

Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
References Committee

Inquiry into the progress and future direction of life-long learning

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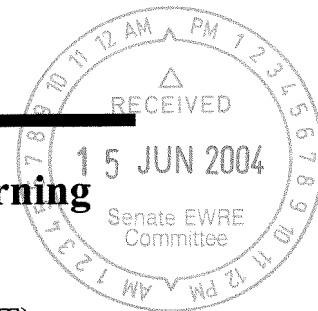
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Submission to the Senate Inquiry into Lifelong Learning

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Purpose and introduction:

The purpose of this submission is to inform the Senate Inquiry into Lifelong Learning of recent research findings about individual choice and lifelong learning in the Australian vocational education and training (VET) sector, and related proposals for improving current policy and program arrangements in the VET sector. This submission is based directly on a national research project conceived and conducted by the author as part of the 2002-03 research program of the Monash University-ACER Centre for the Economics of Education and Training (CEET), as approved and funded by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA).

Please note that this paper comprises a personal submission, and is neither authorised nor endorsed by CEET, Monash University, nor any other individual or organisation.

Focus of the submission:

The primary focus of this submission is on the first term of reference of the Senate Inquiry, which relates to:

'The progress and future direction of life-long learning and, in particular:

- a) *policies and strategies aimed at addressing the life-long learning needs of an ageing population.'*

In the course of addressing the above term of reference, other pertinent issues are touched upon in relation to the following terms of reference:

- b) *the ways in which technological developments, particularly the Internet, have affected the nature and delivery of life-long learning since 1997;*
- c) *the adequacy of any structural and policy changes at Commonwealth and state or territory level which have been made in response to these technological developments; and*
- g) *technological barriers to participation in life-long learning and adult and community education, and the ways and means by which these might be overcome.*

In addition to the summary of key research findings, their implications, and related change proposals below, an excerpt from the abovementioned report is attached for further information (see Appendix 1). This appendix contains the *Executive Summary* (pp.9-11 below) and *Overview Report* (pp.12-22 below), in addition to the list of Australian and international policy and research literature that informed the research. The reasons for including the Appendix are that the findings and proposals listed below are presented in a more integrated and expository manner, and the reference list may provide useful leads to further information for the Senate Inquiry.

Background to the submission:

As indicated above, this submission is based upon a national research project conducted for ANTA, the final report of which is entitled *Steering a course: individuals, choice in VET and lifelong learning*, Report to the Australian National Training Authority (2003, 2 vols., unpublished).

The *main aims* of this research project were as follows:

- to examine the nature and dynamics of individual choice in markets for VET; and
- to identify resulting issues and implications for VET policy and provision and lifelong learning

The *key research questions* were as follows:

- Why do individuals choose to do further study in VET?
- What scope exists for exercising choice in VET markets?
- Which factors influence individual choice in VET?
- Are individuals behaving like rational consumers of VET?
- How complex is choice-making in VET markets?
- How satisfied are individuals with their choices?
- How important are different types of choice in VET?
- How can choice in VET and lifelong learning be enhanced?

The *research methodology* principally comprised:

- an analysis of Australian and international policy and research literature on adult choice in VET markets and lifelong learning; and
- a national online survey of VET students, conducted in late 2002.

In total, there were 504 survey returns, with the following composition by:

- *age*: 19 years of age or below (23%): 20-49 years of age (69%): 50 years of age or over (8%).
- *gender*: 63% female: 37% male;
- *geographical location*: 51% rural/regional: 49% metropolitan; and
- *provider type*: schools (10%): TAFE (72%): ACE (4%): other (14%).

Several *important qualifications* about the respondent population must be noted upfront:

- with the exception of age, the respondent population is not representative of the total VET student population in Australia;
- the survey was conducted at the end of an academic year, with the result that the respondent population is likely to comprise successful completers of whole VET courses or modules, and by implication exclude non-completers and those who completed prior to survey administration; and
- the survey was online and self-administered, with the result that respondents necessarily enjoyed access to the Internet, and possessed the requisite IT and literacy skills required to complete the survey.

The above factors are likely to have influenced the results of the survey to varying degrees, and should therefore be taken into account when considering the research findings and consequent proposals.

Snapshot of key research findings:

Below is a snapshot of key findings of the above research study of individual choice and lifelong learning through VET:

- individual learners follow zigzag, rather than linear, study and work trajectories;
- individuals' trajectories are typically characterised by frequent interruptions and changes in career and study direction;
- individuals, in many instances, appear to be constructing their own 'portfolio careers', drawing upon available (and relatively short-term) work and study experiences;
- individuals appear to use VET modules/courses and qualifications to initiate and navigate new career trajectories; and as a consequence
- lifelong learning is already a reality for many individuals.

Key evidence to support these conclusions, albeit tentative, includes the findings that:

- survey respondents were found to have undergone frequent job changes since leaving school, as follows:
 - 69% of 25-29 year-olds had undergone 3-5 job changes;
 - 27% of 30-39 year-olds had undergone 6-9 job changes; and
 - 19% of 40-49 years-olds had undergone 10 or more job changes.
- survey respondents changed their career direction with every 2-3 job changes on average, and 24% had enrolled in 4 or more post-school courses,

Main reasons for (re)engaging in VET

As reflected in Table 1 below, the main reasons individuals gave for undertaking further study in VET were:

- vocational/work-related reasons (68%);
- non-vocational reasons (24%); and
- other reasons (10%).

These data also show that the following proportions of individual learners were motivated by reasons relating directly to their:

- *anticipated* job/career/study outcomes (60%); and
- *current* job/employer (16%).

Overall, the survey findings suggest that, as the age of learners increase, there is a corresponding shift in their motivations to engage in further learning:

- from extrinsic to intrinsic motives; and
- from career-starting to career change/development objectives.

