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**Choice, transitions and learning careers:
Issues and implications for vocational education
and training policy**

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Introduction

The emergence of a 'risk society' (Beck 1992) has been initiated in recent years by profound social, political and economic forces, including globalisation, economic restructuring, the dismantling of the welfare state, demographic change, technological innovation, and changes in work organisation and employment patterns. Increasing rates of skills obsolescence, job turnover, and unemployment and underemployment signal the demise of 'front-loaded' education, linear career paths and jobs-for-life. Research reviewed by Selby Smith et al (2001) and Ziguras et al (2004) suggests that such trends and implications apply in Australia. The associated 'risks and opportunities' highlight the need for lifelong learning to become 'a reality for all' (OECD 1996, 70).

Against this background, the concept of 'transitional labour markets' was conceived to address the risks and problems associated with the rise of unemployment, particularly economic insecurity and social exclusion. Transitional labour markets amount to: 'A universal strategy of job sharing, life-long learning and temporarily subsidized jobs based on entitlements [which] could create transitional forms of employment as a significant alternative to unemployment.' (Schmid 1995, 453)

A parallel development has been the reconfiguration of vocational education and training (VET) in many OECD countries within a quasi-market framework (Anderson et al 2004). 'Quasi-markets' involve the use of market-like mechanisms to allocate government funds to both public and private providers of public services, such as VET. According to quasi-market theory, increased user choice exerts competitive pressure on providers to improve the efficiency, responsiveness and quality of service delivery (Le Grand and Bartlett 1993). In Australia, the creation of quasi-markets in VET during the 1990s has induced a massive proliferation of government-recognised providers, and a diversification of courses and qualifications (Anderson 1997, in press a).

Lifelong learning policies and quasi-markets for VET require, and have supposedly 'empowered', individuals to exercise greater choice and responsibility for their own learning, employability and career development, and to negotiate transitions through education, training and labour markets. According to official rhetoric, clients are more able to 'shop around' for the training that best meets their needs and preferences (Kemp 1996). In the OECD's (1996, 89) view, lifelong learning is not only 'a right to be exercised, but [also] a necessary requirement of participation.' Marketisation, however, potentially injects greater risk and complexity into choice and transition processes, as individuals are now expected to navigate a maze of pathways and lifelong learning opportunities (Anderson 1999b; ILO 2002).

This paper aims to contribute to debate about the nature and role of VET in transitional labour markets. It begins with an examination of the concept of transitional labour markets and the role of learning therein. Some key findings of a study of choice and transitions in the Australian VET sector are then presented, in light of which various issues and implications for both VET policy and provision and transitional labour market theory and research are discussed.

Transitional labour markets

The theory of transitional labour markets (TLMs) represents a much-needed and overdue attempt to rethink many of the assumptions of the post-war welfare state in the light of new social and economic conditions and their attendant 'manufactured risks' (Giddens 1994). At the heart of TLM theory is the recognition that the goal of full employment has become largely unachievable, if not obsolete, in the wake of structural economic change and the rise of non-standard and precarious forms of employment. As Schmid (1998, abstract) observes, 'The model of continuous and dependent full-time employment is no longer up to date, although it still implicitly underlies many institutional arrangements.'

TLM theory aims to construct a new policy settlement between economic and social interests around a revised concept of full employment – one that no longer presumes single, linear, lifetime careers characterised by full-time paid employment. TLM theory redefines 'full employment' as 'employment for all', a goal that is deemed to be both achievable and essential, given the crucial role of paid work in promoting economic security and social integration. Employment for all, it is argued, can be realised through a combination of reduced working hours, redistribution of paid employment opportunities, and complementary policy measures. TLMs 'allow or support the change of employment status or the combination of labour market work with other socially (and to some extent even economically) useful activities.' (Schmid 1998, abstract)

While accepting the economic case for a flexible workforce, TLM theorists aim to balance this objective with social justice outcomes for people marginalised in, or excluded from, the labour market:

The argument is that the borders between the labour market and other social systems have to become more open for transitory states between paid work and gainful non-market activities which preserve and enhance future employability ... the institutionalisation of transitional labour markets would encourage mobility ('transitions') across the border of social systems without inducing downward spirals of social exclusion by optimising people's lifetime social participation. (Schmid 1998, 2)

As such, TLM theorists are attuned to the multiple and increasingly risky transitions that individuals undergo nowadays. Although sympathetic to human capital theory, TLM theory implicitly problematises the ideal-type of individuals as rational actors who pursue their economic self-interests in isolation from their other identities and interests. Influenced by life course theory, which foregrounds processes of transition interspersed by 'critical events', TLM theory recognises the multi-dimensional and unpredictable nature of human life courses. In this sense, TLM theory subsumes *homo economicus* within a new and more complex ideal-type, *homo transitus*.

