

A word cloud is positioned in the upper left quadrant of the page, overlaid on a background image of a young child's face. The words are in various shades of grey and white, with some appearing in larger, bolder fonts than others. The words include "organisations", "prior learning", "registered", "recognition", "enterprise-based", "what's in it", "training", "learning", "prior", "registered", "organisations", "training", "learning", and "enterprise-based".

What's in it for me?

Recognition of prior learning in enterprise-based
registered training organisations

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Recognition of prior learning in enterprise-based
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Key messages

- ✧ The six enterprises and their employees involved in this study provided significant information about how the recognition of prior learning process can operate within enterprise-based training organisations. They demonstrate that a 'one size fits all' approach is inappropriate in developing such recognition processes.
- ✧ The place of recognition of prior learning in the enterprise's overall business and training plans will always evolve according to the needs of the organisation. Recognition is therefore part of broader organisational processes, including the enterprise's assessment and training agenda.
- ✧ The recognition processes within the enterprises studied were complex, requiring extensive infrastructure and a significant commitment to the process from all stakeholders. Where employees had a reasonable level of support in undertaking the process from their employer, there were rarely complaints about any aspects of it.
- ✧ Enterprises see whole-of-organisation benefits in implementing recognition processes, which confirm employees' skills developed over a period of time and represent significant corporate knowledge. Working with limited training resources, recognition of prior learning enabled them to achieve training efficiencies. However, for business reasons, organisations sometimes require that all staff undertake specified training, and recognition processes are not allowed.
- ✧ Employees see both organisational and personal benefits from the process. The benefits include: having existing personal skills recognised and certified; accessing a process that offered a high degree of flexibility; identifying skill gaps; achieving nationally recognised and portable qualifications which are recognised outside the enterprise; and having opportunities for networking with other staff within their organisations.

Executive summary

Recognition of prior learning is acknowledged as a crucial element in lifelong learning. It also plays a significant role in the development of training cultures within enterprises and as a mechanism to assist mature-age workers to obtain formal recognition and certification of skills gained through work, learning and life experiences. The extent of its importance has been stressed by the inclusion of a standard in the *Australian Quality Training Framework standards for registered training organisations* (ANTA 2001) which relates specifically to recognition. Standard 8.2(a) states that a registered training organisation is obliged to ensure that recognition of prior learning is offered to all applicants as part of the enrolment process. Furthermore, one of the Australian National Training Authority's overarching national initiatives outlined in *A national marketing strategy for VET: Meeting client needs* (ANTA 2000) is the simplification of recognition processes in order to, amongst other things, encourage the completion of qualifications in key industry sectors.

Recent Australian research has documented the practice and implementation of recognition of prior learning within public and private registered training organisations and across the various educational sectors. There is, however, only limited information about skills recognition implementation and outcomes within Australian enterprises. By investigating the practices, processes and benefits of recognition within a sample of enterprise-based registered training organisations, a fuller picture of skills recognition across the whole vocational education and training (VET) sector is possible.

To this end, 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 registered training organisations, delivering training package qualifications under the Australian Qualifications Framework, ranging from lower-level certificates to diplomas and advanced diplomas. By contrast, Santos delivers customised training based on its own enterprise standards, and has elected to enter into a formal partnership with East Gippsland Institute of TAFE for purposes of training and assessment, rather than to become a registered training organisation in its own right.

The aims of this study were to investigate the nature of recognition within individual enterprises, the processes employed, the strategies in place for promotion and support of recognition, and the perceived benefits for individual employees and the organisation more broadly. A further goal was to determine the barriers and facilitators of recognition—why employees chose to engage or not to engage in the skills recognition process, given their expectations and the expectations of their organisation.

Information for the study was gathered using in-depth, semi-structured interviews. These were conducted with the managers responsible for training in each enterprise as well as with workplace assessors and employees.

The diverse nature of these enterprises meant that their training and recognition needs were quite disparate. All, however, had as their ultimate goal, improved productivity and enhanced business practice. The key incentives for these enterprises for establishing processes which allowed employees to have their prior learning, work and other relevant experiences recognised, included meeting

quality system requirements and legislative imperatives. Working with limited training resources, these enterprises acknowledged the efficiencies that recognition enabled them to achieve. It was clearly evident to them that the training dollar would go further if it built upon current competence, and if unnecessary redundant training could be eliminated. The end product was likely to be a much better qualified enterprise workforce. These views echoed those widely expressed in the literature.

In a number of the enterprises, skills recognition was an organisation-wide undertaking, and considerable numbers of employees were engaged in the process. In other organisations, while it was promoted, it was left to the discretion of individual employees whether they took the opportunity to have their previous skills and learning formally recognised. Several enterprises indicated that, in instances where their organisation identified new knowledge and practices or enhancement of certain generic skills as being a priority for their business, training was mandated and skills recognition disallowed.

All the enterprises had established infrastructures to support the implementation of recognition processes, although the extent and sophistication of these varied from organisation to organisation. The better resourced the enterprise-based training provider was, the more extensive its support materials and strategies were. In all these enterprises, recognition was well established, and it was typical to find them offering some or all of the following services in support of the recognition process:

- ✧ information sessions
- ✧ printed information and guides for candidates
- ✧ recognition workshops
- ✧ provision of evidence requirements
- ✧ provision of exemplars or guidelines for the types of evidence required
- ✧ meetings between individual candidates and assessors
- ✧ negotiated opportunities for recognition assessment to be undertaken.

The enterprises had established these processes not only to comply with the requirements of the Australian Quality Training Framework or other quality certification, but because they were convinced of the efficiencies their organisation could achieve if they set up system-wide support mechanisms for skills recognition.

Training and assessment managers considered that recognition had a firm place within the training and assessment activities of their enterprises, and strongly supported the concept of recognition as part of the national training agenda. There was widespread acknowledgement that the recognition process provided confirmation of employees' skills where they had been developed over long periods of time and represented significant corporate knowledge.

The benefits of skills recognition to the enterprise were also appreciated and understood by those employees who participated in this research. Some indicated that they felt that the enterprise stood to gain more than they did as individuals, although the majority saw the benefits as being mutual. Employee informants could readily cite many benefits of the recognition process, and these included:

- ✧ having their existing skills recognised and certified
- ✧ accessing a process which offered them a high degree of flexibility
- ✧ identifying skills gaps
- ✧ achieving nationally recognised and portable qualifications which were valued outside the enterprise, particularly when they were applying for other jobs
- ✧ being introduced to new opportunities for networking within their organisations.

Employees expressed strongest satisfaction with recognition where they had experienced good support throughout the process, especially where they had been matched with 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, such as the compilation of portfolios of evidence, tended to be viewed in this way 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 received a reasonable level of support, there were rarely complaints about any aspect of the recognition process.

In these respects, it can be assumed that employees in enterprises are no different from their peers pursuing recognition in any other type of registered training organisation. Indeed, such responses support the analysis undertaken by Bateman and Knight in 2003, which noted that much of the criticism of recognition related more to the administrative processes and associated issues rather than to the concept of recognition itself. A number of employees participating in this study indicated that their main grievances with recognition were related to their disappointment that they could not apply for recognition for single units of competency, and that they could not be guaranteed promotion as an outcome of successful recognition.

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.

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 demonstrated 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 evolve according to the needs of the organisation.

Research purpose

'Recognition' is increasingly being used in the vocational education and training (VET) sector as the preferred term in place of both 'recognition of prior learning' and 'recognition of current competency'. 'Recognition' or 'skills recognition' can be thought of as umbrella terms which encompass both of these types of assessment.

While recent research has looked broadly at recognition implementation and practice across a range of registered training organisations and sectors, there is much less detailed information available about skills recognition within industrial settings. The outcomes of this study were, therefore, intended to fill a gap in our existing knowledge about the valuing, utility and effectiveness of recognition within some of the key organisations delivering VET qualifications.

This study examined five medium and large-sized enterprises which provide training and skills recognition services for their employees and are registered training organisations. It also included one enterprise which has entered into a formal partnership with a technical and further education (TAFE) institute for recognition purposes. The six enterprises were identified using the National Training Information System and were invited to participate in the study. The organisations were selected because they were representative of both public agencies and private enterprise; they also offered a range of training packages and a range of qualifications within the Australian Qualifications Framework.