Table 1: Aggregate main reasons for engaging in VET (%)

For interest or personal development	19
To get a job (or own business)	16
To try for a different career	14
To get extra skills for my job	13
To get a better job or promotion	12
I always wanted to do this course/career	10
To get into another course of study	5
It was a requirement of my job	3

NB: Multiple responses allowed

The research findings suggest, therefore, that individual choices and decisions to (re)engage in VET are:

- multi-factorial and contingent on personal-contextual circumstances;
- largely vocational and work-related;
- mixes of extrinsic and intrinsic motives;
- oriented towards personal growth and aspiration; and
- shaped by age/life-stage (more than by gender, geographical location).

Sources of information

The primary sources of information used by individuals in the process of making course/provider choices are, in order of significance:

- provider websites (21%);
- media advertisements (15%);
- course/career advisors (7%);
- employers (6%);
- family members (6%);
- self-initiated inquiries (6%);
- course/career directories (5%);
- work colleagues (5%); and
- friends (4%).

The remarkably high proportion of respondents who identified ‘provider websites’ as their main source of information was unanticipated (and indeed is unprecedented in any prior research), but may reflect the self-administered nature of the online survey. Nonetheless, such a finding suggests that prospective VET students may be increasingly utilising the Internet as an information source and choice-making tool. This warrants further investigation as it has potentially significant implications for the provision of information, and the ability of VET students to access adequate and reliable in order to make well-informed choices.

Criteria for individual choice

The main criteria used by individuals when choosing courses/providers are:

- provider reputation (16%);
- proximity to home/work & ease of access (10%);
- course costs (10%);
- course offerings (9%);
 (“only provider that offers this course”)
- short course duration (6%); and
- course relevance (6%).

These survey data suggest that individual learners are increasingly basing their choices of course/provider on:

- formal market criteria (38%)
 - perceived quality, costs, duration, and relevance
- non-market criteria (25%)
 - geographical proximity/ease of access (10%)
 - preferred course not offered elsewhere (9%)
 - employer chose on their behalf (3%)
 - “had no other choice” (3%)

Overall, 10% of respondents had difficulty choosing a course, and only 5% had difficulty choosing a provider. The main problems encountered were an over-supply, and of courses and providers, and an under-supply of courses and providers in rural/regional markets.

Importance of choice types

The following types of choice were identified by survey respondents as being ‘very important’ or ‘important’, in order of significance:

- choice of course/career (96%);
- choice of subjects/modules (83%);
- choice of mode of study (eg. on-campus or by distance/online) (82%);
- choice of provider (82%);
- choice of attendance times (73%);
- choice of fee-payment mode (eg. upfront fees or pay-as-you-earn) (61%); and
- choice of mode of assessment (when and how) (60%).

As reflected in Table 2 below, choices of study mode and subjects/modules are relatively more important to individuals than choice of provider. Although choice of modes of attendance, fee payment and assessment are ranked lower than choice of provider, such choices are nevertheless important to at least six in ten individuals who undertake further study in VET.

Table 2: Importance of types of choice by all respondents (%)

	Provider	Course	Study mode	Subjects/ modules	Attend time	Assess	Payment mode
Very important	47	82	55	48	42	28	38
Important	35	14	27	35	31	32	23
Fairly important	12	3	15	15	17	24	21
Not important	5	0	3	1	7	13	15
Unsure	0	0	0	1	2	3	3
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Key findings and propositions

The key findings and propositions arising from this study of individual choice and lifelong learning in VET are that:

- age/life-stage is the most significant (and overlooked) factor shaping choice after individuals have made the initial post-school transition;
- individual choices are shaped by extrinsic/instrumental *and* intrinsic/aspirational goals;
- individuals appear to be increasingly active and rational consumers of VET;

- ICT appears to be facilitating the rise of consumerist behaviour;
- choice in VET markets is less complex than generally assumed;
- a majority of individuals are satisfied with their choices and available information; and
- adult learners value choice and appear willing and able to exercise a wider range of choice in VET than current policy settings in VET markets allow.

Such findings and propositions must, however, be treated with caution due to the small and generally unrepresentative sample population. Nonetheless, they signal potentially important issues and trends worthy of further investigation.

Key implications and proposals

The research findings suggest that if lifelong learning is to be actively and effectively promoted and supported in and through VET, several key changes to existing policy and program arrangements in the VET sector are required. These changes are summarised below:

- there is a need to develop a more learner-driven (rather than industry-driven or employer-led) VET system;
- the scope for individual choice needs to be expanded to enable learners to exercise greater influence over the content and delivery of VET programs, according to principles that underpin User Choice for employers/apprentices;
- the quality and accessibility of information about VET courses and providers requires improvement, including better online and interactive information provision;
- greater emphasis needs to be placed on designing and delivering VET that corresponds in forms and modes that reflect individual learner's changing goals/motivations and life-stages;
- the scope for flexible customisation of VET courses and qualifications needs to be increased, so as to cater more effectively for the diverse needs, interests and circumstances of adult learners;
- increased emphasis should be given to the negotiation of individualised learning plans/outcomes between learners and teachers;
- greater scope should be provided for the customisation of learning packages and qualifications in VET in response to individual needs, along the lines proposed in the United Kingdom's *Skills Strategy* (2003) and the Credit Matrix being developed by the Victorian Qualifications Authority (2003); and
- tangible steps should be taken to place individuals 'at the centre of VET', recognise 'diversity' among VET learners, and provide adult learners in VET with 'more choices', consistent with the *National VET Strategy 2004-2010* (ANTA 2003).

