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Skill Test of Workers from Informal Sectors for their Recognition and Employability: A Thematic Study

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Abstract

This thematic review explores the significance of skill tests and recognition for the informal sector workers by employing a systematic approach to unveil recurring themes: validation of skills, employability enhancement, recognition and accreditation. The validation of skills emerged as a cornerstone, boosting confidence and motivation. Skill tests and recognition play a pivotal role in enhancing job prospects for informal sectors' workers, equipping them with a competitive edge. Moreover, recognition and accreditation are crucial for establishing the credibility of informal learning achievements. Implications for informal sectors' workers include increased confidence, employability and credibility. Policymakers are urged to integrate systematic recognition processes to foster a culture that values and empowers informal sectors' workers.

Keywords: employability, informal sectors' workers, job prospect, recognition, skill test

Introduction

There are different forms of education providing skills like formal education, non-formal education and informal education. Formal education is characterized as a structured and methodical system of learning with a stringent curriculum encompassing content, methodology and objectives. In contrast, non-formal education represents a systematic learning approach with adaptable methodologies and content tailored to accommodate specific needs and interests of participants, as elucidated by Dib (1988). It is essential to note, however, that Dib's definition of informal education differs, classifying it as a non-systematic form of education devoid of defined objectives.

As per mode of learning, informal learning has increased dynamically in the ever-escaping landscape of education which signifies the learning from others socially. Informal learning embodies the essence of adult education with a distinctive emphasis on learner-centric approaches and the primacy of life experiences as the fundamental wellspring of all knowledge acquisition. The concept, as delineated by Marsick and Watkins (2001), predominantly manifests in workplace settings, yet its unfolding occurs organically, devoid of any organizational or predetermined instructional design. Unlike formal education, informal learning tends to steer clear of the conventional classroom structure; it is immediate, active, and

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intricately linked to specific job-related or task-oriented contexts.

The occurrence of informal learning is intricately tied to self-initiated activities within workplace, resulting in the acquisition of new professional skills and knowledge, ultimately contributing to the successful execution of job responsibilities or specific tasks (Boileau, 2011). These informal skills, representing a category of expertise gained through informal education, are cultivated organically through the course of daily activities associated with work, family or leisure. Crucially, informal learning lacks the organizational or structural constraints typically associated with formal education, being devoid of predefined objectives, fixed time frames, or structured learning support systems. Although the importance of informal learning is growing, lack of recognition to the informal learning is leading to the undervaluation of skills gained by such workers (Steenekamp & Singh, 2012). This challenge can be mitigated by providing formal skill tests to informal sectors' workers (Colardyn & Bjornavold, 2004). Skill test provides recognition and value to informal sectors' workers' skills that motivate them to engage in their specific occupations with joy and pride.

An assessment tool created to gauge the practical knowledge and skills obtained through self-directed or non-formal learning experiences is called a skill test for informal learners (Colardyn & Bjornavold, 2004). It usually focuses on applying skills in real-world situations, giving students the chance to show that they are proficient in particular fields. These assessments, which might consist of practical exercises, projects or

situations pertinent to the subject matter, offer a concrete indicator of a learner's competency and preparedness for the use at workplace (Gumrilha & Aji, 2016). Skill test-related assessments are conducted in their workplace setting that help the informal sectors' workers engage comfortably.

For non-formal learners, skill tests are essential because they offer concrete confirmation of learned concepts and competencies (Gumrilha & Aji, 2016). The learner's confidence and employability are increased by these examinations which also increase credibility. Furthermore, passing skill exams results in formal acknowledgement, which closes the knowledge gap between industry expectations and informal learning and ultimately promotes professional development and career promotion (Sodhi & Wessels, 2016). The main objective of this study is to analyze the importance of skill tests for informal sectors' workers.