Further details of the enterprises and their training systems are included in the organisational profiles section later in this chapter.

It was anticipated that an in-depth examination of recognition within enterprise-based registered training organisations 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 that recognition is both accessible and equitable. This study also sought to investigate employer and employee expectations and experiences of recognition, including the value they place upon the process, and any dispositional and organisational barriers and facilitators they believe may encourage or discourage participation in recognition in their enterprises.

Resulting research questions

Broadly, the key issues to be investigated in this study were:

- ✧ How do enterprises promote recognition to workers within their organisations?
- ✧ How do enterprises support candidates through the process of skills recognition?
- ✧ Why do workers choose to engage or not engage in skills recognition?
- ✧ What are the perceptions that organisations and individual employees have of the value of engaging in recognition?

These questions were expanded in the interviews conducted with managers, assessors and learners, in order to build as complete a picture as possible of the organisational and personal contexts which have a bearing on the uptake of recognition within enterprises (see appendix 3).

Methodology

Given the focus of the research and the nature of the research questions, a qualitative research method was employed in the study. Information was gathered using in-depth interview techniques with key informants in the participating enterprises. 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 (see appendix 1).

The methodology is described in greater detail at appendix 2.

Policy and/or practice issues

One of the Australian National Training Authority's (ANTA) 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 within key industry sectors (ANTA 2000). The importance of skills recognition has been further emphasised in a recent paper on strategies for increasing mature-age worker participation and achievement in vocational education and training in Australia (ANTA 2003b).

Informants to national consultations have indicated that recognition is an important strategy for encouraging employers to support further training and to place higher value on the existing skills of their workforce (Bowman et al. 2003). At the same time, it is acknowledged that there is significant potential for recognition to be an industrial relations issue—a factor which is likely to significantly influence employer and employee engagement with the process of recognition.

Summary of issues identified in the literature

The process of formally recognising learner skills and knowledge previously gained through formal, non-formal and informal learning avenues has a range of names in the literature, including the 'accreditation of experiential learning', 'prior learning assessment and recognition', 'recognition of current competencies', 'recognition of prior learning' and 'skills recognition'.

A number of comprehensive studies has 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 to be realised by acknowledging skills previously gained, and on the barriers which impede ready uptake by potential applicants.

In the first instance, skills recognition is identified as enhancing equity of access to education and training programs and to more broadly encourage lifelong learning. The process is perceived to help learners to identify skill deficits and strengths, while successful skills recognition leads to formal qualifications and certification. Authors also emphasise the important role that skills recognition plays in building learner self-esteem and confidence.

For enterprises, the process of determining employee prior learning or current competencies is commonly portrayed in the literature as being highly beneficial. Commonly cited benefits 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 that the end product is a better qualified enterprise workforce. In addition, 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 fact that there are obvious benefits associated with skills recognition, it is evident from the literature that there are a number of barriers which deter learners from engaging in the process. A general lack of awareness about its availability, the complexity and seeming complexity of the process it involves, 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. The literature emphasises the importance, in overcoming these barriers, of extensive promotion and support for those learners who seek to have their formal, non-formal and informal skills and knowledge recognised.

Organisational profiles of the participating enterprises

All of the enterprises participating in this study have business as their major imperative. At the same time, all have made a sizable financial and human commitment to the training and assessment of their employees. All but one have sought to become registered training organisations and integral players in the Australian VET system. The sixth enterprise has generated an extensive training system founded on enterprise-based competency standards, and has entered into a formal partnership with a registered training organisation in order to provide a quality training and recognition service for its employees.

Despite the importance that these enterprises have placed upon training provision, they make it clear that it is not their core business. For them, training and assessment has to be designed to meet the specific business needs of the enterprise. Recognition thus plays a significant role in addressing these needs.

A brief description of each of the enterprise-based registered training organisations which participated in this study follows. It should be noted that two of them have chosen not to be identified by name.

Defence Learning Services Network

The Defence Learning Services Network is one of the four registered training organisations within the Australian Defence Organisation. It is primarily responsible for the development of 16 000 employees, geographically dispersed across 200 sites around Australia. Their training needs are diverse, spanning generalist areas associated with working in government/defence, and specialist areas such as procurement, project management, financial and frontline management and explosives ordnance.

The network has 600 assessors on its database and has issued between 7000 and 8000 statements of attainment.

The network delivers qualifications from the business, government, public safety and transport and distribution training packages. These range from lower-level certificates to an extensive number of diplomas and advanced diplomas.

Centrelink Virtual College

Centrelink is in the business of implementing federal government policy primarily in relation to social welfare payments, and has 27 600 staff operating in over 375 customer service centres and

27 call centres across Australia. Business demands, in terms of customer service and accuracy and timeliness of processing welfare payments, place great pressure on the workers and limit the time available for training. Much of the training is focused on equipping staff for specific roles as well as on the professional advancement of staff.

The Virtual College, Centrelink's registered training organisation, is based in Canberra and was launched in August 2001. It enables staff anywhere in Australia to access training. Much of the training delivered involves competencies from the business, national public service, telecommunications (call centres) and community services and health training packages, and includes qualifications from certificate II through to a number of diplomas.

Santos

Santos is one of Australia's major energy providers, with interests throughout the nation and overseas. With its joint venturers, Santos explores, produces and markets a significant proportion of oil and gas in Australia. The organisation encompasses approximately 500 employees, with about half of them based in Brisbane and the remainder over 13 remote sites in the south-western corner of Queensland and central Northern Territory.

Santos has a comprehensive online 'learning manager' which is accessible from remote sites and is supported by workplace trainers and assessors. The current recognition of prior learning process involves workers preparing themselves for assessment against non-endorsed enterprise competencies and then applying for recognition against the relevant training package through East Gippsland Institute of TAFE, with whom Santos has a recognition agreement. There is an assumption that workers will be competent before they apply for recognition, and assessments are conducted against the enterprise competencies (developed in collaboration with East Gippsland Institute of TAFE) that have been mapped to the nationally endorsed competencies.

Telstra

Telstra is the leading fully integrated telecommunications company in Australasia, one of only 17 fully integrated telecommunication companies worldwide. They employ about 10 000 communications technicians.

With the introduction of the *Australian Quality Training Framework standards for registered training organisations* (ANTA 2001) which stipulated minimum qualifications for VET trainers and assessors, Telstra recognised the need to upgrade the skills of their workplace trainers so that they all possessed the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training. Many Telstra trainers had extensive experience in training and assessing within the organisation, but these skills did not necessarily align with certificate IV requirements. Nevertheless, Telstra wanted to recognise the existing skills of their trainers, which had been gained over a long period of time. At the same time they wanted to set up a program to encourage the trainers to undertake more professional development, particularly the units in certificate IV that were considered 'new knowledge' within the organisation. Therefore, a recognition and training project was initiated to coordinate the process for the trainers.

An extensive range of qualifications, from certificate II to diploma and advanced diploma in the area of telecommunications, is included in Telstra's scope.

Emergency Services Agency

This enterprise is responsible for emergency management and has four operational services: bushfire service, ambulance service, emergency service and fire brigade. Staff include fire fighters, ambulance paramedics, ambulance officers and patient transport officers, helicopter aircrew and administrative support staff. The enterprise also has a large volunteer workforce of some 700 bushfire fighters and emergency service volunteers.

The entire service is divided into brigades of approximately 40 members. Each brigade organises its own training and has about four qualified assessors who undertake the assessments. Training liaison officers who are based in the agency's registered training organisation monitor for quality control and sign off all assessments.

The impetus for this enterprise to become a registered training organisation lay partly in its having so many volunteers, and partly in the high-risk nature of the work. Volunteers generally work full-time elsewhere and therefore have to be trained and assessed in the evenings and weekends. To out-source this training and assessment would be very expensive. By conducting its own training and assessment, the enterprise also feels that it maintains greater quality control.

Public Utilities Company

This enterprise has responsibility for the provision and maintenance of water, wastewater, natural gas, telecommunications and energy services to its region. It also sells electricity in the south-east Australian contestable market and provides skilled services beyond the region and overseas. The organisation runs its own call centre and a customer advisory service.

When this enterprise first achieved registered training organisation status, there was a high level of recognition activity as staff throughout the organisation pursued assessment and certification of their existing skills in order to proceed to higher pay levels and to enable the organisation to achieve quality certification.