Extract from:

Anderson, D. (2003)

***Steering a course: individuals, choice in VET and
lifelong learning*, Report to the Australian National
Training Authority, Centre for the Economics of
Education and Training, Monash University,
2 vols., unpublished.**

Executive summary

The concept of choice in vocational education and training (VET) has been given unprecedented rhetorical prominence in recent times, due to the convergence of two major policy trends: the development of markets in VET and promotion of lifelong learning. Increased choice is viewed as both a means to achieve the putative benefits of markets in VET, such as greater responsiveness, quality and efficiency, and as a desirable end in itself. As empowered consumers in the VET marketplace, individuals are purportedly more able to shop around and choose the training that best meets their needs and preferences. Choice is also portrayed as both an individual right and necessity in the context of globalisation, economic restructuring and technological change. In the face of rapid change and uncertainty, individuals are expected to take greater responsibility for their own learning and career development over their lifetimes. Such policy narratives highlight the centrality of choice in negotiating the veritable maze of options available in education, training and labour markets.

Underlying these trends is an implicit assumption that choice-making in VET is an unproblematic process in which individuals engage freely, actively and in pursuit of their rational self-interests as they steer a course through education and work. To what extent though does the reality of choice in VET match the rhetoric? Given the relative dearth of research on individual choice in VET, this study set out to examine: the contexts of choice in VET; the nature, dynamics and complexity of choice-making by individuals in VET; the factors that shape choice; and the resulting issues and implications for VET and lifelong learning.

The research for this study primarily comprised a review of Australian and international policy and research literature on choice in VET, lifelong learning and related topics, and a national online survey of VET students enrolled at Registered Training Organisations, including TAFE institutes, in late 2002. A total of 504 survey returns were received, and although the sample population was relatively small and largely unrepresentative of the total VET student population, it provides some useful, and in some instances unexpected, insights into the questions under investigation.

Prior research and the findings of this study show that individual choice in VET is a complex, contingent and dynamic process. Most individuals who pursue further study in VET are following zigzag, rather than linear, trajectories that are characterised by frequent interruptions and changes in direction. Respondents aged 20-49 years had typically undergone 3-5 job changes, and on average had changed career direction with every 2-3 job changes. Individuals are using VET courses and qualifications to both initiate and navigate new trajectories during the course of their working lives. On average, respondents had enrolled in 2-3 formal accredited courses after leaving school, although almost one quarter had enrolled in 4 or more. This suggests that for many individuals engaged in VET, lifelong learning is already a reality.

Gender, geographical location, employment status and other demographic factors influence individual choice, but the more significant changes in the nature and direction of post-initial learning and career trajectories appear to be linked to age progression and changes in work and life circumstances and personal horizons.

Individual choices and decisions to engage in further study in VET are multi-faceted, and although largely vocational and work-related in nature, tend to be based on mixes of instrumental and non-instrumental goals, the nature and balance of which change with age and stage of career development. Although the extrinsic value of VET qualifications remains important, individuals aged 25 years and above are motivated increasingly by the perceived intrinsic value of studying in VET in terms of meeting their personal development goals. Only 16% of survey respondents had undertaken further study in VET for reasons relating to their current employment, including 3% because 'it was requirement of my job'. The vast majority of respondents were motivated by personal aspirations and anticipated job/career outcomes.

When choosing VET courses and providers, individuals rely predominantly on formal sources of information. The most important sources of information were provider marketing and promotions, specifically provider websites (21%) and media advertisements (15%). These were followed by: course/career advisors at schools, TAFE and universities (7%); employers (6%); self-initiated inquiries at providers' front desks (6%); course/career directories (5%); and work colleagues (5%). Informal sources of information, such as parents/guardians (2%), other family members (4%), and friends (4%) were less influential. Individuals therefore rely less on official, and technically impartial, information sources, and more on provider-generated sources.

Individuals who decide to engage in VET are adopting consumer-like behaviour to a significant extent, as reflected in the finding that 43% of all survey respondents had shopped around for their course/provider. The most active choice-makers were: part-time employees (57%); those who were unemployed and looking for work (48%); and those who had enrolled in 4-5 (57%) or 6 or more (49%) courses since leaving school. Almost one third (32%) of those who had shopped around for their course/provider used the Internet, and relied on information contained in provider websites. Two thirds (67%) of those who had used the Internet had actively shopped around. Although further research is required to confirm these trends, the survey findings suggest that ICT is facilitating the apparent rise of consumerism in VET.

Individuals' choices of course/provider are multi-factorial and based to a significant degree on market-based criteria, such as perceived quality and price. The most common reasons for choosing a provider's course were: provider reputation (16%); geographical proximity to home/work and ease of access (10%); course costs (10%); and course offerings (9%); short course duration (6%); and course relevance (6%). Active consumers tend to base their choices on more criteria, and to a greater extent on market-based criteria, particularly course costs. However, many individuals were unable to exercise choice, either because their preferred course was offered by only one provider (9%), their employer made the choice on their behalf (3%), or 'I had no other choice' (3%). Overall, at least one in four individuals chose their courses for reasons that could be classified as 'economically irrational' or out of necessity.

Contrary to expectations, individuals are not experiencing undue difficulty when choosing courses and providers since the creation of a diversified VET market. Only 10% of respondents experienced difficulties when choosing a course, mainly due to: a lack of alternative courses (20%); insufficient information about job/career outcomes (15%); and a lack of comparative information about courses (13%). Only 5% experienced difficulties when choosing a provider, mainly due to: a lack of sufficient

alternative providers (30%); a lack of comparative information about providers (19%); and an over-abundance of alternative providers (12%). Choice is more complex and difficult in metropolitan markets, due largely to an oversupply of courses and providers. Although fewer difficulties were reported by rural/regional respondents, where they exist is a result of undersupply or thin markets.

