



Special Issue Article: Learn & train for safety

Accredited OHS professional education: A step change for OHS capability



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 8 August 2014

Received in revised form 29 March 2015

Accepted 9 April 2015

Available online 30 April 2015

Keywords:

Competency
Capability
Education
Knowledge
OHS
Safety
Professional

ABSTRACT

In the last two years Australia has seen a step-change in Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) professional education with the implementation of the OHS regulator-funded OHS Body of Knowledge project. This project resulted in the development and publication of the OHS Body of Knowledge, accreditation of university-level OHS professional education and certification of OHS professionals and practitioners. The OHS Body of Knowledge for Generalist OHS Professionals was first published in 2012 and work is ongoing. The OHS Body of Knowledge is achieving recognition within Australia and internationally. Professional accreditation for university level OHS education was introduced in 2012. Coincidentally, accreditation of OHS professional education has been implemented at the same time as structural changes in the quality standards for universities and changes in the Australian Qualification Framework presenting significant opportunities.

Commencing with a brief description of the rationale, development and implementation of the OHS Body of Knowledge project this paper focuses on the OHS Body of Knowledge itself and accreditation of OHS professional education. The paper provides a discussion on competence compared with capability. It then examines the impact of recent Australian government initiatives, the OHS Body of Knowledge and accreditation, on capability and draws on the results of accreditation assessments to describe the impact on OHS education. The paper concludes with an evaluation of the contribution of the OHS Body of Knowledge and program accreditation to the capability outcomes of the Australian Work Health and Safety Strategy for 2012–22 with an extrapolation to potential lessons for other countries.

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1. Introduction

Job roles and activities and the required knowledge and skills for Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) professionals is becoming an area of increasing discussion and research (Borys et al., 2006; EUSAFE: European qualification for Occupational Safety and Health Professionals 2013; Hale et al., 2015; Reiman and Pietkainen, 2014; Vassie and White, 2014; Wybo and Wassenhove, 2014).

In 2007, the issue of knowledge and skills and quality of OHS advice was raised by WorkSafe Victoria, one of the Australian OHS regulators. Certification of those providing OHS advice was seen as an important process in establishing confidence in the quality of such advice; however the development of a certification process was inhibited by lack of agreement on the required knowledge and a mechanism for recognising education programs that addressed that knowledge. The OHS Body of Knowledge project commenced in 2009 with the following objectives: to define the

knowledge required by generalist OHS professionals; to develop and implement accreditation of OHS professional education qualifications; and to develop a certification process for generalist OHS professionals. For the purposes of the project a generalist OHS professional was defined as

One who applies a multidisciplinary body of knowledge in a unique way to provide enterprises with advice on the organisational arrangements that will lead to the systemic and systematic management of OHS to prevent work-related fatality, injury, disease and ill-health.

[Pryor, 2012, p. 3]

The first edition of the OHS Body of Knowledge was published in 2012 (HaSPA, 2012) with further chapters currently being developed. Accreditation of university level OHS professional education commenced in 2012 with nine universities having a total of 15 programs now accredited and others currently being assessed.¹ The certification process is being implemented in 2015.

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E-mail address: registrar@ohseductationaccreditation.org.au¹ Australia has a 14 universities offering a total of 28 programs.

With a focus on the changes to OHS education stimulated by accreditation of OHS qualifications, this paper commences with a discussion of competency compared with capability, then reviews the development of OHS capability statements, the OHS Body of Knowledge, the accreditation process, and concludes with a summary of the changes to OHS professional education observed over the accreditation period.

2. Competency and capability

Professions, industries and organisations are moving to develop capability rather than competency frameworks. [See for example education leaders (Lewis, 2009); offshore oil and gas industry (Griffin et al., 2014) and the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO)²] Whatever the context, there is considerable variation in the use of the terms ‘competence’ and ‘capability’. While to some people it may only be a matter of terminology, to others the differentiation between competence and capability is important conceptually.

In Australia ‘competency’ is strongly associated with the vocational training sector and seen as leading to a somewhat narrow educational outcome. In this context competency is defined as:

The consistent application of knowledge and skills to the standard of performance required in the workplace. It embodies the ability to transfer and apply knowledge and skills to new situations and environments.

