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Spoilt for choice? Individuals, VET markets and lifelong learning

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Abstract

Choice has become a central organising principle in vocational education and training (VET) in recent times, due to the convergence of two major policy trends: the construction of markets in VET and the promotion of lifelong learning. Increased choice in VET markets is viewed as a means to promote greater diversity and responsiveness. As ‘empowered consumers’, individual learners are supposedly more able to shop around for VET programs that satisfy their needs and preferences. Choice is also portrayed as an individual right and necessity in the context of globalisation and economic restructuring. Faced with rapid change and uncertainty, individuals are expected to take greater responsibility for their own lifelong learning and development by navigating successful courses through VET and labour markets.

Such narratives highlight the pivotal role of choice in the achievement of key policy outcomes envisaged by government, and the extent to which such outcomes rely on individual agency (Field 2000). Yet relatively little is known about the contexts, processes and outcomes of choice in VET or the extent to which individuals are willing and able to exercise choice in VET markets. This paper reports on the findings of an ANTA-funded research project which examined key dimensions of choice and lifelong learning in VET. The study, which comprised a literature review and a national online survey of VET students, raises significant issues for policy making, provider marketing and program delivery. Strategies for enhancing learner choice, information provision and lifelong learning in VET are proposed. The paper concludes by questioning whether the dissonance between the rhetoric and realities of individual choice in VET markets may erode learner motivation and consequently undermine the lifelong learning policy objectives of government.

Introduction

Choice has become a key organising principle in vocational education and training (VET) in recent times, due to the convergence of two major policy trends: the construction of markets in VET and the promotion of lifelong learning. Increased choice in VET markets is viewed as both a means to promote greater diversity and responsiveness and a desirable end in itself (Anderson 2004). As ‘empowered consumers’, individuals are supposedly more able to shop around for VET programs that satisfy their needs and preferences. Choice is also portrayed as an individual right and necessity in the context of globalisation and economic restructuring. Faced with rapid change and uncertainty, individuals are expected to take greater responsibility for their own lifelong learning and development by navigating successful courses through VET and labour markets (ILO 2002, OECD 1996).

Such narratives highlight the centrality of choice to the achievement of key policy outcomes envisaged by government, and the extent to which such outcomes rely on individual agency. For Field (2000), lifelong learning policy typifies the ambiguous and unstable nature of the new mode of governance in western social democratic

nations, in that it requires action by civil society rather than by agencies of the state: 'It is not government that will produce more learning among more people, but citizens ... For governments, this presents obvious difficulties. Rather than government doing things directly, it is required to persuade citizens to change their ways.' (p.253)

One strategy for persuading individuals to (re)engage in learning has been to promote the concept of choice, as echoed in *Learning@Your Choice*, a paper presented by the former chief executive officer of the Australian National Training Authority (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 ... 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)

Despite the rhetorical emphasis on individual choice in official VET policy, surprisingly little is known (and much is assumed) about the contexts, processes and outcomes of choice in VET markets. Nor is it clear that enhanced choice will motivate individuals to become self-directed lifelong learners, willing and able to construct and navigate pathways through the veritable maze of options in VET and labour markets. Consequently a study was conceived and undertaken by the Centre for the Economics of Education and Training (CEET) at Monash University, with funding from ANTA.

The research study

The study set out to examine: the contexts of choice in VET; the nature, dynamics and complexity of individual choice in VET; the factors that shape choice; and issues and implications for VET policy and practice. The research comprised two main phases, the first of which entailed a review of Australian and international literature on choice in VET, lifelong learning and related topics. Existing research was found to be sparse and provided few insights into choice in post-school VET. Most studies focus on post-compulsory education and training school students and their choices with respect to academic and vocational pathways. The few that examine adult choice (Connelly & Halliday 2001; Maxwell, Cooper & Biggs 2000; Miller, Kellie & Acutt 2001) pay insufficient attention to changing patterns of choice at different ages and life stages, and largely overlook the new market contexts and dynamics of choice in VET.