Available information about VET courses and providers is generally adequate to ensure effective client choice. In all, 13% and 7% of all respondents indicated that they would 'probably' or 'definitely' have chosen a different course or provider respectively had they had access to better/more information. Much higher proportions of those who experienced difficulty when choosing their course or provider said they would have made different choices with access to better/more information. Almost four in ten respondents suggested various ways to improve the quantity, quality and accessibility of VET information. The strong emphasis on strategies to improve online information provision reflects the growing trend for individuals of all ages to use the Internet as their preferred medium for information-searching and choice-making.

Individuals attach great importance to all types of choice in VET, with the following identified by respondents as 'very important' or 'important': choice of course/career (96%); choice of subjects/modules (83%); choice of study mode (82%); choice of provider (82%); choice of attendance times (73%); choice of fee-payment mode (61%); and choice of assessment mode (60%). These findings - together with those that suggest that mature-aged individuals are active and independent choice-makers who are largely satisfied with their choices and the information on which they are based - call into question the official justification for restricting individuals to choice of course and provider. They suggest that individuals wish to shape their learning experiences and career development to a greater extent than current policy settings and domains of choice in VET allow, except under User Choice.

The findings of this study suggest that VET policy and programs should be reoriented to promote and support greater choice and lifelong learning by individuals. More attention should be paid to the changing needs, interests and aspirations of individuals at different ages and life stages, especially their personal development goals. In view of the preferences expressed by study participants, there is a strong case for expanding the scope for individual choice in VET with respect to content, delivery and assessment. Consideration should be given to applying the principles of User Choice more widely, and to introducing 'individualised learning packages' that provide greater scope and flexibility for learners to select and combine subjects/modules from a broader range of courses and qualifications. More effective choice could be facilitated by enhancing the quantity, quality and accessibility of VET information, and providing more integrated sources of information, advice and guidance about courses and careers. Given current trends and consumer preferences, the provision of such services is likely to move increasingly online, in which case ethical and social access issues require attention. Steps in these directions would foster the development of a more learner-driven VET system, consistent with the national VET strategy for 2004-2010 which aims to 'give clients more choice' in order to increase and support participation in lifelong learning (ANTA 2003). Moreover, this study suggests that unless individuals' needs, interests and aspirations are met more effectively, and if their scope to exercise choice in VET remains limited, they may be less inclined to choose VET as a port of call during the course of their lifelong learning.

Overview report

The concept of choice in vocational education and training (VET) has been given unprecedented rhetorical prominence in recent times, due to the convergence of two major policy trends: the development of markets in VET and promotion of lifelong learning. Increased choice is viewed as both a means to achieve the putative benefits of markets in VET, such as greater responsiveness, quality and efficiency, and as a desirable end in itself. As empowered consumers in the VET marketplace, individuals are purportedly more able to shop around and choose the training that best meets their needs and preferences. Choice is also portrayed as both an individual right and necessity in the context of globalisation, economic restructuring and technological change. In the face of rapid change and uncertainty, individuals are expected to take greater responsibility for their own learning and career development over their lifetimes. Such policy narratives highlight the centrality of choice in negotiating the veritable maze of options available in education, training and labour markets.

The convergence of marketisation and lifelong learning and the pivotal role accorded to choice in VET policy narratives are well-illustrated in a presentation, entitled *Learning @ Your Choice*, by the former chief executive officer of ANTA:

Much of Australia's success beyond 2001 will depend upon individuals and communities, the nation as a whole, and the globe, embracing lifelong learning. How do we engage people in learning?... To borrow a philosophical concept, I believe allowing people choice is part of the answer ... Let's not forget that for some people the future is something they would rather not contemplate. They may be filled with reservations, fear of the new and the unknown ... These are the people who will benefit most from engaging in lifelong learning, who will value most the options which enable them to 'learn at their choice'. The vocational education and training market is broad, varied and changing ... Employers, parents, trainers and students are all intersecting learners who need options, flexibility, pathways - choice - choices which can allow them to tailor education to their needs. (Scollay 1999, pp.2,16)

As reflected in the above extract, there is an implicit assumption in current policy rhetoric that choice-making in VET is an unproblematic process in which individuals engage freely, actively and in pursuit of their rational self-interests as they steer a course through education and work.

To what extent though does the reality of choice in VET match the rhetoric? Given the relative dearth of research on individual choice in VET, this study set out to examine: the contexts of choice in VET; the nature, dynamics and complexity of choice-making by individuals in VET; the factors that shape choice; and the resulting issues and implications for VET and lifelong learning. The research primarily comprised a review of Australian and international policy and research literature and a national online survey of VET students enrolled at Registered Training Organisations, including TAFE institutes, in late 2002. A total of 504 survey returns were received, and although the sample population was relatively small and largely unrepresentative of the total VET student population, it provides some useful, and in some instances unexpected, insights into the questions under investigation.

Learning and career trajectories of individuals in VET

Both prior research and the findings of this study show that individual choice-making in VET is a highly complex and multi-faceted process, the nature and dynamics of which are difficult to pin down in any precise or definitive manner. From the bird's eye perspective afforded by this study however, it would appear that most individuals who decide to pursue further study in VET are not following linear or uni-directional learning and career pathways. Rather they appear to be following zigzag trajectories, characterised by regular interruptions and changes in direction. For instance, the survey findings suggest that individual learners aged 20-49 years had undergone 3-5 job changes, and on average had changed career direction with every 2-3 job changes.