Today the level of recognition in the enterprise may be described as having reached saturation point. With very low levels of staff turnover, and staff all qualified to the necessary and appropriate level for their job requirements, the demand for recognition (and, indeed, for training) is at a much lower level than it was when the enterprise first became a registered training organisation.

Because many of this enterprise's activities are in the areas of public health and safety, and because the organisation sees itself as having a clear mandate to deliver faultless services in these areas to the community, it requires those employees working in certain areas of high risk to undertake annual re-training. Recognition is not offered in those cases, regardless of the employees' current application of the skills in question.

This enterprise thus provided this study with a good illustration of the inapplicability of a 'one size fits all' concept to the principle of recognition.

Findings

Introduction

As might have been expected, the enterprise-based training organisations which participated in this study gave the same reasons for engaging in assessment through recognition as indicated in the literature as those prevailing throughout the VET sector.

Recognition offers enterprises significant savings in time and money, allowing them to target training more efficiently to areas and personnel with specific, enterprise-related needs. Recognition functions as an effective means of skills auditing, which has benefits for the enterprise as a whole, for team leaders or managers, and for individual employees.

Recognition has long been favoured by policy-makers and educators alike as a means of ensuring equitable access to skills certification, enhancement of learner self-esteem, and encouragement to individuals to see themselves as lifelong learners (Kearns 2001; Smith forthcoming). Furthermore, this process is seen as a fair means of formally acknowledging people's existing skills and is in contrast to the usual, traditional requirement for all people to undertake training prior to presenting for assessment.

Learners in enterprises are somewhat differently situated than are their peers undertaking training and applying for recognition in either public or private training providers. The enterprise understandably sees itself as having a vested interest in the employees' training and assessment, particularly when the question arises as to who pays for the activity and who benefits from it. Employees in enterprises which are also registered training organisations must align their personal training needs to the business needs of their organisation, and it follows that the same must be the case for recognition.

The particular needs of enterprise-based registered training organisations

The enterprises involved in this study had training needs which were as diverse as their respective business operations. What they had in common, however, was that the impetus to engage in training and recognition activities was invariably business-focused. Training managers in these organisations made it clear that, although they valued and supported their employees' desires to pursue broader vocational training, it was the 'direct needs' of the business which took priority and which they were prepared to fund. As one training manager said, 'Business comes first, and even though training is part of the business, it has to be specific to the business'.

This perspective is consistent with that expressed by industry informants to a previous study into recognition in Australia. As Bowman et al. note:

... some employers considered they were being asked to support an activity that was only partially or directly of benefit to themselves ... [not recognising that] ... the benefits of skills recognition were felt by individuals and the whole of society, not just by the industry or specific workplace of current employment. (Bowman et al. 2003, p.30)

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. For example, when it emerged during a Senate Estimates Committee hearing that defence personnel were not trained in procurement, regardless of the extent of their responsibilities in this area, the department had to make a commitment to redressing this training deficit in a very short space of time. Given that most personnel who had responsibilities for procurement had in fact been exercising those responsibilities for some time, it was deemed appropriate that staff apply for recognition of their procurement skills rather than undergoing unnecessary and costly training.

Similarly, after the many bushfires in Australia in the summer of 2003, seven compulsory competencies were introduced which all bushfire fighters had to achieve before the start of the 2004 season. Thus, while this study was being conducted, the emergency services agency which participated in this research was busily engaged in ensuring that its volunteer trainers and assessors were ready to handle the large volume of requests for recognition that they expected from some 80% of their volunteer fire fighters.

Several of the 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 International Standards Organisation 9000 or similar quality certification. Two of the participating enterprises suggested that the fact that their ageing workforces had considerable experience was one reason why 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 their having to undergo expensive and time-consuming training.

For one enterprise, Santos, it was the disastrous experience of one of their industry competitors that was the original catalyst for defining their training needs. The third recommendation of the Royal Commission into the gas explosion at Esso's Longford plant in September 1998 stated that:

Esso [is] obliged to demonstrate [that] its training programs and techniques impart knowledge of all identifiable hazards and the procedures required to deal with them.

(Royal Commission into the Longford Esso Gas Explosion 1999)

This experience highlighted for Santos the importance of all staff working to safe standards. In attempting to ensure this, Santos found they could not be sure that all their diverse sites applied consistent standards in their training. Despite some staff resistance, the company introduced recognition as a means of establishing, for organisational purposes, the skills their staff did or did not have.

However, notwithstanding this tendency to consider the training needs of the organisation as a whole, training managers were also accustomed to considering the needs and aspirations of individuals within the enterprise. They indicated that training needs could be very broad. One reported that, 'People with identical job titles can be doing very different jobs. Hence training needs cannot be easily identified at corporate level, they have to be identified at local level'. Thus while a whole-of-enterprise perspective may be articulated in company documentation (such as their annual report), the role of the local trainer/assessor, familiar with the needs of individuals and their specific work areas, remains vital in actual implementation of training policy. This is where recognition emerges as a really viable means of achieving outcomes beneficial to individuals and to the enterprise as a whole.

The process of recognition in enterprise-based registered training organisations

Within the various enterprises participating in this study, recognition appeared to be more structurally embedded in their training and assessment activities than is often the case in non-enterprise training providers. For those public and private organisations whose key role is the provision of training for the individual, the community and industry more broadly, recognition is

seen as a client service and as a means of enhancing access to learning (Bowman et al. 2003). Further, 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 which takes place beyond that point. In enterprise settings, this separation is less likely to occur.

Several participants commented that they did not even distinguish between recognition of prior learning and recognition of current competency, both terms which are widely used elsewhere in the sector. One training officer suggested that recognition of prior learning was used on entry to the enterprise to recognise skills gained prior to that time, with recognition of current competency being used from that time forward to recognise the successful performance of competencies on the job. Others claimed that 'recognition' itself might not be recognised as a term among employees, who are encouraged to think of the activity as an assessment of the skills they have, for a variety of purposes other than certification, such as promotion or pay increases.

The Defence Learning Services Network has begun to promote the use of the term 'recognition' in place of the term 'assessment', and has re-badged all of its assessment documentation accordingly. What was previously their 'assessment kit' is now, in its latest version, a 'recognition kit'. In support of this, a Defence Learning Services Network assessor commented that the assessment process was the same, regardless of whether an employee was pursuing recognition or had undertaken training. This position was not dissimilar to that in some other enterprises. In the Centrelink Virtual College, although assessors distinguish between credit transfer and recognition, and each is a separate process, a lead assessor pointed out that it was 'still called recognition when selling it to candidates'. As one Centrelink Virtual College trainer/assessor said, 'We call recognition "recognition" ...'. An assessor in another enterprise described recognition as being:

... part of our everyday system of working with competencies. People wouldn't even differentiate, you're almost applying for a pay point, in doing that you have to say that you can achieve these two competencies or whatever is required ... That is an RPL [recognition of prior learning] or RCC [recognition of current competency] process in itself. It's embedded into everything we do ...

Some of the enterprises had made significant investments in their recognition services in order to facilitate highly effective and efficient processes. One Centrelink Virtual College assessor was very clear about the benefits of this:

We have refined the process so much that it is very short and tight and everyone knows exactly where they're going. Because we now have the process in place it saves the organisation a lot of money and time.

Where recognition processes were well entrenched in the enterprises' training culture, the following elements were typically in place: 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 methods to support the recognition process and for appropriate personnel to implement it and support their workers in their applications.

A number of enterprise-based registered training organisations had the facilities to support this activity in an online environment; for example, at Santos, 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 which 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.

An assessor in another enterprise emphasised how important it was that the assessment process be transparent, and that employees have plenty of opportunities to discuss the requirements with their assessors:

What we have found is that initially you have to talk people through it but after they do it a couple of times they get a feel for what sort of evidence they need.

The form that evidence for recognition took 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 print-outs of the jobs they had worked on in a given timeframe and use these as evidence of the performance of certain competencies. For others, the portfolio remains 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 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 portfolio preparation because 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 registered training organisation applies recognition as suits its own business purposes or organisational philosophy. In some enterprises, recognition is an enterprise-wide undertaking; in others, it is pursued at the discretion of individual employees or work teams, according to particular needs. In some enterprises, those needs may even be site-specific, so that employees transferring to another plant might need to re-evaluate their training and assessment needs. In enterprises where recognition of current competency is tied to performance appraisal, it is likely to be subject to annual re-assessment, and this is significantly different from 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 are then 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. Other enterprises, however, make good use of recognition as a skills auditing process.

