

RPL in enterprise-based RTOs: how does it work?

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Abstract

Recognition of prior learning is acknowledged as a crucial element in lifelong learning, in the development of training cultures within enterprises and as a mechanism to assist mature age workers obtain formal recognition and certification of skills gained through work, learning and life experiences (Smith, forthcoming; Australian National Training Authority 2003b). The extent of its importance has been stressed by the inclusion in the Australian Quality Training Framework Standards for Registered Training Organisations of a standard that relates specifically to the mandatory offering of recognition. Standard 8.2(a) states that 'The RTO must ensure that RPL is offered to all applicants on enrolment' (ANTA 2001, p.18). Further, one of the Australian National Training Authority's overarching national initiatives outlined in *A national marketing strategy for VET: Meeting client needs* is the simplification of recognition processes in order to, amongst other things, encourage the completion of qualifications among key industry sectors (Australian National Training Authority 2000).

While recent research has looked broadly at recognition implementation and practice across a range of Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) and sectors, there is much less detailed information about skills recognition within industrial settings. Therefore, the outcomes of this study were intended to fill a gap in our existing knowledge about the valuing, utility and effectiveness of recognition within some of the key organisations in VET-enterprise RTOs.

This study was undertaken by CURVE at Canberra Institute of Technology and the Assessment Centre, at the University of Ballarat. The study looked at five medium and large sized enterprise RTOs that provide training and skills recognition services for their employees, and one enterprise that is in a partnership with its local TAFE institute for assessment purposes. The enterprise-based RTOs were selected on the basis of their willingness to participate in the research and the range of Training Packages and AQF qualifications that they offer. The enterprise RTOs included a mix of public agencies and private enterprises.

The enterprises involved in this study provided significant information about how recognition within enterprise RTOs can operate. As key players in vocational education and training they demonstrate various modes of commitment to recognition and clearly indicate that it is neither a static nor a simple concept, but evolves according to the needs of the organisation.

Introduction

This research is the third in a series of recent research into RPL in the Australian VET sector. *Giving Credit* (Bateman & Knight) and *Recognition of Prior Learning in the vocational education and training sector*, unpublished, (ANTA) were presented at the 2003 AVETRA conference. Where this research differs to previous research is that it looks at RPL in enterprise-based registered training organisations.

It was anticipated that an in-depth examination of recognition within enterprise-based RTOs would elicit detailed data about the marketing and materials used to raise employee awareness and interest in recognition; the procedures employed to support workers through the recognition process and any strategies they use to ensure recognition is both accessible and equitable. This study also sought to investigate employer and employee expectations and experiences with recognition, including what value they place upon the process and any dispositional and organisational barriers and facilitators that they see may encourage or discourage engagement with recognition in their enterprises.

Literature review

Internationally, the process of formally recognising skills and knowledge gained through previous learning, work, training and other experience, known in Australia as recognition of prior learning, has a diversity of nomenclature, including accreditation of prior learning or accreditation of prior experiential learning (United Kingdom and European Union), prior learning assessment and recognition or workplace prior learning and recognition (Canada) and recognition of prior learning (South Africa and New Zealand). In the majority of these countries, the process is directed at the assessment of an individual's prior learning, work and other experience in order to gain access to formal education or training. In both Scotland and Canada, as in Australia, recognition has been extended to the workplace and to the provision of opportunities for employees to have their skills gained through formal, non-formal and informal learning formally recognised.

In the Australian literature on education and training, the concept of skills recognition has been clouded by a degree of dispute (Wheelahan et al 2002b; Bateman & Knight 2003; Smith, forthcoming) that has largely centred on the inclusion or exclusion of credit transfer in the process and assumptions about the differences between recognition of prior learning and recognition of current competencies (Wheelahan et al 2002a; Kirkwood & Kearney 1998 as cited in Bateman & Knight 2003). In documenting the debate, Bateman and Knight (2003) note the changing views over time, and suggest that with the implementation of Training Packages and the Australian Quality Training Framework both prior learning and current competencies are encapsulated within a single framework of recognition.