Against the background of frequent job turnover and career change, the research findings suggest that individuals are using VET courses and qualifications to both initiate and navigate new trajectories during the course of their working lives. Like a ship's captain, they are steering a course through unfamiliar waters, and this requires them to make choices and decisions about the destinations which they aim to reach, and also to restock their knowledge, skills and qualifications along the way. On average, individuals in VET enrol in 2-3 formal accredited courses after leaving school, although almost one quarter enrol in 4 or more. This latter finding suggests that for a significant proportion of individuals engaged in VET, lifelong learning is already a reality. However, the extent to which this occurs through choice or necessity cannot be established from this study, and requires further investigation.

Most studies of choice in post-compulsory education and training have focused solely on school leavers and their choices and preferences with respect to academic or vocational education pathways. Neither these studies nor the few others that have examined individual choice in post-school contexts have paid sufficient attention to the effects of age and changing patterns of choice at different stages of a person's life trajectory. In many respects, the most significant findings of the present study relate to the influence of age and life stage, and the evidence suggests that age becomes the most significant variable shaping individual choice once the initial post-school transition has been made.

Gender, geographical location, employment status and other demographic factors undoubtedly continue to exert strong influences on individual choices as discussed throughout this report. But the more significant changes in the nature and direction of an individual's learning and career trajectory appear to be linked to age progression and the associated transformations of her/his circumstances and personal horizons. The need to develop a deeper appreciation of age-related transformations is important not only for aligning VET provision more closely to the changing needs, interests and aspirations of different age cohorts, but also for ensuring that the form and content of VET facilitates individual learning and development over a lifelong framework.

Individual motivations to enrol in VET

Age, or more precisely the stage or juncture of an individual's career and life trajectory, appears to exert a particularly strong influence on her/his motivations to engage in further study in VET. While young school leavers starting their careers are

largely driven by instrumental and explicitly vocational motives, the motivations of those already in the workforce appear to shift quite markedly. Their decisions to undertake VET study are generally based less on necessity and far more on personal aspiration, including (but not only) for reasons relating to career development and often career change objectives. Although the instrumental (exchange) value of VET qualifications remains important in terms of achieving their newfound career-related objectives, individuals aged 25 years and above are motivated to an increasing degree by the perceived intrinsic value of further study in VET and its role in meeting their personal growth and development objectives. Even those who are unemployed and seeking to re-enter the workforce are strongly motivated to enrol in VET 'for interest and personal development'.

Such findings convey important messages to policy makers and providers about the need to better understand and respond more effectively to mature-aged individuals' motives for engaging in lifelong learning processes through VET. In particular, as Maxwell, Cooper and Biggs (2000) conclude in their larger scale study of choice in VET, such findings suggest the need to shift the emphasis and balance of current VET policy priorities and program provision away from the immediate requirements of industry and current employers towards the longer term needs of individual learners. Only 16% of survey respondents had undertaken further study in VET for reasons relating to their current employment, including 3% because 'it was requirement of my job'. The vast majority of respondents were motivated by personal aspiration and anticipated job/career outcomes.

Choice-making and sources of information

Overall, this study finds that individual choices and decisions to engage in further study in VET are multi-factorial, highly contingent on other life circumstances, and although largely vocational and work-related in nature, tend to be based on mixes of diverse instrumental and non-instrumental goals. Despite the apparent significance of age and life stage, it should still be acknowledged that the reasons why individuals choose to undertake further study in VET in the first place, and choose to enrol in particular courses and providers, are inextricably tied up with social context, specifically socio-economic class, gender, race, ethnicity and disability, among other structural factors (Maxwell, Cooper and Biggs 2000). With the partial exception of gender and some other demographic variables, this study did not investigate the influence of social context or related structural factors on choice to any significant degree. However as indicated elsewhere, future research will need to explore the role and interaction of context and individual choice in VET if a more comprehensive and sophisticated understanding of choice processes is to be developed.

An especially noteworthy finding is that individuals who decide to engage in VET are adopting consumer-like behaviour to a significant extent, as reflected in the finding that 43% of all survey respondents had shopped around for their course/provider. Respondents who shopped around more than others were: females (45%); individuals located in remote (50%) and metropolitan (45%) areas; those attending ACE centres (50%), private training colleges (48%) and 'other' VET providers (46%); and those who had enrolled in 4-5 (57%) or 6 or more (49%) formal accredited courses since leaving school. With respect to labour market status while studying, the most active

choice-makers were: part-time employees (57%); and those who were unemployed and looking for work (48%).

The active nature of choice-making by individuals is reflected in their predominant reliance on formal, rather than informal, sources of information. The most important of sources of information are provider marketing and promotions, specifically provider websites (21%) and media advertisements (newspaper, radio, TV) (15%). The next most important sources of information were: course/career advisors at schools, TAFE and universities (7%); employers (6%); self-initiated inquiries at providers' front desks (6%); course/career directories (eg. Guide to Tertiary Courses) (5%); and work colleagues (5%). Informal sources of information, such as parents/guardians (2%), other family members (4%), and friends (4%), are significantly less influential. These findings also suggest that individuals are relying less on official, and technically impartial, sources of information, and more on provider-generated sources of information.

Even stronger evidence of consumerism is the marked propensity for active choice-makers in VET to use the Internet as their main information source and choice-making tool. Almost one third (32%) of those who shopped around for their courses/providers used the Internet, and relied on information contained in provider websites. Other information sources were far less important as follows: media advertisements (newspaper, radio, TV) (12%); a family member (6%); self-initiated inquiries at providers' front desks (5%); course/career directories (eg Guide to Tertiary Courses) (5%); and work colleagues (5%).

Most significant is the finding that 67% of those who had used the Internet as their main source of information had also actively shopped around for their courses and providers. Assuming that Internet usage is growing among VET students, this finding suggests that new information and communications technologies (ICT) are facilitating a rise in consumerism in VET. However, given that survey responses were self-administered, and that respondents were Internet users, further research is required to confirm these findings, and also to determine the extent to which active choice-making is a planned and systematic process.