The second phase of the study involved a national online survey of VET students enrolled at Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) in late 2002. Comprising a total of 504 survey returns, the sample was relatively small and unrepresentative of the total VET student population, except with respect to age. The mode and timing of survey administration limited the sample to: students with Internet access and skills in information and communications technology (ICT); those with adequate literacy skills; and those who had completed their module or course. In effect, non-users of the Internet, students with low literacy skills, and those who had withdrawn from their courses/modules prior to completion (possibly due to ill-informed choices) were excluded from the sample. Consequently the following research findings should be qualified accordingly and viewed as indicative rather than definitive in nature.

Domains of choice

The study identified three domains of choice in the publicly funded VET system, the boundaries of which correspond with the new quasi-market structure of VET, as follows: the direct funding or non-market sector (mostly TAFE provision); the competitive tendering market; and the User Choice or apprenticeship/traineeship market. The open and fully commercial market for VET constitutes a fourth domain of choice. However, because it is privately financed and falls outside the direct scope and influence of government policy, it was not examined in depth for this study.

As reflected in Table 1, the scope for clients to exercise choice in relation to key aspects of their VET study varies considerably between these domains. Contrary to the policy rhetoric of ‘free’ or at least ‘increased’ choice, only clients in the User Choice market enjoy greater choice than prior to marketisation. Even then employers exercise far greater control over training decisions than their apprentices/trainees (Schofield 2000). In the other two domains of choice, which collectively account for around four in five VET enrolments nationally, the extent to which individual learners are able to exercise choice is no greater than it was prior to marketisation. In short, they can select their preferred course and provider as has always been the case, but have not been empowered to choose course content, mode of delivery (time, location etc.) or assessment, as is the case under User Choice. The only enhancement of the scope for individual choice produced by market reform has been the diversification of supply. To the extent that government purchases VET places from non-TAFE RTOs, then individuals can theoretically choose from a broader range of providers.

Table 1: Domains of client choice

	Course	Provider	Content	Delivery	Assessmt
Direct funding/non-market	✓	✓	x	x	x
Tendering market	✓	✓	x	x	x
User Choice market	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Open/commercial market	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: Individual learners are defined as the client in the direct funding/non-market sector and tendering market, whereas the employer (in conjunction with their apprentice/trainee) is viewed as the client under User Choice.

The restrictions on individual choice have been justified on the grounds that:

Clients will often not be in a position to make adequately informed choices about every aspect of training they require. This is likely to be the case for many individual students ... (W)here training is purchased by government ... clients should ... be given maximum information and the opportunity for choice between provider and type of training program. (ANTA 1996, p.18)

ANTA (2003, p.6) recently restated its rationale, claiming that: ‘Clients still see vocational education and training as complex, and this denies them the ability to make informed choices about the “what, where, when and how” of training.’ Ironically, research has found consistently that employers find VET in general, and User Choice in particular, to be complex and confusing (ACG 1994, 1999; KPMG 1999). Due to

the comparative lack of research about individual clients, the present study set out in part to test the validity of the official rationale for restricting individual choice.

Lifelong learners in VET

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. Almost seven in ten (69%) respondents aged 25-29 years had undergone 3-5 job changes since leaving school, 27% of those aged 30-39 years had undergone 6-9 job changes, and 19% of those aged 40-49 years had undergone 10 or more job changes. On average, respondents had changed career direction with every 2-3 job changes. Against this background of frequent job and career change, the research suggests that individuals are using VET courses and qualifications to both initiate and navigate new trajectories during 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. For many individuals engaged in VET therefore, lifelong learning is already a reality.

In many respects, the most significant findings of this study relate to the influence of age and life stage, and the evidence suggests that age becomes the most significant variable shaping individual choice after the initial post-school transition has been made. Gender, geographical location and other demographic factors undoubtedly continue to exert strong influences on individual choices. 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 personal circumstances and 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 learning and development over a lifelong framework.

