

# Skills Formation and Recognition: Progress and Prospects

**Peter Judge has looked at the recent National Board of Employment, Education and Training (NBEET) report and finds some acceptance in principle of its ideas, but slow progress, concerns and difficulties in implementing them**

**M**ORE learning effort should focus on the workplace; we should be more open to different ways, times and places of learning; and we should be much more systematic about assessing and recognising what has been learned. The core ideas behind NBEET Commissioned Report No 10, *Progress and prospects in Improved Skills Recognition* are quite straightforward.

A little more concretely, the report explains that the skills or 'competencies' required in workplaces and working lives should be carefully defined to provide 'benchmarks' against which individuals can be formally assessed and recorded as holding skills. The assessments would count for admission and/or credit toward a qualification, and for improved pay, status or opportunities in the workplace and the labour market. These recognition technologies are conceptually distinct from 'open learning' approaches which provide learners with more control over the content, place, pace, sequence and method of learning, but in practice, says the report, the two kinds of innovation encourage and draw support from each other.

It is clear that ALIA members could be greatly affected by developments in this skills recognition area. We need to be able to make a strong and continuing input into any discussions that might impinge on our professional training and development. We must ensure that our hard-won qualifications, and our own training recognition procedures, will be accepted by whatever 'genuinely national approach and machinery' is put in place. Anne Hazell and Susan Ainsworth look at this concern in their articles elsewhere in this issue.

The report and the consultations on which it draws were commissioned from an education consultant by NBEET's Working Party on Skills Formation and Recognition. The consultant's task was to:

- map the development of change in skill recognition;
- gather views of key stakeholders about the pace and direction of change, and about the role of NBEET in the area; and
- analyse the implications for long-term strategy in the Board's area of responsibility.

More than 100 individuals, in nearly sixty organisations, were consulted and a further thirteen organisations provided written responses to a discussion paper.

The report finds that there has been some conceptual progress and general acceptance of the core ideas. A few organisations, including CSIRO, are beginning to use these principles in practice. However, the consultant has identified many significant issues, including:

- slower-than-expected progress in developing skills standards; difficulties in defining competencies in non-technical tasks/occupations; and misconceptions of the nature of competencies, and of a competency-based system;
- some uncertainty also about whether and how standards can be both national and applicable in individual enterprises/training settings;
- the danger that in the absence of competency standards conventional courses/time requirements will be the benchmarks of national recognition;
- difficulty in taking advantage of skill-pay/status links established via the structural efficiency principle (SEP), so as to deliver workplace change and productivity improvements (rather than 'paper-chasing' and new credential-governed rigidities in workplaces and the labour market).
- concern about levels of understanding by management/enterprises of the importance of skills formation, and scepticism amongst employers about the system now developing in Australia;
- difficulties in adapting the public education/training system,

including drawing schools and higher education into a national skills system, and the possibility that existing provision will be insulated from change, with industry-responsive and community-based approaches growing up at the margins only;

- an apparent need to reconsider ways in which public funds to education and training are used, particularly so as to encourage provider-industry partnerships and to discourage the separation of existing and new types of provision;
- concern over the complexity of the new infrastructure, and particularly at the slow development of the ITAB system which is essential to the development of industry-wide competency standards; and
- difficulties in understanding the scope of and linkages between the many parts of the change agenda, unrealistic expectations about the time required, and the need for a more 'bottom up' approach to change.

The impression is that some educational and employer bodies will pay lip service to the 'core ideas' but go on doing things as they have always done them. By its nature, such a national system has to operate on a one-in-all-in basis.

The report offers responses to some of these issues in four areas:

- ways of hastening the development and improving the quality of a competency-based system;
- ways of shaping a 'skills currency' which maximises the benefits of credentials and minimises their costs and limitations;
- ways of improving the response of the public education/training system to the new agenda; and
- ways of improving the management and direction of the overall process of change.

The report concludes that the central principles of the new approach seem to be settled, and believes that most of the new ideas and techniques which will give these principles life are now on the table. The next stage involves more selecting from, adapting, refining and implementing new approaches rather than inventing them. Change will affect many areas of social life, and continue over a long period. The change process will affect many institutions and upset established ways of doing things ranging from Commonwealth-State relations to teaching and learning. The interests and situation of social and economic groups, including powerful occupational groups, are affected. The report notes that several of the changes now under way require the outlay of considerable energies for uncertain returns or returns which have yet to appear, or to be clearly identified.

The emergence of new approaches to skills formation and recognition have provoked much confusion, concern and opposition as well as optimism, excitement and energy. The complexity and the qualitative character of change, the extent of its reach and influence, and its expense and uncertain pay-off, all mean that while much has already been gained the achievement of core objectives is not yet assured. ALIA members may wonder whether this is an admission that NBEET may be trying to run before it can decide in which direction it wants to walk. As Anne Hazell's article in this issue of *inCite* shows, there are other initiatives (e.g., the Mayer and Finn reports) that may be competing for attention. This vexing topic of 'competencies' will not go away—we must be sure that it works for us and not against us.