A number of comprehensive studies have examined the implementation of skills recognition in Australia. In most instances, however, these have focused upon its application and uptake in educational settings and very little research has been undertaken on skills recognition within enterprise-based training environments.

Much of the literature concentrates upon the benefits that can be gained by acknowledging skills previously gained and on the barriers that impede ready uptake by potential applicants.

Commonly cited benefits for enterprises are that less time is spent in unnecessary training, that training can be better targeted because strengths and weaknesses are identified through the assessment process and the end product is a better qualified enterprise workforce. Additionally, it is suggested that the process provides employers with clear indications of existing skill sets, provides them with the opportunity to maximise employee potential and supports the implementation of workplace change.

Despite the obvious benefits associated with skills recognition, it is evident from the literature that there are a number of barriers that deter learners from engaging in the process. A general lack of awareness about its availability, the complexity and seeming complexity of the process that it entails, the time required to collect evidence and the lack of clarity of the language used in promoting skills recognition have all been identified as inhibiting more extensive uptake. To overcome these barriers, the literature emphasises the importance of extensive promotion and support for those learners who seek to have their formal, non-formal and informal skills and knowledge recognised.

Research method

Given the focus of the research and the nature of the research questions, a qualitative research method was employed in the study. A semi-structured interview approach was adopted as this allowed the development of pre-planned questions, but did not preclude deeper probing and clarification of responses and evaluative comments during interview.

At the same time, an extensive review of the literature on skills recognition in vocational education and training in Australia and overseas was undertaken.

A project reference group with expertise in recognition supported the project and provided valuable insights and suggestions about the shape and content of the study.

Six enterprises were invited to participate in this research. These were the Defence Learning Services Network, the Centrelink Virtual College, Santos, Telstra, and two organisations known in this report as the 'Emergency Services Agency' and the 'Public Utilities Company.' All enterprises are medium to large organisations with large workforces, often dispersed across Australia. All but Santos are RTOs delivering training package qualifications under the Australian Qualifications Framework ranging from lower level certificates to diplomas and advanced diplomas. In contrast, Santos delivers customised training based on its own enterprise standards, and has elected to enter into a formal partnership with South East Gippsland TAFE for purposes of training and assessment, rather than to become an RTO itself.

In line with emerging concerns about privacy, permission was sought from the chief executive officer of each enterprise-based RTO regarding their organisation's involvement and whether it was appropriate that their organisation be named in the

study. Information sheets were distributed to interview and questionnaire respondents, along with personal consent forms.

The records of interview derived from the interviews with all informants were analysed by hand using a coding and categorisation strategy. This approach allowed the systematic identification of major themes, commonalities and variances across enterprises, together with variations and inter-relationships within organisations.

Limitations of the study

The sample of enterprises was unavoidably skewed in favour of large and well-resourced organisations. Two of them (Centrelink's Virtual College and the Defence Learning Services Network) belong within two of Australia's largest Commonwealth government departments. This should be borne in mind when the findings are read, as their observations will not necessarily be applicable to all enterprise-based RTOs, especially not to those located within small organisations.

The scope of this study also precluded a larger sample size than the one here described. However, the observations arising from the investigation of recognition practices in these six enterprises is remarkably consistent with the findings of much larger studies, and so it may be assumed that the size of this sample is not, in fact, a limitation to the veracity of its findings.

As with so many studies in the vocational education and training sector, it was relatively easy to gain access to the participating enterprises and their senior managers, trainers and assessors, but it was almost impossible to gain access to those undertaking the processes of recognition and/or training. Therefore, this research bases its findings of employees' experiences of recognition on the observations of many fewer employee participants than had originally been planned.

Findings and discussion

As might have been expected, the enterprise-based training organisations which participated in this study had the same reasons for engaging in assessment by means of recognition that have been established in the literature as the reasons which prevail throughout the vocational education and training sector.

In enterprises, learners are somewhat differently situated than are their peers undertaking training and applying for recognition in either public or private training providers. Employees in enterprises that are also registered training organisations must accommodate their personal training needs to the business needs of their organisation, and it follows that the same must be the case for recognition.