Methodology

This is a review-based paper based on the thematic analysis of different pieces of literature. The thematic analysis approach is useful for classifying and presenting themes relating to data by illustrating data with the interpretation of diverse subjects (Boyatzis, 1998). As per Alhojailan (2012), thematic analysis empowers researchers to intricately examine the connections between concepts and juxtapose them with recurring data patterns. Through the utilization of thematic analysis, researchers gain the capability to interconnect diverse concepts and perspectives expressed by workers. As thematic analysis facilitates a comprehensive exploration of the relationships between

concepts, allowing comparisons with data replicated across varied situations and timeframes throughout the project's duration, it provided me to frame this study with specific themes (Alhojailan, 2012). The thematic analysis creates a platform where amalgamation of different workers' insights can be linked and contrasted with data acquired under disparate circumstances. I also linked and differentiated among different studies in the subject matter. The method not only permits but also encourages diverse possibilities for interpretation, enabling a nuanced understanding of the intricate web of relationships and meanings inherent in the data (Marks & Yardley, 2004). This comprehensive analytical tool, by embracing various perspectives and contexts, ensures a robust and multifaceted examination of the relationships between concepts, fostering better understanding of the intricate dynamics embedded with the workers' experiences and opinions across different phases of the project.

Thematic analysis is a systematic process with four steps: data reduction, themes' reliability and validity, data display, and data drawing and conclusion (Miles & Huberman, 1994). During the data reduction process, I determine the process of selection followed by simplification and transformation of data and coding of data. Secondly, in the theme's validity and reliability phase, I provided the developed theme to different literature and took consultation from experts in the skill test field to see if the developed themes were consistent. Then, I organize data to arrange concepts and thoughts with data display. Finally, I provided my conclusion with data interpretation.

To perform the thematic review, I first searched the pieces of literature in consultation with my

faculties and some seniors in TVET field. As per their suggestions, I used Google Scholar and searched keywords like "informal learning", "informal sectors' workers", "skill test" "recognition", "importance of skill test" and "advantage of skill test." As per their suggestions, my focus was on the importance of skill test, thus, I reviewed the literature within the area, mostly the recent literature. A total of 20 national and international journal articles and books were reviewed, focusing on the importance and recognition of skill tests for informal sectors' workers.

Importance of Skill Test

After doing the thematic review, the importance of skill tests on informal sectors' workers is categorized as validation of skills: boosting confidence and motivation, employability: enhancing job prospects, and recognition and accreditation of the skill.

Validation of Skills: Boosting Confidence and Motivation

Individuals engaged in informal learning derive their knowledge from real-life experiences. The validation of such informal learning becomes crucial for these workers. Moyer (2016) asserted the significance of informal learning, emphasizing its importance for workers. However, the validation of acquired skills is deemed essential. Without practical and effective measurement mechanism, these skills risk losing their meaning and significance. Moyer's argument underscores the necessity of validating informal learning outcomes, ensuring that the skills gained through these experiences are acknowledged and recognized. The absence of a viable measurement approach not only diminishes

the value of these skills but also raises questions about their legitimacy. Therefore, Moyer advocates for the establishment of a robust validation framework, emphasizing that without it, the skills acquired through informal learning might be perceived as inconsequential or lack the credibility required for broader acknowledgement and acceptance. In essence, the recognition of skills acquired informally is integral to acknowledging the authentic and valuable learning experiences that occur beyond the formal confines of traditional educational settings.

The validation of skills catalyzes motivating informal sectors' workers. Witthaus et al. (2016) conducted a comprehensive study in Europe, stressing the assessment and recognition practices of non-formal Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). Their findings indicate that the validation of skills acquired through non-formal MOOCs acts as a significant motivator, inspiring workers to enhance their performance. In the context of informal learning, validation takes on a crucial role, providing a tangible acknowledgment of the skills and knowledge gained through non-traditional pathways. The study by Witthaus et al. (2016) emphasizes that when workers receive formal recognition to their achievements in non-formal MOOCs, it has a positive impact on their motivation levels. The act of validation becomes a source of encouragement, validating the workers' efforts and instilling a sense of accomplishment. By delving into the assessment and recognition practices of non-formal MOOCs, Witthaus et al. (2016) shed light on the pivotal connection between validation and learner motivation. The study underscores that when workers perceive

their achievements as formally recognized and validated, they are more likely to be motivated to excel further in their learning endeavors. This aligns with the broader understanding that acknowledgment and validation play integral roles in shaping workers' attitudes and commitment to the learning process. The implication is clear: in the realm of informal learning, where individuals often engage in self-directed and non-traditional educational pathways, the validation of skills emerges not only as a means of recognizing accomplishments but also as a powerful tool to foster continuous motivation. Therefore, the incorporation of validation practices becomes essential for unlocking full potential of informal sectors' workers, propelling them toward higher levels of engagement, achievement, and sustained enthusiasm for lifelong learning.