Over their life course, individuals can undergo five 'critical transitions' between:

- one employer, or employment status, and another (e.g. full- and part-time work);
- unemployment and employment;
- education or training and employment;
- unpaid, private (e.g. family) work and paid employment; and
- employment and retirement (Schmid 1998).

One of the main aims of TLM theory is to design innovative institutional mechanisms to support and facilitate such transitions, so as to maximise participation and reduce social exclusion. In doing so, account is taken of the emergent phenomenon of individualisation, 'a new element of modernisation' which denotes the phenomenon wherein 'individuals are increasingly seeing themselves as the creators of their own, non-collective life plans.' (Schmid 1998, 3) Although its extent and implications remain somewhat unclear, individualisation can be viewed as a manifestation of, and response to, the new risk society. Correspondingly, TLMs valorise and activate individual choice and agency.

TLMs are characterised by four principles, which: combine paid employment with other socially useful activities; combine various income sources (e.g. wages and transfer payments); provide legally valid entitlements for transitional employment; and finance employment and other socially useful activities, rather than unemployment. Four conditions must be satisfied if TLMs are to be effective:

- *empowerment*: 'to increase the capacity of individuals to cope with the (new) risks of social life';
- *sustainable employment and income*: 'to "make transitions pay" for keeping or increasing employability';
- *flexible co-ordination*: 'a new balance between centralised regulations and self-organisation by delegating more decision making power to individuals or local agencies in order to adjust to individual needs and local circumstances'; and
- *co-operation*: to 'support or stimulate evolving local networks and public-private-partnerships of implementation' (Schmid 1998, 10).

Viewed in conjunction with the life course perspective and transition typology of TLM theory, these principles and conditions provide a 'new regulative framework' for realigning social with economic institutions and managing the social risks created by economic flexibility. As Schmid and Schömann (2003, 2) explain:

Transitional labour markets can be seen as risk management institutions. They extend conventional social policy by encouraging people to risk transitions between different employment relationships ... or to combine such relationships

In sum, TLMs aim to provide '*flexicurity*', which denotes 'a device to combine flexibility and security' (Schmid and Schömann 2003, 3).

Transitions between education, training and employment

The role of lifelong learning and its contribution to the maintenance of employability and social inclusion is central to TLMs. The starting premise is that just as the norm of a lifetime career has become increasingly redundant in the wake of rapid change, so too has the related model of front-loaded education. 'Front-loaded education' refers to the longstanding practice of confining education to the pre-employment phase of a career. 'The institutionalisation of *life-long learning* is a requisite for upward spirals or sustainable employment careers throughout the life-cycle.' (Schmid 1998, 35) It necessitates 'far-reaching changes' in institutions, individual behaviour and firms' human resources management practices (Schömann 2002, 21).

Learning is significant at two levels in TLMs. First, it is argued that individuals should develop their 'adjustment capacity', by accumulating 'potentials' or personal resources, in order to negotiate 'critical transitions' successfully. As Schmid (1998, 7) explains, '*Critical transitions* ... occur when such (life) events result in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one's behaviour and relationships'. Although not explicitly described in such terms, informal learning is therefore integral to the process of self-empowerment.

Second, learning as a formally accredited and credentialed process of skills formation is viewed as one in which individuals must participate on a lifelong basis if they are to remain flexible and adaptable to changing labour market demand. TLM research suggests that low skilled people are among those at highest risk of falling into long-term unemployment. In consequence, Schmid and Schömann (2003, 21) argue that:

A closer link of publicly supported training activities to the labour market and firms' skill needs, as proposed by the concept of transitional labour markets in [the] form of multiple transitions or simultaneous organisation of working and learning, is an important element to improve social integration through labour market policies.