Changing motivations and aspirations

Age, or more precisely the stage 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 over are motivated to an increasing degree by the perceived intrinsic value of further study in VET and its role in meeting personal growth and development objectives. The unemployed and those seeking to re-enter the workforce are also strongly motivated to enrol in VET 'for interest or personal development'.

Such findings contain important messages for policy makers and providers about the need to better understand and respond more effectively to mature-aged individuals'

motives for engaging in lifelong learning through VET. 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. As Maxwell, Cooper and Biggs (2000) also conclude in their larger scale study of choice in Australian VET, the emphasis and balance of VET policy priorities and program provision should be shifted away from the immediate requirements of industry and current employers towards the longer term needs of individual learners.

Consumerism and sources of information

Overall, the 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 diverse mixes of 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 and disability, among other structural factors (Maxwell, Cooper & Biggs 2000). With the partial exception of gender and some other demographic variables, this study did not investigate the influence of structural and cultural factors to any significant degree. Future research will need to explore the interaction of social context and individual choice in VET in order to develop a more comprehensive and sophisticated understanding of choice processes.

Individuals who decide to engage in VET appear to be 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 choosers 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 sources of information were 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%), were significantly less influential. These findings also suggest that individuals are relying more on provider-generated information than on official, and technically impartial, information sources.

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, including media advertisements which were used by only 12% of active choosers. 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 ICTs are facilitating a rise in consumerism in VET. However as the survey was self-administered and respondents were Internet users, further research is required to confirm these findings and to assess 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 over. Some are still 'composite consumers', but in conjunction with their employers - whom 6% of respondents identified as their main information source - rather than parents, who continue to exert a strong influence on younger students.

Preferences, criteria and complexity

Like their decisions to undertake further study in VET, individuals' choices of course/provider are multi-factorial and 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 findings suggest that around four in ten VET learners conform to some degree to the model of rational choice that underlies current market-oriented policy. 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, 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 for reasons that would be classified as 'economically irrational' 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 to the resulting proliferation of provider and course alternatives (Anderson 1999). Around the time of this study, there were about 4,300 RTOs and 7,900 national VET qualifications and accredited courses in Australia. However the findings of this study suggest that choice in VET markets is not unduly complex. Only 10% of respondents experienced difficulties when choosing their course, and only 5% had difficulties choosing a provider. The main problem encountered by 20% of respondents who had difficulties when choosing a VET course was a surfeit, not an over-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%). The main problem encountered by 30% of respondents who experienced difficulties when choosing a VET provider was a lack of sufficient alternatives, followed by a lack of comparative information about providers (19%), and an over-abundance of alternative providers (12%).

Yet there is some evidence that marketisation may have increased the complexity of choice in VET. Of the respondents in metropolitan markets who had difficulties choosing a course, 63% identified 'too many courses to choose from' as the main problem. Conversely, 72% of the respondents in rural/regional markets who had difficulties identified 'not enough courses to choose from' as the main problem. Of the metropolitan respondents who had difficulties choosing a provider, 80% identified 'too many providers to choose from' as the main problem. Conversely, 88% of the rural/regional respondents who had difficulties identified 'not enough providers to choose from' as the main problem. In effect, the complexity and difficulty of choice-making is relatively greater in metropolitan markets, where there has been a massive proliferation of providers and courses. Although 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 90% and 95% respectively of respondents had no difficulties when choosing a course and provider.

Client satisfaction 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 client choice, although there is clearly room for improvement. In all, 13% and 7% of 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 available information may also have been higher had the sample population included students who had withdrawn prior to completion of their courses and modules.

Around four in ten respondents suggested ways in which the quantity, quality and accessibility of information about VET courses and providers could be improved. The main suggestions involved the provision of more information about: course structure, organisation and content (14%); and course completion rates and outcomes (primarily relating to jobs/careers) (6%). The main suggestions for improving the quality of information were to provide: simpler/clearer/less jargonised information (7%); more consistent/comparable information about courses/providers and outcomes (4%); and more accurate and up-to-date information about courses/providers (4%). The main suggestions for improving the accessibility of information 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 email (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.

