee development.

Using Skills Recognition in Differing Organisations

Industries vary in size, composition and focus; hence the context of the organisations must be taken into account when developing leading practice skills recognition guidelines that meet that industry's needs. The purposes, orientation, management and operational styles of private and public companies can also vary considerably. The organisational culture of many companies is also undergoing significant change in terms of technological development, privatisation, increasing associations with developing sectors, increasing numbers of migrant employees, the development of equity and diversity strategies, an ageing workforce, and concerns around globalisation and sustainability.

It is acknowledged under the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF 2013) that there is no one SR/RPL model that is suitable for all qualifications and all situations. However, the National Principles and Operational Guidelines for Recognition of Prior Learning (AQF 2013, pp. 78–79) in Australia outline several principles that need to underpin pathways for the purposes of issuing recognised qualifications in Australia. These principles are that they:

- are clear and transparent to students/applicants;
- are systemic and systematic;
- will enable flexible qualification pathways;
- may be horizontal across AQF qualifications at the same level as well as vertical between qualifications at different levels;
- can facilitate credit for entry into, as well as credit towards, AQF qualifications; and
- can eliminate unfair or unnecessary barriers for student/applicant access to AQF qualifications.

Sound decisions need to be made to allow credit outcomes to be used to meet pre-requisites or other specified requirements for entry into a program of study leading to a qualification or for the partial fulfilment of the requirements of a qualification. These need to be formally documented for the student and for quality audits and must include any reasons for not giving credit. Sound decision-making processes are as follows:

- Decisions need to be evidence-based, equitable and transparent.
- Decisions need to be applied consistently and fairly and be subject to appeal and review.
- Decisions need to recognise learning regardless of how, when and where it was acquired; provided that the learning is relevant and current and has a relationship to the learning outcomes of the qualification.
- Decisions need to be academically defensible and take into account the students' ability to meet the learning outcomes of the qualification successfully.
- Decisions need to be decided in a timely way so that students' access to qualifications is not unnecessarily inhibited (AQF 2013, pp. 78–79).

These guidelines hence constitute an ethical code of conduct (rather than an overly constrictive code) to be followed when undertaking assessment of a person's transferable prior skills and knowledge.

Sound Practice in Skills Recognition Assessments

The details of how to undertake skills recognition are often determined by the environment in which they are undertaken. In sectors that define themselves as being highly safety critical, including construction, transport, aviation, maritime and even food preparation, some assessors may feel constrained in their skills recognition assessments, and may be uneasy about making informed judgements in areas deemed

safety critical. However, the following recommended practices do not involve risk and should underpin any skills assessment.

The processes should be designed to be as user-friendly as possible for the applicant, while also meeting the needs of the employer. In Australia the ASQA requires Registered Training Organisations (those that are accredited to offer formal skills recognition) to inform their applicant clients of the training, assessment and support services available to them before they enrol or enter into a training contract. This information should include the availability of skills recognition services and details of the process.

The skills recognition process should be more personal than merely requiring an applicant-student to collect documentary evidence. Instead, the process should involve both the assessor and applicant working together, with the assessor assisting the applicant throughout the process. It is also useful to identify why the applicant and/or the employer are considering skills recognition, so that the assessor can give relevant advice about which course of action to take, and what kinds of evidence will be required. This may also unveil any unspoken motivation on the part of either party. Is the employer looking for evidence of a lack of skills to determine whether this person can be made redundant? Is the employee expecting their employer to fund the assessment process, so that they can immediately leave for another job elsewhere, with their new qualification?

An assessor needs to understand what the applicant does and or does not know about the assessment process to ensure that there are shared expectations. The assessor needs to be open to questions and to provide advice freely throughout the whole process; this includes outlining the process clearly, both verbally and in writing, in jargon- and acronym-free language (Smith 2004, p. 5) to ensure that, for example, people are not bewildered or alarmed by the education jargon of mapping competencies and challenge tests. The support of an interpreter is also recommended where required.

Using culturally inclusive approaches that may include story sharing and informal conversations to encourage practical demonstrations of skills and abilities may suit migrant workers, Indigenous Australians and/or people returning to the workforce after long absences. Providing complete documentary evidence may be difficult for some migrant workers, Indigenous workers, people returning to the workforce after absences and long-term employees who have learned all their skills on the job. In these situations, assessors may also need to support applicants to source alternative forms of evidence. Using positive approaches including using language that determines what clients can do, rather than focusing on the deficit approach of measuring what they cannot do, is desirable. Deficit approaches are to be avoided as they can create test-like conditions that promote anxiety and lowered self-assessment. Maintaining a positive approach that supports, acknowledges and values the skills and experiences of the applicant is crucial in any adult education exercise to build trust and comfort with the process and encourage active participation. Assessors need to be prepared to probe for further evidence if necessary, by using professional conversations to draw out evidence of, for example, abstract skills, which may be otherwise unnamed and overlooked. Without some coaching on the part of the assessor, some applicants may be unaware that the skills and experiences they have are relevant.