[Naidu et al., 2013, p. 36 (emphasis added)]

In comparison capability has been defined as:

The applied theoretical knowledge that underpins practice in occupations and professions and also the industry specific knowledge and skills that transcend particular workplaces and the tacit knowledge of the workplace.

[Wheelahan and Moodie, 2011, p. 22] (emphasis added)]

The difference between competency and capability is further highlighted in the introduction to the capability framework for education leaders which describes *competency* as being about delivering the present based on the past, while *capability* is about imagining the future and bringing it about (Stephenson in Lewis (2009)). While use of the terms varies, a brief review of the literature (Hase and Davis, 1999; Lewis, 2009; Phelps, 2001; Stephenson, 1992; Wheelahan and Moodie, 2011) reveals some distinguishing features which can inform the discussion on capability (Table 1).

Competency is a necessary part of capability (Hase and Davis, 1999; Stephenson, 1992) but capability goes much further in that it is about confidence and adaptability; the development and effective use of the knowledge and skills in complex and changing circumstances including those that may not have been previously experienced. It is this feature that draws Stephenson to argue that, in contrast to reductionist approaches to defining competency in terms of measurable outcomes, capability includes factors which may defy measurement.

Capable people have the knowledge, skills, self-esteem and values such that they have confidence in their ability to:

- take effective and appropriate action
- explain what they are about
- live and work effectively with others and
- continue to learn from their experience

Table 1

Comparison of features of competency compared with capability derived from the literature.

Competency	Capability
Knowledge relevant to the workplace	Theoretical knowledge relevant to the profession
Skills relevant to the workplace	Skills underpinned by theoretical knowledge
Application usually limited to defined set of circumstances although may be some scope for novel situations	Can be applied in complex and changing circumstances
Standard set for performance	May not have a defined standard
Standard set by regulatory process/workplace	Standard may be set by profession or external body

as individuals and in association with others in a diverse and changing society.

[Stephenson, 1992, p. 1]

This view of capability takes on greater importance when considering the skills and knowledge required by effective OHS professionals in the workplace, particularly the so called ‘soft skills’ such as leadership, mentoring, communication and professional presentation skills (Hale et al., 2015; Reiman and Pietkainen, 2014; Vassie and White, 2014; Wybo and Wassenhove, 2014).

The mission of the Australian OHS Education Accreditation Board is to ensure that OHS professional education is based on sound educational design and review processes, and delivery of learning appropriate to the development of graduates equipped with the knowledge and skills to undertake the responsibilities of an entry-level generalist OHS professional.³ While competency is essential for OHS practice, the concept of capability provides a further dimension that expands our understanding of the required knowledge and skills. In working with the concept of capability and looking to inform OHS education, the ongoing development of OHS professionals, and recognition of OHS as a profession, the Australian OHS Education Accreditation has developed a generic model to inform thinking on capability (Fig. 1).

In this model the OHS professional holds a conceptual framework underpinning practice derived from knowledge gained through education which is iteratively further developed and mediated through experience. The knowledge and experience components of the conceptual framework interact in the execution of professional skills. Other important factors in capability are: personal attributes such as self-reliance, creativity and flexibility in changing environments; values such as respect for the input of others; and professional practice skills such as leadership. The bold boundary indicates that the ‘capable’ OHS professional integrates these components and can apply them in varied, changing and complex circumstances.

3. Capability of OHS professionals

There have been two developments by the Australian government that have impacted on the definition of OHS capabilities in Australia.

At the policy level, the Australian Work Health and Safety Strategy 2012–2022 promotes the vision of *healthy, safe and productive working lives*. One of the strategic outcomes for the strategy is that “Those providing work health and safety . . . advice have the appropriate capabilities.” (Safe Work Australia, 2012, p. 9) Thus not only is the importance of the knowledge and skills of OHS

³ See <http://www.ohseducationaccreditation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Strategic-and-operational-plan-2013-14.pdf>.

² <https://www.asio.gov.au/img/files/ASIO-People-Capability-Framework.pdf>.

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