Institutional arrangements that incorporate lifelong learning 'can supplement or counteract the role of the market by correcting for market failure due to under-investment of specific target groups in continuing training efforts' (Schmid and Schömann 2003, 20). Such arrangements include: the combination of working time reduction with lifelong learning; improved incentives for lifelong learning via sabbatical leave or job rotation for training purposes; and establishment of 'alternating further training systems', modelled on apprenticeships (Schmid 1998). As Schmid and Schömann (2003, 20) note, 'These forms ... add a training component to job mobility which occurs as part of either the market process or individual preferences.'

The research study

The research project that forms the main basis of this paper can be loosely classified as a study of 'training transitions' (Reci and de Bruijn 2004). It investigated: patterns of participation and transitions in VET; contexts, processes and drivers of choice; and implications for VET policy (Anderson 2003). The research comprised two elements, the first of which entailed a review of Australian and international literature. Existing research on choice and transitions in post-school VET was found to be sparse. Most studies focus on initial school-to-work transitions. The few that examine adult choice pay insufficient attention to age and life stage, and largely overlook the new market context and dynamics of choice in VET (see Anderson in press b).

The second element involved a national online survey of VET students enrolled at Registered Training Organisations in late 2002. Comprising a total of 504 returns, the sample was small, self-selected and, except with respect to age, unrepresentative of the total VET student population. To put the sample into perspective, there were around 1.69 million students enrolled in publicly funded VET programs in 2002 (NCVER 2003b). The nature and timing of survey administration meant that the sample was limited to: students with access to information and communications technology (ICT); those with adequate ICT and literacy skills; and module and course completers. As it was administered at the end of the academic year, responses may also have been subject to *post hoc* rationalisation. The findings should be qualified accordingly, and viewed as indicative rather than definitive.

The study was neither framed nor informed by TLM theory, with which the author has only recently become acquainted. However, it attempted to investigate the impact of many of the same social and economic trends that lie behind TLM theory, and their implications for participation in VET and lifelong learning. To this extent, the research findings provide a mirror, albeit small, for reflecting on and raising issues about aspects of TLM theory and the role of training transitions. Due to space limitations, only a few key findings have been selected for this paper. 'Training', 'VET' and 'further education and training' are used interchangeably below.

Learning and working transitions

The study provides a snapshot of the transitions that the respondents were undergoing at the time of the survey, the frequency of job turnover, career change and post-school study, and motivations to engage in VET. The data yield a number of significant insights into the nature of training transitions, as outlined below.

Survey respondents were undergoing a range of transitions through VET *from*: other types of education and training, including school (17%), apprenticeships or traineeships (1%), TAFE (9%), and university (5%); unemployment (10%); employment (42%); child-rearing/family care (12%); and other (5%). While enrolled in VET, 19% were casually employed, 11% were unemployed, and 25% were not in the labour force. Well over half (55%) the respondents were therefore marginal to, or non-participants in, the labour force. Only 29% were full-time employed and 15% were part-time employed.

Employment status appears to have a significant bearing on enrolment mode. A majority of respondents who were casually employed (67%), unemployed (81%) or not in the labour force (70%) were enrolled on a full-time basis. In contrast, 74% of those in full-time employment were enrolled on a part-time basis.

The number of prior jobs (of at least 6 months duration) held by respondents increased with age. The proportion of survey respondents who had held 3-5 jobs since leaving school leapt dramatically to 69% for the 25-29 years age group, which is 26% and 36% higher than for those aged 30-39 years and 40-49 years respectively.

Overall, the research suggests that either job turnover has increased over the long run and/or people are entering jobs of shorter duration. For instance, significant proportions of the following age groups had only held 1-2 jobs since leaving school: 30-39 years (19%); 40-49 years (17%); and 50-59 years (15%). The apparent increase in job turnover or reduction in job duration is suggested by the finding that 40% of respondents aged 17 years or less, and 62% of those aged 18-19 years, had already held 1-2 jobs. The data also suggest that VET learners currently aged 20-29 years have held more jobs, possibly of shorter duration, than was previously the case. Over one third (36%) of respondents aged 50-59 years had held ten or more jobs, possibly because people over 55 years are more likely to be retrenched (Borland 2000).