Business needs, however, were not the only drivers of training and recognition activity in the enterprises in this study. The two large government agencies, the Defence Learning Services Network and the Centrelink Virtual College, are governed by legislatively determined requirements, which in some instances must be delivered or reported on within very tight timeframes. Similarly, after the many bushfires in Australia in the summer of 2003, seven compulsory competencies were introduced that all bush fire fighters had to achieve before the start of the 2004 season.

Other participating enterprises also identified legislation as driving training and assessment activities; for example, in occupational health and safety and other areas of public safety.

More than one organisation indicated that their training program was linked to their quality system, and recognition was often an integral part of achieving the degree of formal staff qualification required by ISO 9000 or similar quality certification. Two of the participating enterprises suggested that the fact that their ageing workforces had considerable experience was one reason that they were pursuing certification via recognition. Both the employees and the enterprise stood to gain from having the employees' existing, current skills recognised, rather than having to undergo expensive and time-consuming training.

Although the training and recognition needs were quite disparate in the participating enterprises, all of them had as their ultimate goal, improved productivity and enhanced business practice. Working with limited training resources, it was clearly evident to them that the training dollar would go further if redundant training could be eliminated, and the end product was likely to be a much better qualified enterprise workforce. These views echoed those that are widely expressed in the literature (Scottish Qualifications Authority 2000; Bloom & Grant 2001; Wheelahan et al 2002b; Manitoba Education Training and Youth 2003).

The process

Within the various enterprises recognition appeared to be more structurally embedded in their training and assessment activities than is often the case in non-enterprise training providers. The process of skills recognition conducted by public and private training providers generally occurs prior to enrolment and as such is treated separately from the training that takes place beyond that point. In enterprise settings, this separation is less likely to occur.

Where recognition processes were well-entrenched in the enterprises' training culture, they typically had in place the following elements: information sessions, recognition workshops, supply of evidence lists, individual meetings between learners and workplace assessors, negotiated opportunities for recognition assessment to be undertaken, and time during work hours to prepare their applications. Enterprises identified the need for sound planning and assessment processes to support the recognition process and for the personnel to implement it and support their workers in their applications.

Some enterprise-based RTOs had the facilities to support this activity in an online environment. At Santos, for example, learners go to the organisation's intranet to find learning materials and to discover what to expect from the process. They can then download an assessment matrix that comprises both tasks and assessment instruments, perform self-assessment and source a workplace assessor who has the skills to assess in the particular competency of interest to the learner. Once the recognition has been conducted, the assessor's decision is recorded electronically in the learner's training file and on hard copy.

Evidence required for recognition varied from enterprise to enterprise in this study. To some extent, the form followed the nature of their work and the recording

mechanisms in place in the organisation. For example, in one high-tech enterprise, employees could produce printouts of the jobs they had worked on in a given timeframe and use this as evidence of the performance of certain competencies. For others, the portfolio was the standard format of evidence presentation. As one assessor said, 'Some people still baulk at it, but [the portfolio] is so embedded in this company now that you would have to have something really sophisticated to replace it.'

Most enterprises provided some form of guidelines or exemplars of the types of evidence required, and some supported this further with more detailed information packs and telephone access to assessors. In Centrelink, employees are provided with an evidence checklist that they can mark off as they collect the evidence required for their portfolio. Feedback indicates that not only have employees found this very helpful, but so have their team leaders. Defence, by contrast, has withdrawn their guide to preparing a portfolio, as they found that it was influencing all recognition candidates to prepare portfolios, even where this was not the most appropriate form of evidence. The information has now been integrated into generic candidate information about the recognition process.

Each enterprise-based RTO applied recognition as suited its own business purposes or organisational philosophy. In some enterprises, recognition was an enterprise-wide undertaking; in others it was pursued at the discretion of individual employees or work teams, according to particular needs. In some enterprises, those needs were even site-specific, so that employees transferring to another plant might need to revisit their training and assessment needs. In enterprises where recognition of current competency was tied to performance appraisal, it is likely to be subject to annual re-assessment, and this is a significant difference to the practice in non-enterprise registered training organisations.