A Telstra trainer/assessor noted that, in his enterprise, recognition had made certain training needs apparent. This is consistent with the literature, which identifies one of the major benefits of recognition as assisting both employers and employees to identify skill deficits and areas where they may need to undertake additional training (Manitoba Education Training and Youth 2003; Smith forthcoming).

Like other enterprises, Telstra found that there were areas of work skills where employees could readily accumulate evidence, and where recognition was therefore 'easy'. In areas of more complex or specific skill requirement, the enterprise chose to pay for its employees to go to a TAFE institute and undertake training.

Where there was an identified need for employees to learn 'new knowledge', Telstra, in common with several other enterprises, insisted on training rather than recognition. Likewise, in instances where the enterprise identified a need for team-building or a shift in organisational culture, the

enterprise might mandate participation in training rather than offering recognition. This is perhaps the point of greatest divergence between enterprise-based registered training organisations and other registered training providers. Similar views are expressed in the literature. For example, informants to the study undertaken by Hoffman, Nay and Garratt (2002) noted their concern that recognition processes had the potential to simply maintain the status quo in enterprises. In instances where significant workplace change needed to be initiated, training rather than recognition was seen to be the much more effective strategy.

Several enterprises noted that recognition had played a significant part in enabling their workplace trainers and assessors to achieve certification at the time when the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training had first become the required standard.

In smaller enterprises where all the organisation's employees know each other well, it can be a challenge to establish the appropriate distance between candidates and assessors. The training manager in one such organisation described the situation thus:

The initial problem was that, because I knew a lot of them, they would say, 'You know me, you know what I do—sign me off'. And I would say, 'Well, I can't do that. You have to convince [the assessor]'. And now that message is getting out and they're starting to provide the right evidence and the right amount of it.

Employer perspectives

The place of recognition and its perceived benefits in enterprise training and assessment

It was apparent that recognition played a substantial role in the training and assessment activities of each of the enterprises participating 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 according to each enterprise's business cycle or the organisational life cycle of its employees. One enterprise-based registered training organisation pointed out that levels of recognition had, a few years previously, been very high. Now, because their workforce was relatively stable, with very low levels of staff turnover, 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 was fulfilling a particular purpose at a particular point in time, rather than being an ongoing process. However, because the process was so successful, the enterprise is now looking to publicise recognition more within their workplace, to let workers know that they can apply and undergo the process within various training packages.

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 registered training organisations to offer skills recognition.

One enterprise made it clear that recognition was just one element in the more global quality assurance processes to which their organisation was committed in order to maintain its national and international status. Indeed, they saw their registered training organisation 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 being ‘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 progression along salary scales. Indeed, recognition activity had either plateaued or was on the increase in all of the enterprises in this study.

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

Ways in which recognition is promoted and supported in enterprises

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

Although a learning manager in Centrelink noted that the language of recognition could be daunting to employees, and another observed that many employees saw recognition as ‘too difficult, too expensive and too labour-intensive’, the enterprise has invested a great deal of effort into establishing processes to assist employees to prepare for, and to participate in, recognition.

Managers agreed that the support of other stakeholders in the recognition process was vital; however, some found it an ongoing challenge to communicate the importance of recognition to the supervisors of potential candidates. One assessment manager believed that team leaders in her organisation did not necessarily understand the workings of recognition, and another agreed that it was ‘not on their horizon’ unless they had been through the process themselves, in which case, supervisors were more likely to recognise the benefits. In one enterprise, a trainer/assessor was quite disheartened about the lack of support shown by the enterprise’s middle managers:

I don’t think a lot of the managers and team leaders think this is a need at all. They don’t give it any priority. We have tried to promote it but the majority don’t support it. It is important to the national office because they can sell us as a clever and skilled organisation. The senior management is supportive, middle management is not.

It is apparent from these comments that informants in this study reflected similar concerns in relation to the seeming complexity of the process, the lack of awareness of its potential benefits and the difficulties associated with the language of recognition, to those expressed in recent Australian research on the topic (Wheelahan et al. 2002b; Bowman et al. 2003; Smith forthcoming).

In most enterprise-based registered training organisations which participated in this research, workshops were conducted for potential candidates for recognition, although the formality of these varied. Group information sessions were typically followed by one-on-one interviews between assessors and employees, during which the employee’s work and study history would be discussed and requirements for evidence clarified. Beyond that point, the provision of further support varied greatly from one enterprise to another, with employees in some being able to access online support and drop in to assessment centres to work on their portfolios, while in other enterprises, employees were expected to manage the remainder of the process themselves, including finding their own assessor. Likewise, there was a great deal of variation in the support which the various enterprises offered their staff in terms of time release from work in order to prepare for recognition. Although it was most common that employees were expected to do such preparation in their own time, some enterprises made some work time available to allow this.

In the context of their trainers undergoing recognition, Telstra made an assessment of the resources they would require for this process. Before the recognition process began, the national human resources manager undertook some recognition training to prepare himself. Subsequently, this preparation helped him to inform other human resources managers in the organisation who then mentored the trainers through the recognition process, providing support where necessary.

Although all of the enterprise-based registered training organisations were using trained and qualified workplace assessors, very few of these had undertaken additional specialised training in conducting recognition assessments. However, to ensure the validity of recognition assessments, most of the participating organisations offered their assessors specific professional development activities, while others relied on their assessors' participation in assessor networks or collaboration with other assessors.

Employee perspectives

Experience of the recognition process

Employees in the participating enterprises viewed recognition in terms of their personal experiences with it. Only one of those interviewed had chosen not to apply for recognition. For the remainder, the process had been successful to varying degrees, and was evaluated accordingly.

Employees experienced the same hurdles or barriers as have been documented elsewhere. Finding the requirements of the process difficult to understand and not feeling confident of compiling a portfolio of evidence which would meet the requirements were chief among these.

It was just too confusing. It took me six months to get my head around what they wanted.

Similarly, employees in enterprise-based registered training organisations found the same factors helpful as do candidates elsewhere. An assessor who took the time to give individual advice on specific requirements was the most frequently cited enabler of a successful recognition experience.

I thought my assessor was really good. Initially I was stumbling around, but after a few discussions she gave me a fairly good indication of what to provide. She was a big help.

Anticipated and actual benefits

Employees could readily identify the benefits of recognition to their organisation, citing the same advantages as those who spoke on behalf of the enterprise: savings of time and money, efficiency, assurance of a skilled workforce. Most employees saw the personal benefits they received from the recognition process as quite distinct from those of the employer.

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 during that time. Employees such as this person felt that recognition was particularly relevant when it came time to compete for promotion with younger employees, some of whom now enter the workforce with double degrees.

This same employee said that the experience had made him think about his work differently, and that it had made him more aware of the relevance of certain tasks he was required to perform to the competencies required in the certificate IV he was pursuing. 'I now sometimes document a process as I do it with future recognition in mind', he said.

One employee said that the advantage of recognition over training was its flexibility—that it could be 'fitted in around work' and could be pursued at the employee's own pace.

Employees often cited the appeal of gaining nationally recognised and portable qualifications as their chief incentive in applying for skills recognition. One employee reflected that, over the years,

he and his colleagues had undertaken a great deal of non-accredited training, and developed many skills. However, without formal recognition, 'you couldn't prove you had done it'.

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 of their own learning that this aspect of 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.

Many employees said that, having learned to navigate the recognition process, they were now willing and able to mentor others: 'Having had the experience, I would like to help someone else to do it.' However, none indicated that their enterprise sought that assistance from them.

Anticipated and actual negative outcomes

Several employees identified the amount of time required to collate evidence 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 undertake the training, if available, in preference to applying for recognition. One employee described having to get third party evidence from a previous employer as 'just too hard':

I was told I had to write up the whole criteria basically, send off to my old boss, get him to do another write-up on it, send it back to me. I just thought it would be a huge inconvenience for him to fill it out because it was huge. I was told he would have to write down all the selection criteria and he would have to assess me against it. So I just did [the training].