Data on the prior educational participation of respondents indicate that lifelong learning is already a reality for many VET students. Individuals appear to be enrolling more frequently in formal accredited courses after leaving school, and at an earlier age, than was previously the case. For instance, around two in ten (a higher than average proportion of) respondents in both the 25-29 year and 30-39 year age groups had enrolled in 4-5 courses since leaving school. Less than two in ten

respondents aged 40-49 years had enrolled in only one course since leaving school, roughly the same proportion as for the 25-29 year and 30-39 year age groups. Roughly six in ten respondents aged between 20-24 years and 25-29 years, compared to 45% of all respondents, had enrolled in 2-3 formal post-school courses. Three in ten (30%) respondents aged 50-59 years had enrolled in 6 or more courses.

The frequency of career change appears to have been rising among individuals undertaking VET courses over the past two decades. Around two in ten of the following age groups had experienced 3 career changes since leaving school, and roughly one in ten had experienced 4 or more career changes: 25-29 years; 30-39 years; and 40-49 years. A majority (63%) of those aged 50-59 years had undergone 3 or more career changes. On average, VET students appear to have undergone a career change with every 2-3 job changes. The rate of career change increases steadily for people with higher rates of job turnover.

The rate of post-school course enrolment correlates fairly closely to the rate of career change. As the number of career changes increases, so too does the number of post-school enrolments in formal courses. In this regard, it is noteworthy that 40% of respondents who had undergone 4 or more career changes had also enrolled in at least 4 post-school courses.

These findings provide a number of potentially significant insights into the changing patterns of work and learning over individuals' lifetimes. At a general level, the high rates of job turnover and career change suggest that individuals undergo multiple labour market transitions throughout their lifetimes, and that most of these transitions are broken and reoriented on a reasonably frequent basis. Only 35% of respondents had not undergone a career change, many of whom were young and still engaged in 'front-end' study. The proportion of individuals who had not undergone a career change declined steadily with age, and dropped markedly for those aged 25 years and above. While 24% of respondents aged 25-29 years had not undergone a career change, this fell to only 9% for those aged 50-59 years.

Broadly speaking, individuals engaged in VET typically follow zigzag trajectories characterised by frequent interruptions or changes in direction. Relatively few respondents had experienced linear career trajectories and unidirectional study sequences. The data suggest that individuals are using VET qualifications to navigate changing career trajectories during their working lives. As discussed shortly, individuals' reasons for enrolling in VET vary, as do the directions subsequently taken. But most appear to use VET courses to reorient themselves and acquire new skills and qualifications. Typically, individuals appear to undertake 2-3 formal courses after leaving school, but 24% enrol in 4 or more. How successful they are in navigating their new trajectories, and whether their new qualifications help them to reach their intended destinations, is unclear and requires more research.

Individual motivations

Strategies to promote lifelong learning by adults necessitate a better understanding of the factors that motivate individuals to engage in further training. Current VET policy gives precedence to increasing employability, on the assumption that individuals are solely or largely motivated to enrol in VET courses for extrinsic and work-related reasons (Anderson 1998). However, this and other studies of choice identify the intrinsic value of study as a strong motivating factor (see Connelly and Halliday 2001; Maxwell et al 2000; Miller et al 2001; Sargant and Aldridge 2002).

Table 1: Main reason for enrolling in further study (%)

	Survey	Australia 2001 a	
	Respondents	Graduates	Module Completers
Vocational or work-related reasons	75	79	64
<i>To get a job (or own business)</i>	24	31	21
<i>To try for a different career</i>	17	11	9
<i>To get extra skills for my job</i>	12	12	17
<i>To get a better job or promotion</i>	12	9	7
<i>I always wanted to do this course/career</i>	9	n/a	n/a
<i>It was a requirement of my job</i>	3	16	10
Non-vocational reasons	19	21	29
<i>For interest or personal development</i>	15	14	25
<i>To get into another course of study</i>	4	7	4
Other reasons	5	4	6
Total	100	100	100

a Data are sourced from NCVER (2003a)

The most common reasons for enrolling in VET were: 'to get a job (or own business)' (24%); 'to try for a different career' (17%); 'for interest or personal development' (15%); 'to get a better job or promotion' (12%); and 'to get extra skills for my job' (12%). As Table 1 shows, respondents' motives correspond roughly to those of all VET graduates and module completers in 2001 (NCVER 2003a).

Both data sets show that vocational or work-related objectives account for a substantial majority of individuals' main reasons for enrolling in VET. However, they also suggest that only a small proportion enrol in VET for reasons relating to their *current* jobs. The survey for the present study shows that only 15% fell into this category, with 12% enrolling in VET 'to get extra skills for my job' and 3% because 'it was a requirement of my job'. Such reasons are overshadowed by motives relating to future or *anticipated* job and career outcomes.