Relative importance of choices

As noted earlier, with the exception of the User Choice market, the scope for individual choice in VET is heavily restricted by government on the grounds that individual clients lack access to adequate information and are therefore unable to make effective choices. As indicated above, around nine in ten participants in this study felt they had made effective choices of course and provider, and were generally satisfied with the information on which their choices were based.

Other findings of this study suggest that individuals not only feel sufficiently well-informed and able to make such choices, but also attach great importance to all types of choice in VET. Choice of the following items were identified as '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%). Choices of study mode and subjects/modules are relatively more important than choice of provider. Although choice of modes of attendance, fee-payment and assessment are ranked lower than choice of provider, such choices are important to at least six in ten individuals who undertake further study in VET. Different cohorts value different types of choice in VET to varying degrees. For instance, greater importance was placed on choice of fee-payment mode by recipients of the Youth Allowance (76%), Austudy (84%) and government/other scholarships (75%), than by other respondents (55%).

These findings - together with those that suggest that mature-aged individuals are active and independent choice-makers - 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 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 policy preoccupation with diversifying the range of VET providers is missing the mark.

Conclusions and 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 and competitive tendering sectors of VET should be redesigned in accordance with the broad principles of flexible customisation that operate in the context of User Choice. The limited relevance and influence of current employer and job requirements on the choices of individual learners also suggest that the content and assessment of non-apprenticeship programs should be reoriented to respond more to the needs, interests and aspirations of individual learners. Individuals who wish to

gain promotion, change career direction, re-enter the workforce or higher education via VET, and develop their personal interests and skills accounted for a significant majority of survey respondents. These and related findings highlight the need for a more learner-driven VET system that embraces the multiple goals and motivations of individuals, vocational and non-vocational, and enhances the scope for choice.

By implication, this suggests that consideration should be given to redesigning curriculum and credentialing frameworks 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 diverse subjects and modules into individualised 'learning packages' that best meet their particular 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 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 direct negotiation of learning plans and outcomes.

Such an approach is consistent with the new national strategy for VET in 2004-2010, which places individuals alongside employers '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. Both initiatives aim to foster greater choice and flexibility within VET qualification frameworks so that individuals, especially adults, are enabled to construct learning and career paths that accord with their personal goals and ambitions, and support their engagement in lifelong learning and development.

Steps in these directions would also necessitate improvements in the quantity, quality and accessibility of VET information, as previously noted. The growing reliance on self-initiated searches for VET information via the Internet points to the need to enhance the online information currently provided by official government sources. Enhancements to the design, content and navigability of official VET websites are essential if government is to remain in step with, if not ahead of, the choice-making preferences and processes of individual clients. Before rushing headlong into the information age however, social access and ethical issues must be addressed. As 'information alone may be necessary to career decision-making, but not in itself sufficient' to ensure wise choices, young people and disadvantaged groups may require more concerted guidance, support and skills development in information processing (Norton Grubb 2002, p.4). Access to the Internet and requisite ICT skills are not enjoyed by all individuals. Some may be disadvantaged if online information services ignore their special needs. Government has a responsibility to ensure, by exhortation or regulation, that people of all ages and circumstances have access to high quality and impartial information, including on the Internet (Watts 2001).

Individuals appear to be taking an increasingly consumerist approach to choosing VET courses and providers. In doing so, many appear to be adopting the individualistic orientations, consumer attitudes and rational behaviours that

international agencies and national governments advocate as a necessary response to globalisation and related challenges. Despite the increased riskiness and complexity of their journeys, 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 opportunities to take a more active role in steering their courses in and through VET. If however individuals' rising expectations of choice and self-direction are not satisfied, their motivation to become and remain lifelong learners is likely to decline. Ironically if the realities of choice in VET markets do not reflect the rhetoric of government, regardless of how persuasive it may be, individual consumers may decide (in their rational self-interests) to take their custom elsewhere.

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