A number of 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 5-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. Another agreed, saying, 'We wasted a lot of time trying to prove what we have already done in our past working lives. I am in my forties, and having to do the same as a 21-year-old'.

In enterprise-based registered training organisations where the organisation does not provide an 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:

In the end it was, 'What do you want me to do? I'll do it so I can continue to get my pay increases'.

These employees indicated that their peers who chose not to pursue recognition were discouraged by observing their experiences:

People say to me, 'We saw how much time you put into that and how stressed you were. We're not going to do it'. Our work environment is stressful enough.

The comments of many employees seemed to indicate that the enterprises in which they worked displayed a preference for recognition of current competency over recognition of prior learning, which was perhaps disguised by the blanket application of the term ‘recognition’.

I was told my previous experience and prior learning was [sic] too old. I had been in the home environment for 11 years. I was told that the skills I had acquired, my work experience and previous study were all too old. They weren’t prepared to look at it. I believe it was related, there are skills you can take to any job and I believe it should have been looked at. I believe that a lot of my prior study—and I achieved a national and state award for excellence—did account for a lot. I may as well have torn up the paper.

Another employee had a similar complaint about qualifications counting for more than experience. Despite having been a state manager of a company, having been self-employed for 20 years, and having run a business for seven years, the only evidence which her enterprise accepted for recognition purposes were her TAFE qualifications.

Perhaps this is indicative of a lack of assessor confidence and/or competence to make the complex assessment decisions that are necessary when assessing prior, especially informal, learning. Most of the participant enterprises were using volunteer workplace assessors, many of whom lacked specialist expertise, and all of whom were undoubtedly over-worked. One employee commented on the inconsistencies which this introduced into the enterprise’s recognition processes (‘the quality of questioning can vary’), and the decreased likelihood of being able to have higher-order competencies recognised: ‘There’s no recognition path for the higher levels [because] there’s no assessor with the expertise available to do assessments’.

A further issue of contention was the granting of recognition for elements rather than entire units of competency, leaving employees needing to complete parts of modules, something they found very frustrating, and which left them feeling that they would have been better off undertaking all the training in the first place.

One employee offered an additional, incidental benefit of participation in training as opposed to recognition. He noted that the former was a means of getting up to date with current policy, procedures and, especially, terminology: ‘Sometimes it’s good to do the training to get currency—the language, the buzz words which are useful in interviews’.

Many employees expressed surprise at the amount of time 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 VET sector.

Finally, one aspect of recognition which could be considered problematic for employees may be seen as positive for employers. Although employees may have the competencies and have attained recognition, they may not be able to progress beyond a certain pay level or proceed to a promotion if there is no vacancy at that level in the enterprise. While this can 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.

For the enterprises in this study, recognition is seen as a financially sound strategy for enhancing business practice and improving productivity. It offers managers a clearer picture of existing workforce skills and lessens the potential for delivery of unnecessary training. The complexity or apparent complexity of recognition processes, however, remains the major barrier to ready and extensive uptake by employees. For some, just as with some learners in other vocational education environments, training rather than recognition will always appear the more attractive option.

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Appendix 1: Literature review

Introduction

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. This recognition of skills is variously called accreditation of prior learning or accreditation of prior experiential learning (the 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.

Recognition, lifelong learning and access

Considerable importance has been placed on recognition of prior learning because of the significant roles it is seen to play in supporting lifelong learning, in fostering the development of a learning culture in the workplace and in developing workers with the requisite skills and knowledge to adapt to the ever-changing nature of the world of work (Kearns 2001; Bjornavald 2001; Smith forthcoming). It is recognised that part of the process of helping mature-age workers in particular to 'market their skills and experience to new employers or to identify and move into new opportunities' is to assist those workers to obtain formal recognition of their skills (ANTA 2003b, p.3).

In Canada, prior learning assessment and recognition has been promoted as a means of improving education and training and enhancing access to employment and further education. Underpinning this recognition activity is a national policy which is designed to ensure, amongst other things, a more efficient use of resources, education and training reform and the development of a culture of lifelong learning (Asia-Europe Meeting Working Group 2 2003).

Recognition has also been identified as a mechanism for advancing social justice. In South Africa, recognition of prior learning is being actively implemented as a means of righting previous injustices. This is best explained by Harris (1997) who contends that it may be possible with recognition of prior learning to:

... break down (often discriminatory) barriers to access and routes to progress; to advantage the disadvantaged and the excluded; to challenge the exclusive practices of formal institutions ... to allow adults to acquire 'qualified' status and to 'market' themselves more effectively in the employment world; to make visible learning that may have hitherto been invisible; to contribute to a positive national morale; to give substance to the concept of lifelong learning.

(Harris 1997, p.4)

In the Australian VET setting, issues of equity and access are seen to be equally important adjuncts to recognition of prior learning, particularly as the process opens up the pathways and opportunities between formal, informal and non-formal learning environments for those who have previously been unable to gain access to them (Ferrier & Selby Smith 2002).

A matter of definition

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). The definitional debate 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 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. ANTA confirms the inclusive nature of skills recognition with the following definition:

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) means recognition of competencies currently held, regardless of how, when or where the learning occurred. Under the Australian Quality Training Framework, competencies may be attained in a number of ways. This includes through any combination of formal or informal training and education, work experience or general life experience. (ANTA 2001, p.9)

Smith (forthcoming) suggests, however, that there is still no general agreement in the education and training sectors about 'what RPL is, does or encompasses' (p.10). Despite this uncertainty, for enterprise-based registered training organisations, the major focus for skills recognition is most likely to be placed upon employees' current competencies.

Benefits of skills recognition for enterprises

The process of determining employee prior learning or current competencies is commonly portrayed in the literature as being highly beneficial to enterprises. For example, skills recognition is seen to lessen the time that can be lost through employees being away from the production of work while they undertake training (Scottish Qualifications Authority 2000). It is also noted that conducting an assessment of existing skill strengths and skill deficits provides employers with the information necessary to more accurately tailor or target training to meet the specific developmental needs of individuals and work teams, thus reducing the amount of unnecessary training (Manitoba Education Training and Youth 2002). In other words, undertaking a process of recognition allows employers to determine 'the right training to be given to the right people at the right time' (Manitoba Education Training and Youth 2003, p.16). As a consequence, recognition of prior learning has the potential to provide considerable cost savings and training that is much more focused (Bloom & Grant 2001; Wheelahan et al. 2002b).

In much of the Canadian literature, an emphasis is also placed on the important role that recognition of prior learning can play in informing employers about the skills sets of their employees, even to the extent that the process can be used to influence recruitment, development and retention of the workforce (Bloom & Grant 2001; Manitoba Education Training and Youth 2003; Saskatchewan Labour Force Development Board 2003).

Furthermore, the process of recognising and certifying the existing skills, knowledge and experience of employees makes sound business sense, particularly as it provides opportunities for maximising the productive potential of employees and for supporting and implementing significant workplace change (Smith forthcoming; Scottish Qualifications Authority 2000). The Scottish Qualifications Authority (2000) found that companies in their study saw the process of recognition as a means of getting employees fully certified against the national qualification framework, and this was the major impetus for employers encouraging their workers to become involved. In one instance:

The company recognised that it employed a large number of people with vast experience in the industry, who either had no formal qualifications at all, or held qualifications that were not competence-based. It was confident that APL [accreditation of prior learning] would be

an appropriate route to certification for these, since the majority were well experienced and able to complete ... at level 3. (Scottish Qualifications Authority 2000, p.3)

Recognition of prior learning can also encourage the development of a strong learning culture within enterprises. This is deemed as extremely important, given the ever-changing nature of the world of work (Scottish Qualifications Authority 2000; Wheelahan et al. 2002b). The close linkage of recognition of prior learning and lifelong learning is well summarised in the *Provincial framework for the recognition of prior learning in Saskatchewan*:

The workplace is changing, requiring employees to develop and apply new skill sets, often acquiring these skills on-the-job. Continuous learning is a growing expectation in the workplace, and RPL is a means to support, encourage and reward that learning. Learning recognition enhances the performance of business, as it encourages staff to improve their own skills and abilities by building on what they know—leading to innovation and improved productivity. (Saskatchewan Labour Force Development Board 2003, p.7)

While this range of benefits is commonly accorded to recognition of prior learning in the literature, Bateman and Knight (2003) emphasise that there has been very little research done which seriously evaluates the real outcomes of skills recognition in either educational institutions or in enterprises. Further, the extent and nature of recognition in enterprises, and more broadly across industries, cannot be discerned because the information available is restricted to a small number of case studies (Bateman & Knight 2003).