Unlike the national survey, participants in this study were asked to nominate and rank up to three main reasons for enrolling in VET. Consistent with prior research (see Anderson in press b), respondents' motives for enrolling in VET were typically multi-factorial. Seven in ten (70%) identified three main reasons for enrolling in VET courses, 16% identified two reasons, and 13% identified one reason only. When all such responses are aggregated (see Table 2), the most common reasons were: '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%); and 'to get a better job or promotion' (12%). Thus, while vocational and work-related objectives collectively remain prominent, 'for interest or personal development' was the single most common motive.

Table 2: Aggregate reasons for enrolling 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
Other reasons	10
Total	100

Viewed from another perspective, the data shed some light on the extent to which *necessity* and *aspiration* motivate individuals to engage in VET. Although precise definitions and categorisations are difficult, necessity appears to account for about 32% of reasons: 'to get a job (or own business)' (16%), 'to get extra skills for my job' (13%), and 'it was a requirement of my job' (3%). Aspiration, however, accounts for 60% of reasons for enrolling in VET, including: 'for interest or personal development' (19%); 'to try for a different career' (14%); 'to get a better job or promotion' (12%); 'I always wanted to do this course/career' (10%); and 'to get into another course of study' (5%). These data suggest that personal aspirations are important motivators for individuals who enrol in VET, and more so than is officially acknowledged.

Similarly, Connelly and Halliday (2001) find that individual choices in further education and training are motivated by intrinsic reasons to a significant extent. The findings of the present study concur, but also suggest that individual motivation is multi-faceted. The data show that the 19% of respondents who had engaged in VET 'for interest or personal development' were also motivated by at least one extrinsic reason. In other words, individuals enrol in VET for reasons related to both the

extrinsic, or instrumental (exchange), value of VET qualifications and their intrinsic worth in terms of personal growth and development.

The relative significance of extrinsic/vocational and intrinsic/non-vocational motives can be assessed in relation to the types of training transitions that respondents were undergoing. Individuals who had been employed prior to enrolling in VET were generally motivated more by extrinsic than intrinsic reasons. Respondents whose main activity in the year prior to enrolment was employment (full-time, part-time or casual) gave the following main reasons for undertaking VET: 'to try for a different career' (24%), 'to get extra skills for my job' (20%), and 'to get a better job or promotion' (19%).

Contrary to expectations, individuals who were outside the paid workforce prior to enrolling in VET were motivated to a larger extent by both extrinsic and intrinsic factors. Those who were unemployed (57%) in the year prior to enrolment, or had been raising children/caring for family members (34%), identified 'to get a job (or own business)' as their main reason for enrolling in VET. Their second and third main reasons were: 'to try for a different career' (14% and 24%) and 'for interest or personal development' (14% and 19%). Compared to those who had been employed in the year prior to enrolment, a higher proportion of those who had been unemployed or not in the labour force were motivated to enrol in VET for its intrinsic value. Maxwell et al (2000) and Miller et al (2001) also found that unemployed people who undertook further training were motivated by intrinsic factors.

The data reveal changing patterns of motivation across age groups. With respect to vocational and work-related reasons, 'to get a job (or own business)' was the most common reason for enrolling in VET for younger age groups: 17 years or less (23%); 18-19 years (27%); and 20-24 years (25%). Economic necessity tends, therefore, to be the main driver of young adults' choices. For a majority of people aged 25 years and above, the emphasis shifts progressively from career-starting to career development and/or change. The most common reason for respondents aged 25-29 years was 'to get a better job or promotion' (21%), while 'to try for a different career' was the main reason for those aged 30-39 years (26%) and 40-49 years (23%). 'To get extra skills for my job' was the main reason for those aged 50-59 years (27%). With the partial exception of the latter group, aspiration typically assumed greater significance than necessity from the mid-twenties upwards. When the second and third main reasons for enrolling in VET are examined, the intrinsic value of VET study comes to the fore for all age groups (except for those aged 20-24 years).

Overall, the findings suggest that most individuals are motivated in the first instance by vocational or work-related reasons. The focus of such motivations, however, shifts from initial job acquisition to post-initial career development at about 25 years and above, with economic necessity progressively being overshadowed by personal aspiration. Intrinsic or non-vocational motives appear to displace extrinsic or

vocational reasons as the main drivers of participation in VET, particularly at 30 years and above.