Santos has a long-standing auspiced arrangement with East Gippsland Institute of TAFE (Bateman & Clayton, 2002) whereby the whole of the workforce is recognised against base level, non-endorsed competencies and employees can then be recognised against the relevant training packages through their TAFE partner. The organisation's intention is that all employees will be competent before they apply for recognition. This form of recognition varies from the other case studies. East Gippsland Institute of TAFE assisted in the development of the enterprise competencies and extensive mapping and consultation occurred prior to the agreement.

Employer perspectives

It was apparent that recognition had a firm place in the training and assessment activities of each of the enterprises that participated in this study. That is not to say that it was being implemented to an equal degree in each enterprise. In fact, levels of recognition can be seen as fluctuating in sync with each enterprise's business cycle or the organisational life cycle of its employees. One enterprise-based RTO pointed out that levels of recognition had, a few years previously, been very high, but that there had not been an ongoing demand for recognition once the initial demand had been satisfied. It could be said that recognition had reached saturation point in that enterprise for the moment. That did not mean that the organisation had any less of a commitment to it. In another enterprise the recognition process represented a particular point in time with a particular purpose, rather than an ongoing process.

Although only two of the participating enterprises mentioned the place of recognition within their current enterprise based agreements, it may be assumed that this situation would prevail in many organisations and serve as a significant influence on the extent to which recognition is offered. Interestingly, only one of the enterprise-based registered training organisations in this study cited compliance with the Australian Quality Training Framework as one of their reasons for offering recognition. This is in marked contrast to the findings of the study undertaken by Bowman et al (2003), who found that the new regulatory framework was the major driver for RTOs in the sector to offer skills recognition.

One enterprise made it clear that recognition was but a part of the more global quality assurance processes that their organisation was committed to in order to maintain its national and international status. Indeed, they saw their RTO as a 'subset' of their quality activities, given the demand by quality certification programs for enterprises to ensure that their staff are appropriately trained, assessed and qualified.

For Centrelink, recognition was described as 'absolutely fundamental in meeting our training needs.' As a senior trainer said, 'If we had to deliver formal training for every skill and knowledge need that we identify we would be overloaded with training.' In this enterprise, recognition activity is increasing due to demand from employees. Centrelink expects this increase in demand to continue, along with increased numbers of employees undertaking further study, given that there is now a link between vocational qualifications and pay point progression. Indeed, recognition activity had either plateaued or was on the increase in all of the enterprises in this study.

For another enterprise, their recognition process brought a number of unexpected benefits, particularly the confirmation that a large number of their workers did possess many skills that could be formally recognised. As well, the recognition process has raised the profile of vocational education and training within the enterprise, and strengthened its culture of learning. They considered that the recognition process itself had an unexpected flow-on effect across the organisation in that it lifted the expertise of everyone: human resources personnel, supervisors and the trainers themselves.

Employee perspectives

Employees experienced the same hurdles or barriers as have been documented elsewhere for candidates for recognition. Finding the requirements of the process difficult to understand and not feeling able to compile a portfolio of evidence that would meet the requirements were chief among these.

Employees in enterprise-based registered training organisations found the same factors helpful as do candidates elsewhere: assessors who take the time to give individual advice as to the requirements being the most frequently cited enabler of a successful recognition experience.

Chief among the reasons given by employees for applying for recognition was the opportunity it provided to have existing skills not only recognised, but certified. One employee had been with his organisation for 20 years, but had no documentary evidence of the extensive skills he had acquired in that time. Employees such as this man felt that recognition was particularly relevant to people like him when it came

time to compete for promotion with younger employees, some of who now enter the workforce with double degrees.

Several employees had found the recognition process useful as a means of identifying their own skills gaps. One even said he would recommend it to others as a 'cheap way of finding out what you don't know.' More often, employees referred to the benefits to their own learning that the recognition process triggered, and to the benefits to management of knowing where a team's skills and gaps lay. One employee described the recognition process as a useful refresher, reminding her 'how much I do know.'