This lack of clear data about efficacy and outcomes undoubtedly underpins some of the concerns about the quantum, quality and value of recognition of prior learning which have been expressed by some researchers and industry representatives. A number of authors (Smith 1999 cited in Ryan & Watson 2001; Wheelahan et al. 2002b) comment on the small numbers of employees taking up the opportunity to have their existing skills and experience formally recognised for purposes of certification, while others have registered a degree of disquiet about the lack of apparent benchmarks and quality assurance of assessments made under recognition circumstances (Ryan & Watson 2001; ANTA 2003a; Bowman et al. 2003). For example, in a study undertaken by Bateman and Clayton (2002), it was suggested that:

Workplace pressures can influence decisions on the assessment of recognition simply because managers need their staff trained and in the workplace doing their core business. Where staff had undertaken the training in modules, there was likely to be more confidence in the quality of the outcomes. (Bateman & Clayton 2002, p.56)

Because of concerns such as these, the credibility of some qualifications gained on the basis of recognition of prior learning has been brought into question (Bowman et al. 2003).

Moreover, in a strategic audit of the aged care industry in Victoria, Hoffman and Dyson (2002) reported that there was some concern registered by informants regarding the impact of recognition when an industry was endeavouring to implement significant change. It was suggested that:

The current process of gaining RPL/RCC works against the significant need for change in the workplace. The industry will not progress unless workers develop broader knowledge and abilities to keep pace with the changing needs of the older population. Prior learning and current competencies should be recognised—but only if they reflect contemporary knowledge and practice requirements. (Hoffman & Dyson 2002, p.17)

This viewpoint was also highlighted by Bowman et al. (2003) who found that some enterprises in their study elected to conduct training rather than to engage in recognition because it was seen to be a more appropriate means of developing new ways of doing things in the workplace.

Thus, the benefits perceived to attach to recognition of prior learning need to be balanced with countervailing concerns about the ability of assessors to make appropriate decisions about competency as well as the credibility, utility and longevity of qualifications gained through the recognition process.

Benefits of skills recognition for employees

The literature on skills recognition both in Australia and overseas identifies a range of benefits for individuals engaging in the process, regardless of whether the assessment of prior learning and previous experience is undertaken in an educational setting or in the workplace.

The most obvious benefit for individuals is that the skills and knowledge they have gained from both informal and formal learning is formally acknowledged and certified as a nationally recognised and portable qualification. Moreover, recognition of their prior learning means that employees do not have to engage in training activities in order to learn again what they already know and can do.

Recognition of prior learning and recognition of current competencies are also consistently offered as a means of improving access and equity in vocational education and training (Pithers, cited in Ryan & Watson 2001; Wheelahan et al. 2002b; Cleary et al. 2002; Bateman & Knight 2003; ANTA 2003b; Smith forthcoming). In the South African context, skills recognition has even been designated as having considerable capacity to 'advantage the disadvantaged and the excluded and ... to contribute to a national morale' (Harris 1997, p.4). Thus, skills recognition has a major social utility benefit attached to it.

The recognition process itself involves individuals in a self-assessment of their own strengths and capabilities, thus assisting them to identify skill deficits and areas where they may need to undertake further training. As a consequence, recognition of prior learning promotes learning and has the capacity to set individuals on a pathway to further qualifications and lifelong learning. Smith (forthcoming) suggests that:

RPL can help candidates understand where their strengths, weaknesses and interests lie, particularly if the process has included direct interaction with workplace supervisors and mentors. This can help them map not only appropriate careers but also appropriate pathways for attaining their goals. (Smith forthcoming, p.6)

It is also suggested that recognition has the potential to improve the mobility of individuals within and across industries by enhancing their marketability (Saskatchewan Labour Force Development Board 2003)

A number of authors also emphasise the important role that recognition of prior learning plays in building the confidence, self-esteem and motivation of those who succeed in having previous skills and knowledge recognised (Wheelahan et al. 2002b; Smith forthcoming). Skills recognition is perceived to engender in individuals an acknowledgement of their own accomplishments (Smith 1999). And, as noted by Wheelahan et al. (2002b), successful recognition can provide an individual with 'progress in a qualification that has a social use, value and standing' (Wheelahan et al. 2002b, p.32).

But as Pithers (cited in Ryan & Watson 2001) warns, there is very little evidence in the literature to prove that these benefits to individuals actually accrue to them. For students in learning institutions, there is some evidence that 'fast-tracking' through a qualification using some recognition is a major benefit from the process (Bowman et al. 2003); however, there is minimal research available on the benefits that employees in enterprise-based training environments have gained through such a process.

Barriers to uptake of recognition of prior learning

A number of major studies has recently examined recognition of prior learning (Wheelahan et al. 2002b; Bateman & Knight 2003; Bowman et al. 2003). Amongst other things, these studies have investigated the factors which are seen to inhibit learners seeking to have their prior learning or current competencies recognised. While these studies have focused largely on educational settings,

barriers to recognition of prior learning identified in these studies may indeed be significant for enterprise-based registered training organisations.

The first of the factors impacting upon recognition of prior learning uptake is the lack of awareness about recognition and its associated processes and procedures. As identified by Bateman and Knight (2003), skills recognition is neither widely known nor understood. Informants to the study undertaken by Bowman et al. (2003) indicated that the terminology surrounding recognition was often perceived to be confusing and unclear, and for novices in vocational education and training, this was enough to turn them away from seeking to have their existing skills and experience recognised. In the same study, an industry representative commented that, if the benefits of recognition were better promoted and understood, then there was likely to be less reluctance on the part of those who could be best advantaged by recognition—the employees.

Interestingly, Hoffman and Dyson found in their study that ‘few trainees believed that they would personally benefit from RPL and generally felt that they would not be eligible’ (Hoffman & Dyson 2002, p.19). Thus, it is apparent that the promotion of recognition of prior learning needs to address both its benefits and issues relating to eligibility in a way that is readily understood by potential applicants.

The second factor identified as influencing uptake is the cumbersome nature of the process of recognition and the time that it takes to collect and collate the evidence to be evaluated (Wheelahan et al. 2002b; Bowman et al. 2003; Bateman & Knight 2003). Smith (forthcoming) comments that ‘complexity, as well as the appearance of complexity, appear to be major disincentives for students seeking RPL’ (p.5). Since recognition of prior learning may require the completion of extensive paperwork, the gathering and collation of evidence from a range of sources to be matched against complex standards and learning outcomes, some authors have noted that potential applicants often prefer to undertake the training rather than go ahead with having their skills recognised (Hoffman & Dyson 2002; Bowman et al. 2003). Re-learning, therefore, is seen to be a preferable alternative because it is simple, straightforward and less threatening than skills recognition.

In off-job training environments, some learners elect not to have their existing skills and knowledge recognised because they have a preference to do the course, learn with their peers, and to refresh and extend their knowledge (Bowman et al. 2003). Although there is no evidence of this in the literature, this may also be the case in enterprise-based training organisations. More importantly, the recognition process may be off-putting to those individuals who have had limited interaction with formal education and who lack the confidence to go through what appears to be a highly confusing and complex process (Bowman et al. 2003).

Finally, a number of authors have stressed the incongruities inherent in the recognition process itself which create barriers for some learners. Wheelahan et al. (2002b) suggest:

The paradox of RPL is that it is assessing an individual’s learning that has occurred mostly *outside* formal education and training, but it requires high levels of knowledge of these formal education and training contexts and the structure of qualifications and language used in education, to prepare a successful RPL application. (Wheelahan et al. 2002b, p.9)

Hence, as occurs elsewhere in the Australian VET system, individuals in enterprises who are potential applicants for recognition may be deterred from applying either because they do not fully understand what is required of them, or because they are unable to match their prior experiences and skills with the competencies described in training documentation (Bowman et al. 2003). As Smith (forthcoming) suggests, the translation of experiences of work and life into specific units and elements of competency is a highly complex task that requires high-level analytical skills and a comprehensive knowledge of the sector and its language.