The above discussion shows the importance of skill tests and validation in boosting the confidence of the informal learner. A similar result has been suggested by Singh (2009). The recognition of informal learning boosts self-confidence.

Employability: Enhancing Job Prospects

The assessment of skills and subsequent recognition plays a pivotal role in augmenting job opportunities for individuals engaged in informal learning. This process significantly elevates employability among informal sector workers, rendering them more competitive and attractive to prospective employers. Leney and Ponton (2007), in their thematic review, emphasized the critical importance of recognizing non-formal learning experiences in the context of employability, particularly in the United Kingdom (UK). In the realm

of informal learning, where individuals often acquire skills through diverse and non-traditional avenues, the linkage between skill recognition and improved job prospects is paramount. The acknowledgement of skills gained informally translates into tangible benefits for informal sectors' workers, making them stand out in a competitive job market. Leney and Ponton's thematic review underscores that formal recognition of non-formal learning experiences contributes significantly to enhancing employability outcomes, shedding light on the relevance of these findings within the specific context of the UK. The thematic review's focus on the UK context aligns with the broader global discourse on the transformative impact of recognizing non-formal learning. The review highlights that in the UK, as in other regions, there exists a direct correlation between the acknowledgment of skills acquired informally and increased employability. This implies that formal recognition serves as a bridge, connecting the diverse skill set of informal sectors' workers with the expectations and requirements of employers.

In essence, Leney and Ponton's thematic review reinforces the idea that the recognition of non-formal learning experiences is not merely a symbolic gesture; it directly influences the employment landscape for informal sectors' workers. By accentuating the connection between skill test recognition and job prospects, the review advocates for a paradigm shift in how society perceives and values the skills acquired outside traditional educational frameworks, positioning informal sectors' workers as valuable contributors to the workforce.

Likewise, Bajracharya (2022) asserted that in the context of Nepal, a substantial majority,

exceeding eighty percent of workers, acquire their skills through practical work experiences. The prominence of the informal sector is particularly noteworthy within the nation's economic landscape. Bajracharya (2022) contends that the skills obtained through hands-on work and experiential learning hold significant potential for economic transformation and social progress in Nepal.

The key proposition put forth is that if these skills, cultivated through real-world experiences, undergo a formal accreditation process facilitated by a testing authority, it can effectively address challenges related to underemployment and inadequate remuneration. The ultimate goal is to pave the way for secure and decent employment opportunities, ensuring a sustainable and satisfactory income to the individuals in Nepal. It is characterized by a predominantly informal sector and witnesses a substantial portion of its population acquiring skills organically through practical engagement in various fields. Bajracharya (2022) highlights the inherent value embedded in these skills, emphasizing that they represent a formidable resource for the nation's workforce. However, the challenge lies in the informal nature of skill acquisition, which often leads to a lack of formal acknowledgement and accreditation. The author proposes a transformative solution by advocating for a systematic testing authority that can validate and accredit the skills obtained through practical experiences. The potential impact of such an accreditation process is underscored by its capacity to address two critical issues prevalent in the Nepalese context: underemployment and underpayment. Bajracharya (2022) contends that formal recognition of skills

acquired through experiential learning can significantly mitigate underemployment, aligning individuals with job opportunities that resonate with their acquired competencies. Furthermore, by establishing a tangible link between skills and formal accreditation, the issue of underpayment can be systematically addressed. Accredited skills create a foundation for bargaining power, ensuring that individuals are justly remunerated for the expertise they bring and implement at the workforce.