One employee noted that recognition had been beneficial to him in unexpected ways, citing particularly the networking opportunities that it had provided. Several mentioned that their personal and organisational perspectives had been broadened by the exercise.

Employees could readily identify the benefits of recognition to their organisation, citing the same advantages as those given by those who spoke on behalf of the enterprise: savings of time and money, efficiency, assurance of a skilled workforce.

The training and assessment managers interviewed for this study all expressed unequivocal support for recognition and felt, in all but a few instances, that it was well promoted and supported in their organisations. It was not always the case, however, that employees had a thorough understanding of the potential extent of that support.

Benefits of enterprise RPL

The benefits of skills recognition to the enterprise were also appreciated and understood by those employees who participated in this research. The majority of employees saw the benefits as being mutual and could readily cite many benefits of the recognition process such as: having their existing skills recognised and certified; accessing a process that offered them a high degree of flexibility; identifying skills gaps; achieving nationally recognised and portable qualifications that were valued outside the enterprise, particularly when they were applying for other jobs; and being introduced to new opportunities for networking within their organisations.

Employees expressed strongest satisfaction with recognition where they had received good support throughout the process, especially where they had had mentors or where assessors had made themselves available for consultation prior to conducting the recognition assessment. Aspects of recognition that were presented as having been problematic, like the compilation of portfolios of evidence, tended to be seen as such in instances where employees had felt that they had been left to negotiate their own path through what was often a complex and time-consuming process. Where employees had had a reasonable level of support, there were rarely complaints about any aspect of the recognition process.

Negative outcomes

Several employees identified the amount of time required to put evidence together for recognition as the major deterrent to higher levels of participation in the recognition process, both for themselves and for their peers. They said that often it was easier to do the training, if it was available, in preference to applying for recognition.

Some employees with significant previous life experience resented the requirement to undergo assessment for recognition purposes. Some felt that other qualifications they held were superior to those required by their current employer; some were unhappy about their enterprise's five-year limit on currency; others found the process itself humiliating. Several commented that it seemed ironic to them that the recognition process seemed to contradict the recruitment process, with the former establishing deficits in skills that the latter had specifically found the employee to possess. 'You are trying to prove that you can do the job that you were hired to do in the first place,' commented one employee.

In enterprise-based RTOs where the organisation did not provide adequate briefing for potential candidates for recognition, employees suggested that 'the hardest thing was getting our head around what they wanted.' They often felt that the process required them to 'jump through hoops' in order to qualify for their next pay increment. Rather than assisting with their learning, these employees saw recognition as only a means to an end.

Many employees expressed surprise at the amount of time that the process took, not only to accumulate sufficient evidence themselves, but for a decision to be made. Similar concerns were expressed by the learners who participated in the study conducted by Bowman et al (2003), and this is one of the most significant barriers to more broad-ranging uptake of recognition across the vocational education and training sector.

In some cases although employees had the competencies and had attained recognition, they were not able to progress beyond a certain pay point or proceed to a promotion if there was no vacancy at that level in the enterprise. While this could cause some resentment among employees, employers may see it as advantageous to have a pool of skilled and certified employees to choose from when that vacancy does occur.

It can be assumed that employees in enterprises are no different to their peers pursuing recognition in any other type of RTO. Indeed, such responses support the Bateman and Knight (2003) analysis, which noted that much of the criticism of recognition related more to the administrative processes and the resultant issues rather than to the concept of recognition itself.

What these observations highlight is the importance of widespread support in enterprises where recognition is being promoted and applied as a means of assessing and certifying the skills of employees. Some employees and some managers of assessment indicated that the benefits and importance of skills recognition were not always understood or supported by all other levels of management. If the promotion of recognition within enterprises is to be really effective, all stakeholders in the recognition process need to be identified and targeted, not only those who are potential candidates.

Conclusions

The enterprises and their employees involved in this study provided significant information about how recognition within enterprise-based recognised training organisations can operate. They were also very clear about 'what was in it for them'.

As key players in vocational education and training, they demonstrate that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach is inappropriate when it comes to recognition, and that the place of recognition in the enterprise's overall business and training plans will always evolve according to the needs of the organisation.

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