Promotion and support

In discussing factors which enable effective recognition of prior learning gleaned from early literature on the subject, Bateman and Knight (2003) note the importance of providing support for candidates going through recognition, of streamlining the process, and making it more user-friendly. They also suggest that greater care is needed in targeting the promotion of skills recognition to potential users of such services. These factors were again confirmed in the study undertaken by Bowman et al. (2003) who found that providers were implementing numerous diverse strategies to encourage learners to have their existing skills acknowledged. These strategies included: conducting workshops to work applicants through the process of applying for recognition; pre-assessment interviews with direct assistance for portfolio development; online application and support for recognition; challenge testing and the provision of evidence guidelines and exemplar material to help applicants match their skills and knowledge with that required by various units of competency (Bowman et al. 2003, pp.23–4). ANTA's *Ideas for action* paper adds weight to the above suggestions by further emphasising that mechanisms for recognition in the VET sector need to be improved 'to make them more user-friendly and flexible' (ANTA 2003b, p.7).

Bateman and Knight found that considerable effort was also being expended into assisting applicants to gather the evidence needed to seek recognition, with promotional material, evidence guidelines and supporting documentation being presented in plain English and in a range of media (Bateman & Knight 2003). This was also true of most of the enterprises involved in the study undertaken by Bowman and her colleagues, where it was noted:

Most enterprise registered training organisations have active policies of promoting RPL and have given some thought to the ways in which they could do more for their disadvantaged learners. (Strategies include allowing more time for applicants from non-English speaking backgrounds and those with a disability; talking it through with assessors; working to compensate for the difficult language—including the VET jargon; and using alternative promotional strategies rather than relying on printed materials). (Bowman et al. 2003, p.31)

In order to promote the value of 'prior learning assessment and recognition' in the workplace, Canada has adopted a national policy implemented by the Canadian provinces using a national framework. Considerable emphasis has been placed on alerting both employers and employees to the benefits of recognition and on the provision of promotional materials to support the implementation of effective skills recognition in enterprises (Centre for Education and Work 2003; Manitoba Education Training and Youth 2003). Print-based, web-based and personal advice are available to support skills recognition in Canadian enterprises.

To encourage the better uptake of recognition of prior learning and recognition of current competencies by individuals within both educational and business organisations, Cleary et al. (2002) suggest that, to enhance the opportunities for learners to access recognition, there needs to be a clear policy to support the process; training and support for those conducting it; and quality information, guidance and supportive networks for those seeking to have their existing skills, knowledge and experience acknowledged.

However, as Smith (forthcoming) states, there is very little evidence in the literature that any of the strategies proposed as enablers of recognition of prior learning are in fact influential in encouraging learners to enter into a process of recognition. He also offers the suggestion that:

RPL policy and practice in Australia appears to be running on the principle that RPL itself is its own promoter of participation and less than effective RPL is generally viewed to be related to the presence of barriers, rather than a lack of promotional strategies or practices.

(Smith forthcoming, p.11)

Thus it appears that a consistent picture emerges from recent local and international literature, that there is a deal of rhetoric about the function, place and value of recognition to enterprises and their employees, but that this is not matched by sound evidence of such rhetoric being translated into measurable recognition practices.

Appendix 2: Methodology

The design of the study

This study was designed to explore the place of recognition in enterprise-based registered training organisations, acknowledging their characteristic differences from other categories of registered training organisation. The project used a case study approach to the examination of a group of medium and large-sized enterprise-based registered training organisations which were representative of the types of organisations engaging in the delivery of accredited training and/or training package qualifications, and who were each providing training and skills recognition services for their employees.

In each enterprise, contact was made with a senior trainer or assessor who agreed to act as an organisational contact for the purpose of organising interviews with the various categories of staff required. These interviews, with training and assessment managers, assessors and employees, provided the major source of information for this qualitative study. In order to achieve a balanced employee perspective, the research team, wherever possible, interviewed employees who had elected not to pursue recognition as well as those who had decided to do so.

Where possible, documentation associated with skills recognition in each of the participating enterprises was also collected for examination. Other information was sourced from a review of literature, focusing on recent Australian and overseas studies on recognition practices and processes. The literature review is provided at appendix 1.

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.

Details of the sample

Possible case study sites were identified prior to submission of the tender for this project in late 2002. Therefore, those sites had to be re-contacted in June 2003 and permission to participate be sought anew from chief executive officer and others involved, especially the on-site research associates, whose assistance to the project was vital. In one instance, an enterprise which had previously agreed to participate, now found itself unable to do so, and therefore another organisation was selected in its place.

Privacy

Enterprises were given the choice of whether to be identified or not in the report. Four agreed to their organisation being named, while two elected not to be named. The former include Centrelink's Virtual College, the Department of Defence's Defence Learning Services Network, Santos and Telstra. The latter included an emergency services agency and a public utilities company. Where it is not necessary to do so, the report avoids naming the enterprises, and to protect the privacy of all individual participants, regardless of their organisation's position on identification, there is no listing of participants provided with this report.

Supporting documentation

Formal letters of request were sent to the chief executive officer of each enterprise-based registered training organisation, accompanied by an information sheet and a consent form for registered training organisations. These are all contained in appendix 3. These organisational consent forms specifically asked the chief executive officers of the enterprise-based registered training organisations not only to give permission for their organisation's involvement, but also, in line with emerging concerns about privacy, to indicate whether it was their preference that their organisation be named in the study, or that a pseudonym be used instead. Rather than inventing names, the report writers elected to avoid naming altogether those enterprises which preferred not to be identified.

The information sheet was also distributed to interview and questionnaire respondents, along with personal consent forms. (Both are contained in appendix 3.)

Interview process

A semi-structured interview process was utilised in this study. This strategy ensured that interviews remained focused while at the same time offering opportunities for individual experiences and perspectives to emerge. Interview schedules and protocols were developed so that information was systematically gathered across those being interviewed and those conducting the interviews. Records of all interviews were taken by hand and audio-taped for later transcription and analysis.

In total, 39 interviews were conducted: six with senior managers, 20 with assessors or managers of assessment, and 13 with employees who had engaged in a process of skills recognition.

Analysis of data

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.

The contents of documents gathered during the study were analysed to determine style and intent and the manner in which they promoted and supported the skill recognition process.

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 registered training organisations, 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 are 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 VET 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.

Appendix 3: Survey instruments

Request to registered training organisations

30 June 2003

Dear <Name of CEO>,

Re: Participation in research project on recognition in Enterprise RTOs

The National Research and Evaluation Committee (NREC) has commissioned a study of recognition within Enterprise RTOs. This important research is being jointly conducted by the Centre Undertaking Research in Vocational Education (CURVE) at the Canberra Institute of Technology and the Assessment Centre, University of Ballarat (TAFE Division).

I am seeking your RTO's participation in this project, whose aims are detailed in the attached Information Sheet.

The project will entail conducting semi-structured interviews with your training manager or Human Resources manager, a trainer/assessor and two focus groups with some of your employees.

A significant element in this project is the invitation to the organisation's training or HR manager to act as site coordinator and research associate on the project. For this, a small remuneration will be paid. However, the greater benefit to the organization is the increased ownership of and engagement with, the research. We are confident that this strategy will result in enhanced outcomes for your organization from your participation. It is anticipated that the findings will be as useful to the Enterprise RTO itself as they are to the wider Vocational Education and Training community.

Further details such as interview and focus group questions will be supplied as arrangements for your organisation's participation are confirmed. Meanwhile, if you have any specific questions about the project, please do not hesitate to contact me on the phone number or email address below.

If you agree to take part in this research, please complete the attached RTO Consent Form, and return by mail or fax.

We welcome your participation, and look forward to your organisation's contribution to this important and timely study.

Berwyn Clayton
Director/Principal Researcher
Centre for Undertaking Research in Vocational Education (CURVE)
Canberra Institute of Technology, PO Box 826, Canberra 2601
Ph: (02) 6207 4844
berwyn.clayton@cit.act.edu.au

Attached: Information Sheet; RTO Consent Form

Information sheet

CENTRE UNDERTAKING RESEARCH IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION (CURVE)
CANBERRA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

and

ASSESSMENT CENTRE, UNIVERSITY OF BALLARAT
(TAFE DIVISION)

INFORMATION SHEET

What's in it for me? Promoting and supporting recognition in Enterprise RTOs

Principal researcher: Berwyn Clayton (Director, CURVE)

Phone: (02) 6207 4844 Fax: (02) 6207 3322

Email: berwyn.clayton@cit.act.edu.au

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the above-mentioned research project. This research is being conducted by the Centre Undertaking Research in Vocational Education, Canberra Institute of Technology and the Assessment Centre, University of Ballarat (TAFE Division). The research is funded by the National Research and Evaluation Committee (NREC), and is managed and will be published by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER).