Similarly, Brewer (2013) contends that informal learning plays a pivotal role in augmenting youth employability. The assertion emphasizes that the formal recognition of informal learning through skill tests is imperative for enhancing employability. In essence, Brewer underscores the significance of acknowledging and validating skills acquired through informal learning pathways as a critical factor in improving the employment prospects of the youth. In the case of Nepal as well, Bajracharya (2022) contends that the skills obtained through hands-on work and experiential learning hold significant potential for economic transformation and social progress.

Recognition and Accreditation of Skill

Another critical aspect of recognizing and accrediting informal learning lies in establishing the credibility of individuals engaged in such learning pathways. Werquin's study in 2012 further advocates for the recognition of informal learning, asserting that this acknowledgement is integral to enhancing the credibility of workers immersed in informal educational pursuits. Similarly, Singh (2008) highlights

that acknowledgement, validation, and accreditation of technical and vocational skills significantly contribute to the informal sector workers. Recognition not only validates their acquired skills but also strengthens the image of informal sector workers in various stakeholders, including employers, institutions, and the professional community.

According to Werquin (2012), the full capabilities of informal sectors' workers remain underutilized in the absence of formal recognition, as they lack a tangible means to demonstrate and prove their acquired skills. The significance of recognizing and accrediting informal learning transcends mere acknowledgement; it directly impacts the perceived credibility of individuals within educational and professional spheres. Stating a different version, Allias (2010) suggests that informal sector workers believe in real world of work rather than the test, its recognition and accreditation. It shows that workers are not concerned about skill test and happy with their skills. Werquin's research underscores the idea that without formal recognition, informal sectors' workers face limitations in fully leveraging their acquired capabilities. The inability to provide tangible evidence of their skills hampers their credibility, potentially impeding their opportunities for growth and advancement. Werquin's argument aligns with the broader narrative that informal sectors' workers often possess diverse and valuable skills gained outside traditional educational frameworks. However, the lack of recognition poses a substantial challenge in translating these skills into tangible assets. In professional settings, where credentials and credibility play pivotal roles, the absence of formal acknowledgment may undermine

the confidence that employers, educational institutions, and other stakeholders place in the abilities of informal sectors' workers.

Furthermore, the study implies that the credibility derived from the recognition of informal learning extends beyond individual benefits to societal and economic dimensions. When informal sectors' workers receive acknowledgment for their skills, they contribute not only to their personal growth but also to the overall enrichment of the workforce. Recognized informal learning becomes a valuable resource that can be harnessed for collective progress and innovation. In essence, Werquin's study advocates for a paradigm shift in recognizing the inherent value of informal learning and its impact on the credibility of individuals. The call for formal recognition is not merely a procedural formality but a transformative step that empowers informal sectors' workers to fully participate and contribute to educational and professional domains. The act of accrediting informal learning, according to Werquin (2012), is a cornerstone in fostering a culture that values and acknowledges diverse learning pathways, ultimately enhancing the credibility and potential of individuals engaged in informal educational pursuits.

In a parallel vein, Singh (2008) contends that the acknowledgement, validation and accreditation of skills contribute significantly to enhancing the credibility of informal sectors' workers. According to Singh, the recognition of skills acquired through informal learning pathways serves as a pivotal factor in elevating the authenticity and reliability of these workers. This recognition not only validates their acquired skills but also bolsters the credibility of

informal sectors' workers in the eyes of various stakeholders, including employers, educational institutions, and the broader professional community. Consequently, Singh emphasizes the pivotal role of skill tests and formal recognition processes in augmenting the overall credibility associated with the skills of individuals engaged in informal learning. Singh's argument delves into the multifaceted impact of recognition, validation and accreditation on the credibility landscape of informal sectors' workers. The process of acknowledging skills obtained through informal learning is depicted as a transformative mechanism that goes beyond validation; it directly influences the perceived authenticity and reliability of these skills. Singh posits that when informal sectors' workers undergo formal recognition processes; their skills are acknowledged and authenticated, instilling a sense of trustworthiness in the capabilities they bring to the table.