The findings also suggest that people begin to exercise choice in VET in a more individualistic and consumer-like manner when they enter the 20-24 years age group, and that active consumerism is a relatively widespread phenomenon among those aged 25 years and above. Some are still 'composite consumers', but in conjunction with their employers - whom 6% of respondents identified as their main source of information - rather than parents, whom continue to exert a strong influence on younger students.

The process of choice: preferences, criteria and complexity

Like their decisions to undertake further study in VET, individuals' choices of course/provider are multi-factorial and also tend to be based to a significant degree on formal, market-related criteria, such as perceived quality and price. The most common reasons for choosing a provider's course were, in order of prevalence: provider reputation (16%); geographical proximity to home/work and ease of physical access

(10%); course costs (10%); and course offerings ('It is the only provider that offers this course') (9%); short course duration (6%); and course relevance (6%).

Overall, the survey findings suggest that around four in ten respondents conform to some degree to the model of rational choice-making that underlies current market-oriented policy arrangements. Active consumers tend to base their choices on more criteria than other respondents, and to a greater extent on formal market-related criteria, particularly course costs. However the prevalence of geographical proximity/ease of physical access (10%) as a major criterion defies the official model of rational choice, as do several less common choice criteria. A significant proportion of individuals were also unable to exercise choice at all, specifically because their preferred course was not offered elsewhere (9%), their employer made the choice on their behalf (3%), and 'I had no other choice' (3%). In effect, at least one quarter of individuals chose their course either for reasons that would be classified as 'economically irrational' by market theorists or out of necessity, not free choice.

Prior research suggests that choice-making in VET has become more complex, difficult and potentially confusing in the wake of marketisation, due in part to the resulting proliferation of provider and course alternatives (Anderson 1999b). For instance, there were approximately 4,300 RTOs and 7,900 national VET qualifications and accredited courses listed on the NTIS around the time of this study. Although the sample is small and unrepresentative, this hypothesis can only be partially sustained on the basis of the research findings of the present study.

The increasing marketisation of VET does not appear to have created undue complexity, as only 10% of respondents experienced difficulties when choosing their course, and only 5% experienced difficulties when choosing their provider. The main problem, encountered by 20% of respondents who experienced difficulties when choosing a VET course, was a surfeit, not an abundance of alternatives. This was followed by insufficient information about the job/career outcomes of courses (15%), and a lack of comparative information about courses (13%). Similarly the main problem encountered by 30% of respondents who experienced difficulties when choosing a VET provider was a lack of sufficient alternatives. This was followed by a lack of comparative information about providers (19%), and an over-abundance of alternative providers (12%).

However, there is some evidence that marketisation may have increased the complexity of choice-making in metropolitan markets. Of the 12% of respondents in metropolitan markets who experienced difficulties choosing a course, 63% identified 'too many courses to choose from' as the main problem. Conversely, 72% of the 9% of respondents in rural/regional markets who experienced difficulties identified 'not enough courses to choose from' as the main problem. Of the 7% of respondents in metropolitan markets who experienced difficulties choosing a provider, 80% identified 'too many providers to choose from' as the main problem. Conversely, 88% of the 3% of respondents in rural/regional markets who experienced difficulties identified 'not enough providers to choose from' as the main problem.

In effect, the complexity and difficulty for individuals making choices is relatively greater in metropolitan markets, where there has been a massive proliferation of providers and courses since marketisation. Although relatively fewer difficulties were

reported by rural/regional respondents, where they exist is a result of undersupply or thin markets. However these findings should be tempered by the overall finding that the large majority, 90% and 95% respectively, of respondents experienced no difficulties when choosing a VET course or provider.

Overall, the foregoing findings about course and provider choice provide two important insights into VET markets from a consumer perspective. Firstly, choice-making is more complex in metropolitan markets due largely to an oversupply of both courses and providers. Secondly, market reforms in VET have not produced a sufficiently diverse range of either courses or providers in some rural/regional areas to satisfy individual demand.

Choice effectiveness and information provision

The question of whether information provision is sufficient to ensure well-informed and effective choices by individuals has been raised by both policy makers and researchers. The evidence provided by this study, although limited, suggests that available information about VET courses and providers is generally adequate to ensure effective choice from a client perspective, although there is clearly room for improvement. In all, 13% and 7% of all respondents indicated that they would 'probably' or 'definitely' have chosen a different course or provider respectively had they had access to better/more information. Much higher proportions of those who experienced difficulty when choosing their course or provider said they would have made different choices with access to better/more information. The overall level of dissatisfaction with the adequacy of information may also have been higher had the sample population included individuals who had withdrawn prior to completion of their courses and modules.

Around four in ten of all respondents suggested ways in which the quantity, quality and accessibility of information about VET courses and providers could be improved. With respect to the quantity of information, the most frequent suggestions were that more information should be provided about: course structure, organisation and content (14%); and course completion rates and outcomes (primarily relating to jobs/careers) (6%). With respect to improving the quality of information, the most frequent suggestions were to provide: simpler/clearer/less jargonistic information (7%); more consistent/comparable information about courses/providers and outcomes (4%); and more accurate and up-to-date information about courses/providers (4%).

With respect to improving the accessibility of information, the most frequent suggestions were to provide: more/better course/provider information on websites (provider and/or systemic) (20%); more advertising and promotion (newspapers, television, brochures, posters) (14%); more interactive use of ICT, particularly emailing of information to clients (4%); and more/better information provision by teaching staff (3%). Almost one in ten (9%) suggested that a single and integrated source of information (mainly online and/or print-based, physical information centre) about all available VET courses and providers should be established. The strong emphasis on strategies to improve online information provision reflects the growing trend, noted earlier, for individuals to use the Internet as their preferred medium for information-searching in choice-making processes.