Peer support where feasible can be undertaken by conducting skills assessment in groups of a few employees, where peers can support each other with prompts and independent assessment of each other's skills and knowledge. Group assessment can also reduce costs and time taken and may be less confronting for some applicants than the potentially test-like scenario of a one-to-one assessment.

Assessors should have domain knowledge of the target industry to meet industry needs, and should also be familiar with their applicants' and clients' workplace language.

Inadequate Skills Recognition Practice

By contrast, skills recognition practices that are neither adequately understood nor undertaken (as referred to earlier in this chapter) can be identified by the following characteristics, many of which put the emphasis on the applicant, who is not a trained assessor, to do much of the work. This is unethical practice and will not lead to the best outcome for the applicant.

Requiring too much of the applicant is exemplified by activities including an expectation that the applicant map their own evidence to elements or performance criteria themselves instead of simply collecting evidence for the assessor to map.

Similarly, providing applicants with a self-assessment checklist that consists of units of competency, elements and performance criteria that they are required to interpret, instead of a more general approach that requires applicants to detail their education, licences that they have held, any volunteer work that they have undertaken, previous work experience and so on, is not good practice. It is the assessor who needs to interpret and map this information, not the applicant. While the evidence must be sufficient, requiring excessive evidence puts unrealistic demands on the applicant and unnecessarily increases the assessment workload and related time frame for both the applicant and the assessor.

Another indicator of poor practice would be requiring the applicant to compile evidence that is not consistent with the competencies detailed in the qualification, for example by asking an applicant to write an essay in relation to a Certificate II in Road Surfacing.

Dismissing the applicant by advising them that it is easier to 'just do the training again' than to apply for skills recognition is highly expedient and could damage the morale of an applicant who is very experienced and/or has previously undertaken the same training.

Supporting Assessors

Assessors also need support to maintain confidence in their professional judgements. They need supportive systems, tools and processes without excessive paperwork combined with the assistance of colleagues and managers, including opportunities

to consult with them on a regular basis. A skills recognition process that is embedded within the organisation's training and assessment and/or human resources business model to ensure that it is well understood and will become a mainstream organisational practice can demystify it for non-assessors and mitigate uninformed assumptions about it.

The provision of regular moderation activities between assessors as part of the quality assurance process and to ensure that assessors feel confident in the judgements that they make can reduce assessor stress and unease. Assessors also need the kind of support that is engendered by participating in a community of practice or formal teams of assessors, or by taking out membership of relevant professional bodies which provide ready access to the most recent information about assessment best practice and related legislation. Assessors need the support provided by sharing knowledge and experiences with other assessors (Davies et al. 2013).

Ensuring successful skills recognition is a three-way process: applicants need to understand the drivers and be supported through the process, assessor skills need to be developed continually to ensure their own confidence in their judgements and business needs must be understood.

Benefits for Employers

Confirmation or otherwise of competence is also a useful risk mitigation strategy. If competence is not confirmed, skills recognition assessments can also identify relevant training needs to ensure that employees have up-to-date skills and knowledge and can feel confident when doing their work. This same process will ensure that employees do not have to undertake training in areas in which they are already experienced and competent. This reduces the cost of unnecessary retraining and the on-costs of employee absences during training, and also ensures that that training is focused on developing new skills and competencies.

Skills recognition can also confirm that employees have the relevant certificates to comply with licensing and regulatory requirements and can also confirm the currency of licences and certificates held. Importantly, skills recognition assessments may also identify where a person may be suited to a different role that better fits with their skills, interest and ability; morale can be increased, absenteeism and 'presenteeism' are reduced and productivity is improved.

Benefits for Employees

There is considerable evidence that formally recognising the skills, knowledge and experience that people already have has a positive effect on employee morale. There is often a concern among older, more experienced workers who do not have formal qualifications that they may be usurped by tertiary and college qualified graduates,

about whose education they may feel suspect or resentful. Providing such employees with the possibility of gaining a recognised qualification can mitigate this problem. Related to this is the reduction of repeated training that employees have no interest in attending, as such demands demean their skills and experience. It can also reduce the time and cost taken to achieve a qualification. Clearly, there is a strong business case for skills recognition in organisations and a strong case for the successful application of these assessments to ensure that employees receive the benefits that can be gained from them.

Conclusion

In summary, it appears that the dilemmas that were acknowledged as inherent in some aspects of adult education in the previous century are still with us. Therefore it is useful to revisit the solutions that were examined in the 1990s and to ensure that the concerns of the individual educator and recipient of education are not buried in a cost–benefit analysis of employee productivity.

As Brockett (1990) recommended, we need to encourage and support a familiar but more current research agenda about the ethical use of skills recognition in workplaces. Current research can remind experienced practitioners of the recurring dilemma of education for economic imperatives versus that for socio-cultural benefit. New practitioners are also alerted to ethical issues in adult education, and will know how to access strategies that will ease their concerns, and which will also inform employees who have been encouraged to undertake skills recognition assessments what the drivers are.

Done transparently and undertaken well with a sound knowledge of how to process assessment applications wisely, and support the applicant, skills recognition can benefit both the employer and the employee while also meeting policy needs.

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