The above analysis sheds some useful light on the reasons why individuals enrol in VET. The data reflect the diverse range and changing mix of factors that shape the nature and direction of individual learning and career trajectories at different stages of the life course. In many respects, the most significant findings relate to the influence of age and life stage. While other data suggest that gender, geographical location, employment status and other demographic factors influence individual choices to some degree, the more significant changes in the nature and direction of learning and career trajectories appear to be linked to age progression and associated changes in individuals' circumstances and aspirations.

Individual choice: domains, processes and preferences

Three domains of choice exist in the publicly funded VET system, corresponding to its new quasi-market structure: the direct funding or non-market sector; the competitive tendering market; and the User Choice market. Individual learners are defined as the 'clients' in the direct funding/non-market sector (restricted to public providers) and tendering market (open to public and private providers), wherein government funds and purchases training respectively. Employers (theoretically) in conjunction with their apprentices or trainees are defined as the 'user' in the User Choice market (open to public and private providers).

As Table 3 shows, the scope for client choice varies considerably between these three domains. As 'composite consumers', clients in the User Choice market enjoy considerable choice, although employers exercise greater control than apprentices and trainees (Schofield 2000). In the other two domains, which collectively account for around four in five VET enrolments, individual learners are restricted to choice of course and provider 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 ... [Such] clients should ... be given maximum information and the opportunity for choice between provider and type of training program. (ANTA 1996, 18)

The Australian National Training Authority (2003, 6) subsequently reiterated this rationale, arguing that the complexity of VET 'denies (clients) the ability to make informed choices about the "what, where, when and how" of training.'

The data suggest that a significant proportion of individuals who decide to engage in VET actively and consciously exercise choice; specifically, 43% of respondents had 'shopped around' for their course/provider. Larger proportions of the following

groups had shopped around: females (45%), and those who had enrolled in 4-5 (57%) or 6 or more (49%) formal post-school courses. With respect to labour market status, the most active choosers were: part-time employees (57%); and those who were unemployed and looking for work (48%). In all, 15% of respondents were unable to exercise choice at all. Individuals appear to begin exercising choice in VET in a more active and independent manner when they enter the 20-24 years age group.

Table 3: Domains of choice in VET

	Course	Provider	Content	Delivery	Assessment
Direct funding/non-market	✓	✓	×	×	×
Tendering market	✓	✓	×	×	×
User Choice market	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Contrary to expectations, the findings suggest that the introduction of quasi-markets in VET has not unduly complicated the choice process. Only 10% and 5% of respondents experienced difficulties choosing their course and provider respectively. Available information about courses and providers also appears to be generally adequate from a client perspective. Only 13% and 7% of respondents respectively would 'probably' or 'definitely' have chosen a different course or provider had they had access to better/more information. Nonetheless, respondents identified several ways in which information provision could be improved. Dissatisfaction with information provision may have been higher had the survey population included students who withdrew prior to completing their studies.

Other data suggest that learners attach great importance to all types of choice in VET. Respondents rated the following types of choice as 'very important' or 'important':

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

Noteworthy is that choices of course/career, study mode and subjects/modules are equally important for individual learners as choice of provider.

Different cohorts value different types of choice to varying degrees. Females attached greater importance than males to choice of: study mode (88%:72%); subjects/modules (88%:76%); attendance times (77%:68%); mode of assessment (65%:52%); and mode of fee payment (64%:56%). With regard to employment status while studying:

- full-time employees attached relatively less importance than other groups to choice of provider (78%), attendance time (68%), and mode of payment (48%);
- part-time employees attached high importance to all types of choice, particularly choice of subjects/modules (96%), attendance time (88%), assessment mode (69%), and mode of fee payment (64%);
- casual employees attached consistently high importance to all types of choices;
- the unemployed attached higher than average importance to choice of course (98%) and much greater importance to choice of fee-payment mode (74%); and
- respondents not in the labour force attached higher than average importance to choice of course (98%) and mode of fee payment (67%).

These findings, together with those that suggest that adult learners are active choosers who are largely satisfied with their choices and available information, call into question the official rationale for restricting individual learners to choice of course and provider. Moreover, they imply that individuals wish to shape their learning and transitions to a greater extent than current policy settings allow.