Types of choice and their relative importance

As the introductory analysis of market structure and domains of choice in VET shows, the scope for individuals to exercise choice is heavily constrained despite the rhetorical emphasis placed on choice in official VET policy. The decision to restrict individuals to choice of course and provider is justified on the grounds that:

Clients will often not be in a position to make adequately informed choices about every aspect of the training they require. This is likely to be the case for many individual students. (ANTA 1996, p.18)

As indicated above, around nine in ten participants in this study felt that they had made effective choices of course and provider, and were generally satisfied with the information on which their choices were based.

Other evidence arising from this study shows that individuals not only attach great importance to all types of choice in VET, but also feel sufficiently well-informed and able to make such choices. The following types of choice were identified as being ‘very important’ or ‘important’, in order of significance:

- choice of course/career (96%);
- choice of subjects/modules (83%);
- choice of mode of study (eg. on-campus or by distance/online) (82%);
- choice of provider (82%);
- choice of attendance times (73%);
- choice of fee-payment mode (eg. upfront fees or pay-as-you-earn) (61%); and
- choice of mode of assessment (when and how) (60%).

As reflected in Table 1, choices of study mode and subjects/modules are relatively more important to individuals than choice of provider. Although choice of modes of attendance, fee payment and assessment are ranked lower than choice of provider, such choices are nevertheless important to at least six in ten individuals who undertake further study in VET.

Table 1: Importance of types of choice by all respondents (%)

	Provider	Course	Study mode	Subjects/ modules	Attend time	Assess	Payment mode
Very important	47	82	55	48	42	28	38
Important	35	14	27	35	31	32	23
Fairly important	12	3	15	15	17	24	21
Not important	5	0	3	1	7	13	15
Unsure	0	0	0	1	2	3	3
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Different cohorts value different types of choice in VET to varying degrees. For instance, much greater importance was placed on choice of mode of fee payment (eg.

upfront fees or pay-as-you-earn) by recipients of the Youth Allowance (76%), Austudy (84%) and government/other scholarships (75%), than by other respondents (55%). Apprentices attached relatively greater importance than non-apprentices to choice of subjects/modules (86% apprentices: 84% non-apprentices) and assessment mode (70% apprentices: 60% non-apprentices). Choice of provider was also slightly less important for apprentices (80%) than for non-apprentices (83%).

These findings - together with those that suggest that mature-aged individuals are active and independent choice-makers who are largely satisfied with their choices and the information on which they are based - call into question the official justification for restricting individuals to choice of course and provider in VET. Moreover, they suggest that individuals wish to shape their learning experiences and vocational development to a greater extent than current policy settings and domains of choice in VET allow. In particular, the finding that individuals place greater importance on choices of study mode and subjects/modules than choice of provider suggests that the predominant emphasis on diversifying the suppliers of VET, in the interests of promoting greater client choice, is missing the mark. The main exception in this regard would appear to be some rural/regional areas in which, as discussed above, individual choice is significantly limited by the existence of thin markets.

Conclusions and policy implications

In view of the preferences expressed by study participants, there is a strong case for expanding the scope for individuals to exercise choice in relation to more aspects of their VET courses. In general terms, the domains of choice that presently exist in the non-market or direct funding and quasi-market sectors of VET need to be redesigned in accordance with the broad principles that operate in the context of the User Choice market for apprenticeship/traineeship training. The limited relevance and influence of current employer and job requirements on the choices of individual learners in VET also suggests that the content and assessment of non-apprenticeship programs should be reoriented to respond to a greater extent to the needs, interests and aspirations of individual learners. Individuals who wish to gain promotion, change career direction, re-enter the workforce, enter higher education via VET, and develop their personal interests, skills and ambitions accounted for 85% of survey respondents. These and related research findings highlight the need for a more learner-driven VET system that embraces the multiple goals and motivations of individuals, both vocational and non-vocational, and enhances the scope for individual choice.

By implication, this suggests that consideration should be given to redesigning curriculum and credentialing frameworks for VET programs, other than those for apprenticeship/traineeship training, so as to give individuals more choice of content, assessment and mode of delivery. Adult learners in particular would benefit from greater flexibility than is presently allowed under the National Training Framework to select and combine individual subjects and modules into individualised 'lifelong learning packages' that best meet their diverse needs, interests and aspirations. With appropriate information, advice and guidance, the coherence and currency of such packages in the labour market could be assured for those who seek existing industry-recognised qualifications for employment-related purposes. For other learners who wish to construct their own learning pathways and 'portfolio careers', greater

provision should be made for them to engage in more direct negotiation of learning plans and outcomes with VET providers.

Such an approach is consistent with the new national strategy for VET in 2004-2010, which places employers and individuals 'at the centre of vocational education and training', values diversity among learners, and aims to 'give clients more choices' in order to increase and support participation in lifelong learning (ANTA 2003). In designing strategies to achieve such outcomes, consideration should be given to the new policy directions taken in the recently released UK Skills Strategy (DES 2003) and the proposal by the Victorian Qualifications Authority (VQA 2003) to develop a credit matrix, as outlined in the review of policy literature. Both initiatives aim to foster greater choice and flexibility within VET program and qualification frameworks so that individuals, especially adults, are enabled to construct learning and career paths that accord with their personal goals and ambitions, and which encourage and support them to engage in lifelong learning and skills development.

Steps in these directions would also necessitate improvements in the quantity, quality and accessibility of information about VET providers and courses, as suggested by the participants in this study. The growing reliance on self-initiated searches for VET-related information via the Internet points clearly to the need to enhance the online information currently provided by official government sources. The National Training Information Service that existed up to and during the conduct of this study was rarely cited as a source of information, and when it was, it was criticised for its inadequacy with respect to design, content and navigability. Such deficiencies require attention if government is to remain in step with, if not ahead of, the choice-making preferences and processes of individual VET clients in this so-called information age.