Furthermore, the study suggests that the increased credibility resulting from recognition has far-reaching implications. In professional and educational contexts, where trust in the competence of individuals is paramount, the formal acknowledgment of skills becomes a cornerstone. Employers, educational institutions, and other stakeholders are more likely to place confidence in the abilities of informal sectors' workers when their skills bear the mark of official recognition. This enhances individual opportunities for career advancement and contributes to reshaping societal perceptions of the value inherent in informal learning. Singh's emphasis on skill tests as a concomitant element to recognition aligns with the broader

narrative that formal acknowledgement is a comprehensive process, involving both the validation of skills and establishment of credibility. The correlation between recognition and credibility, as posited by Singh, underscores the need for a systematic and standardized approach to acknowledging the diverse skills cultivated through informal learning. The study implies that without a structured recognition mechanism, the credibility associated with informal sectors' workers' skills may remain undervalued or overlooked, potentially hindering their full integration into professional and educational spheres. In the case of Nepal, skill tests provide recognition and accreditation to informal sectors' workers (Regmi, 2009). In Nepal, informal sectors' workers are certified with certain levels as per criteria by the National Skill Testing Board (NSTB) under the Council for Technical Education and Vocational Training (CTEVT), the apex body in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). Then their skills are valid for national and international labor markets that provide them justice and recognition.

Conclusion and Implications

In summary, the thematic review exploring the significance of skill tests and recognition to informal sectors' workers has provided valuable insights into the multifaceted aspects crucial for education and workforce development. The methodology employed encompassed a thorough examination of literature, aiming to identify recurring themes, particularly focusing on the validation of skills, enhancement of employability, and recognition and accreditation. The theme of skill validation emerged as a fundamental element in bolstering confidence and

motivation among informal sectors' workers. The review emphasized that formally acknowledging skills acquired through unconventional paths acts as a catalyst, instilling a sense of accomplishment and self-worth. This recognition extends beyond symbolic gestures, empowering informal sectors' workers to engage in continuous learning with confidence. Additionally, the thematic review explored the theme of employability, underscoring the pivotal role of skill tests and recognition in boosting job prospects for informal sectors' workers. The synthesis of findings highlighted that formal validation equips informal sectors' workers with tangible credentials, setting them apart in a competitive job market. Employers increasingly value practical skills gained through informal learning, making recognition a crucial factor in unlocking diverse opportunities. The third theme, recognition and accreditation, emerged as vital for establishing the credibility of informal learning achievements. The review illuminated the transformative impact of formal recognition on the perceived authenticity and reliability of skills acquired through informal pathways. Without recognition, the full potential of informal sectors' workers remains untapped, hindering their ability to showcase capabilities in professional and educational settings.

The synthesis of these themes underscores the interconnectedness of validation, employability enhancement, and recognition in shaping the landscape for informal sectors' workers. The thematic review demonstrated that integrating skill tests and recognition processes is not merely procedural but a strategic imperative for empowering informal sectors' workers. The

formal acknowledgement of skills acquired informally serves as a transformative force that not only boosts confidence, enhances employability, and establishes credibility but also contributes to reshaping the narrative around the significance of informal learning in the dynamic landscape of education and employment.

The thematic review provides a comprehensive overview of the importance of skill tests and recognition to the informal sectors' workers, advocating for a paradigm shift in acknowledging the value of non-traditional learning pathways. The formal recognition of skills acquired informally emerges as a transformative force that contributes to societal progress and economic development, reshaping the narrative around the significance of informal learning in the evolving landscape of education and employment. As we navigate the terrain of 21st-century skills and learning paradigms, the integration of systematic skill tests and recognition processes becomes imperative to foster a culture that values and empowers informal sectors' workers on their educational and professional journeys.

The findings of this study are beneficial for informal learners, workers and policymakers as well. Informal learners and workers can understand the importance of skill tests and recognition. Informal learners and workers can grasp the significance of skill tests and recognition by integrating a focus on validating skills, enhancing employability, and providing acknowledgement and accreditation. This approach ensures that individuals recognize the practical value of their skills, making them more competitive and acknowledged in the professional landscape. Likewise, policymakers can

understand the importance of skill tests and recognition which makes the skill test mandatory for informal and non-formal technical and vocational skills and learning.

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