This project will examine the approaches taken to recognition (both recognition of prior learning – RPL, and recognition of current competencies – RCC) by a small number of medium and large sized Enterprise RTOs which are providing training and skills recognition services for their employees. The aim of this project is to investigate the following key questions:

- ✧ how do enterprises promote RPL/RCC to workers within their organisations (information and marketing)?
- ✧ how do enterprises support candidates through the process of skills recognition (strategies for enhancing access and equity)?
- ✧ why do workers choose to engage or not engage in skills recognition?
- ✧ what are the perceptions that organisations and individuals have of the value of engaging in RPL/RCC (costs and benefits)?

The project will entail conducting semi-structured interviews with employers and training managers and focus groups with employees.

Individual interviews will take approximately 30–40 minutes, and focus groups approximately one hour. They will be recorded, and notes will be taken. Information obtained will be published; however, at no time will individuals be identified by name. Any personal details that are provided during the course of participation in the project will remain confidential. All data collected for this study will be retained by the Centre Undertaking Research in Vocational Education (CURVE) at the Canberra Institute of Technology and will be stored for a period of seven years.

Participation in the project is voluntary and participants have the right to withdraw their consent at any time. Any specific questions about the project should be directed to the principal researcher, on the above number. Thank you again for your interest and cooperation.

Berwyn Clayton

Director/Principal Researcher

Centre Undertaking Research in Vocational Education

Canberra Institute of Technology, PO Box 826, Canberra 2601

Organisational consent form

CENTRE UNDERTAKING RESEARCH IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION (CURVE)
CANBERRA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

and

ASSESSMENT CENTRE, UNIVERSITY OF BALLARAT
(TAFE DIVISION)

RTO CONSENT FORM

What's in it for me? Promoting and supporting recognition in Enterprise RTOs

Principal researcher: Berwyn Clayton (Director, CURVE)
Phone: (02) 6207 4844

- ✧ I have read the Information Sheet, and understand the nature and the purpose of the research project. I agree that the Registered Training Organisation named below can take part.
- ✧ I understand that neither I nor my RTO may directly benefit from taking part in the project.
- ✧ I understand that I can withdraw my RTO's participation from the project at any stage and that this will not affect our status now or in the future.
- ✧ I understand that employees of this RTO may be audio-taped during interviews and focus groups.
- ✧ I understand that the tape will be stored at the Centre Undertaking Research in Vocational Education (CURVE) for a period of seven years and that only the researchers directly involved in the exercise will have access to it.
- ✧ I understand that information gained during the project may be published.
- ✧ I understand that neither I nor any members of my staff will be identified by name, only by position, and that all personal details will remain confidential.
- ✧ I confirm that I am over 18 years of age.

✧ I give consent for the research to use my organisation's name

OR

✧ I would prefer a pseudonym to be used in place of my organisation's name.
(Please delete whichever does not apply)

Name: _____
Position: _____
Email address: _____
Organisation: _____
Signature: _____
Date: _____

Please return this form by mail or fax to:

Berwyn Clayton

Director

CURVE at CIT

PO Box 826

Canberra City ACT 2601

Fax: (02) 6207 3322

Questions for managers and assessors

CENTRE UNDERTAKING RESEARCH IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION (CURVE)
CANBERRA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

and

ASSESSMENT CENTRE, UNIVERSITY OF BALLARAT
(TAFE DIVISION)

What's in it for me? Promoting and supporting recognition in Enterprise RTOs

Interview questions for HR/site managers and training coordinators/trainers/assessors:

- ✧ What are this enterprise's training needs?
- ✧ How does recognition help to meet those needs?
- ✧ What place does recognition have in your enterprise's training program?
- ✧ How important a form of assessment is it for your enterprise? Why?
- ✧ Does recognition always lead to a certification outcome? If not, what other outcome/s (eg, promotion)?
- ✧ Do you distinguish between RPL and RCC? In what ways? What significance does each have?
- ✧ What place does recognition have in training needs (gap) analysis?
- ✧ How important is it that stakeholders within the enterprise recognise prior learning? How is that importance communicated by the enterprise to its staff (learners)?
- ✧ Do your assessors receive special training to conduct recognition?
- ✧ How are learners informed of what's expected of them in the recognition process?
- ✧ What particular skills do learners/candidates need to bring with them to the recognition process? Are those skills overtly addressed by trainers (ie, via a 'preparation for recognition' process?)
- ✧ (How) are learners prepared for the recognition process?
- ✧ Is recognition activity increasing, decreasing, or on a plateau in this enterprise? Why? What are the drivers/barriers?
- ✧ Are the benefits (political, educational, social, technical, etc) of recognition evaluated? (eg, using some ROI measure?)

Questions for candidates and non-candidates

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CANBERRA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
and
ASSESSMENT CENTRE, UNIVERSITY OF BALLARAT
(TAFE DIVISION)

What's in it for me? Promoting and supporting recognition in Enterprise RTOs

Focus group questions for employees/learners/candidates*:

- ✧ Have you applied for Recognition (Recognition of Prior Learning or Recognition of Current Competency)? If yes, to what extent? How successfully?
- ✧ What were your reasons for applying/not applying for recognition?
- ✧ Expectations: What benefits did you expect (or not)?
- ✧ Experience: As you went through the process, what were the hurdles or barriers? What factors were helpful?
- ✧ What is your evaluation of the process now that you've completed it? (Or, what is your evaluation of the process as you see others in your workplace go through it?)
- ✧ (If you did go through the recognition process) what would you do differently if you were to go through it again?
- ✧ Has it been beneficial in unexpected ways? (or, might you have chosen to apply for recognition if conditions were different?)
- ✧ What do you think are the most beneficial aspects of recognition for your organisation if those are different to the benefits it has for you?
- ✧ What are the reasons you think others might have for not applying/applying?
- ✧ Would you recommend recognition to your friends? Why/why not?

* Those who have been through the recognition process, and those who have chosen not to.

Participant consent form

CENTRE UNDERTAKING RESEARCH IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION (CURVE)
CANBERRA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

and

ASSESSMENT CENTRE, UNIVERSITY OF BALLARAT
(TAFE DIVISION)

CONSENT FORM

What's in it for me? Promoting and supporting recognition in Enterprise RTOs

Principal researcher: Berwyn Clayton (Director, CURVE)

Phone: (02) 6207 4844

- ✧ I have read the Information Sheet, and the nature and the purpose of the research project have been explained to me. I understand and agree to take part.
- ✧ I understand that I may not directly benefit from taking part in the project.
- ✧ I understand that I can withdraw from the project at any stage and that this will not affect my status now or in the future.
- ✧ I understand that I may be audio-taped during the interview/focus group.
- ✧ I understand that the tape will be stored at the Centre Undertaking Research in Vocational Education (CURVE) for a period of seven years and that only the researchers directly involved in the exercise will have access to it.
- ✧ I understand that, while information gained during the project may be published, I will not be identified and my personal details will remain confidential.
- ✧ I confirm that I am over 18 years of age.

Name: _____
Position: _____
Email address: _____
Organisation: _____
Signature: _____
Date: _____

I have explained the exercise to the participant and consider that he/she understands what is involved.

Researcher's signature and date:

.....

Please fax this form back to: Berwyn Clayton (Director, CURVE)

Fax: (02) 6207 3322

Appendix 4: Project reference group

A project reference group was constituted to support the research. The members were:

Mr Ray Fogolyan	Executive Officer, Public Safety Industry Training Advisory Body
Ms Leesa Wheelahan	Lecturer, School of Social Sciences, Southern Cross University; author of <i>Recognition of prior learning: Policy and practice in Australia</i>
Ms Susan Dawe	Senior Research Fellow, International and Consultancy Services, NCVET; author of <i>Determinants of successful training practices in large Australian firms</i>



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