Before rushing headlong 'with eyes wide shut' into the information age however, consideration must be given to a range of issues raised recently in relation to the development of integrated systems of online careers information and guidance (Norton Grubb 2002; Watts 2001). The relevance of such issues to the provision of VET information and advice is immediate for, as Norton Grubb (2002) observes, 'educational decisions have become career decisions' (p.2). Noting the tendency for governments to assume that simply increasing the quantity of information is sufficient to ensure wise decisions by student-consumers, he cautions that 'information alone may be necessary to career decision-making, but not in itself sufficient' (p.4). Young people and disadvantaged groups in particular may require more concerted guidance, support and skills development in processing such information:

The centrality of information in the career guidance process, and the interest in many countries in providing more and more information, may seem a logical response to the proliferation of educational and occupational alternatives that potential workers confront. But if individuals are unsophisticated in their use of information, or lack the ability to use information in their decision-making, then simply providing additional information - an 'information dump' - will be inadequate to improving their decision-making, about careers or any other goal. If this is a serious problem for many individuals - particularly young people in secondary school, starting to make decisions that will affect their futures - then they will end up with mis-aligned ambitions inconsistent with their educational plans. Furthermore, if a lack of sophistication is more

prevalent among certain (disadvantaged) groups ... then the provision of information alone will contribute to the problems of inadequate schooling and social exclusion. (Norton Grubb 2002, p.4)

Although this study suggests that most adult learners in VET possess the necessary information gathering, processing and decision-making skills to make effective choices and decisions, it also recognises the potential difficulties faced by young people still at school, early withdrawers from VET courses, and other disadvantaged individuals that did not participate in this study.

The increasing reliance of individuals on provider marketing and promotions, particularly provider websites, as their primary information source also raises ethical and social access issues. Whilst VET providers have a clear interest in and responsibility for providing comprehensive, accurate and up-to-date information about their course offerings, the line between the provision of impartial information and persuasive, if not partial, marketing and promotions is readily blurred. Access to the Internet and the requisite ICT skills are not enjoyed by all individuals, and some may be disadvantaged if online information services overlook their specific needs:

Where the role of the market is extensive, there remain issues about whether governments should retain responsibility for ensuring quality - either by *exhortation*, through guidelines and the like, or by *regulation*. These issues are particularly pressing in relation to the Internet. The quality of websites varies massively. Some are well-designed and user-friendly; some are not ... Little account is commonly taken of clients with visual disabilities and low vocabulary levels. (Watts 2001, p.12)

Arguably therefore, government has a responsibility to ensure by one means or another that individuals of all ages and circumstances have access to high quality and accessible sources of information about VET providers and courses, not only on the Internet, but also via other media such as course/careers advisors and print-based guides. Ideally, government itself should continue to provide independent sources of information, particularly for young school leavers and disadvantaged groups whose special needs are least likely to be met by market-based providers. Independent mechanisms are also required to ensure adequate consumer protection against the provision of misleading information and unfair trading practices (Anderson 1997c).

In conclusion, it would appear that in steering a course to their various unknown destinations in life, individuals are choosing VET as a port of call along the way in order to replenish their stock of knowledge, skills and qualifications for the next leg of their journeys. Their landfalls are precipitated by mixes of necessity and choice, extrinsic and intrinsic goals, the nature and balance of which alter at different stages of their life journeys, and in response to changing personal aspirations and external circumstances. In consequence, their journeys are often interrupted by unanticipated events and developments, and typically take the form of zigzag trajectories rather than linear progressions along sequential pathways.

As McKenzie astutely observes in relation to youth, despite the considerable efforts of policy makers to engineer cohesive and logical pathways and erect signposts for individuals to follow, 'the journeys that young people make, or the itineraries they

follow, ... may not always coincide with the formal structures on offer ... you only know that a pathway exists once some young people have gone down it' (p.205). This applies as much, if not more so, to adults whose journeys have been much less comprehensively traced, and highlights the need for more extensive research if their diverse needs, aspirations and motivations are to be better understood and satisfied in VET. Given the relative lack of clearly articulated pathways for adult learners in VET, it is also another reason why their scope to steer a course and exercise choice in the process should be maximised.

In the process of choosing VET and their various ports of call, individuals are taking an increasingly consumerist approach, in the sense that they are actively seeking and analysing market-based information on which to base their choices of course and provider. In doing so, they appear to be adopting the individualistic orientations, consumer attitudes and rational behaviours that international agencies, such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development and International Labour Organisation, and national governments are advocating as a necessary response to globalisation and its associated challenges. Despite the increased riskiness and complexity of their journeys however, individuals are generally confident of their navigational skills and prepared to accept responsibility for making a wider range of choices than they presently enjoy. Indeed, in many respects individuals have become increasingly active consumers of VET in spite of structural constraints on their scope of choice. This study suggests that individuals would readily embrace an expansion of opportunities to take a more active role in steering their courses in and through VET.

The broader question raised by this study is whether the pervasive rhetoric of choice, and empowerment of students-as-consumers in markets for VET, has raised individual expectations to a point where they can no longer be contained within official domains of choice, let alone satisfied by the relatively limited opportunities for its exercise therein. The risk for government is that the motivation of individuals to become, and remain, lifelong learners may rapidly wane if policy makers and providers are not willing or able to satisfy individuals' growing expectations of choice and self-direction. Paradoxically, this may be the hidden contradiction that emerges in official narratives of client-driven markets in VET, and the rock on which the ship of lifelong learning ultimately founders.

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