Issues and implications for VET and transitional labour markets

The concept of transitional labour markets is a major contribution to debates about the nature and implications of contemporary social and economic change, and strategies for responding to the increased risks and insecurities created by precarious employment. The concept has been investigated and elaborated through a substantial and growing body of research. However, as Schömann (2002, 27-28) notes, attention has been focused mostly on:

... the school-to-work transition, and on other training related to labour market processes. Less attention has been paid to the transitional labour market related to further education and training, although it is probably more important in our age of rapid technological change.

The following section presents some key observations drawn from the research on choice and transitions in VET, and reflects on their potential implications for VET policy and provision and TLM theory and research.

Observation 1: *Individuals who return to study in VET are undergoing a number of critical transitions, which correspond broadly with the TLM typology, including from: other forms of education or training, unemployment, employment, and child rearing/family care, among others. Such transitions appear to be influenced by age and life stage to a greater extent than gender, geographical location or other demographic factors, despite the important mediating influence that the latter factors exert. It is also worth noting that a significant proportion of individuals were undertaking extended learning transitions, including from school-to-VET, from VET-to-VET, and from university-to-VET.*

This observation is consistent with that of Schömann and O'Connell (2002, 3):

Education and training as well as labour market policies are rarely defined as policies which address particular phases of the life course, but ... differing policy domains are of varying importance at different stages of the life course. So initial education and training may be of greatest importance early in the life course, while continuing training may have greater influence later in life.

In broad terms, therefore, the study findings suggest that the concept of TLMs is a fruitful device for analysing life transitions and rethinking current policy assumptions and settings in VET. As Ziguras et al (2004, 3) argue, the life course transitions identified in TLM theory already exist in Australia, but 'the policy levers to support and regulate TLMs are based on outdated assumptions'. One important reform would be to adopt a life course approach to VET policy and provision that takes account of not only demographic factors such as class and gender, but also 'the more immediate social situations of individuals (like family and work dynamics) and the ways in which these social factors play out at the level of individual decision-making.' (Davey and Jamieson 2003, 270)

***Observation 2:** Lifelong learning is already a reality for most people who embark on transitions through VET, the majority of whom undergo several, and often numerous, job and career changes.* Despite the lack of a national policy framework for lifelong learning in Australia (Kearns et al 1999), and the absence of explicit financial or other incentives and supports to encourage participation in learning on an ongoing basis, a significant proportion of individuals who enrol in VET do so in order to maintain their employability and update their skills and qualifications. In effect, they appear to be responding to the social and economic forces that the OECD (1996) and ILO (2002) argue necessitate lifelong learning, by adopting the identity of a 'worker-learner' and combining paid or unpaid employment with study on a regular basis.

This observation draws attention to two key premises of TLM theory. First, it confirms that the norm of a single, linear, lifetime career is irrelevant, at least for individuals in VET. The high rates of career change and post-school course enrolments suggest that individuals are engaged in the construction of 'portfolio careers' that involve the progressive accumulation of work experience, skills and qualifications. These new processes of career formation suggest that labour market and VET policies should be realigned accordingly. Second, the frequency of job turnover, career change and post-school course enrolments among respondents suggests the need to abandon the front-loaded model of education. As Davey and Jamieson (2003, 267) argue, the challenge is 'to confront the "education-work-retirement" life course model and the view that education is something only for those under 25'.

Observation 3: *Individuals embark on further study in VET with a diverse range of both extrinsic/vocational and intrinsic/non-vocational motives, the mix and balance of which changes with age, individual circumstances and life stage. Moreover, in using VET courses and qualifications to navigate a variety of critical life transitions, individuals are attempting to achieve multiple outcomes by combining study with paid or unpaid work and other activities in ways, and to the extent, allowed by existing institutional arrangements.*

Apart from adding weight to the argument for a life course approach to VET, this observation signals the need to review and reform the institution of VET in light of the four conditions for effective TLMs. The main aims should be to ensure that VET empowers individuals to manage the risks associated with multiple transitions, underpins sustainable employment and income during the course of training transitions, and devolves greater decision making power to individuals within a framework of flexible coordination. The design features of a TLM-oriented VET system is a topic for another paper.

Observation 4: *The predominance of vocational or work-related motives suggests that most VET learners undertake critical transitions relating to their employability and labour market status. Apart from the initial transition from school, however, such transitions appear to be motivated less by necessity and current employment needs, and more by aspiration and future or anticipated labour market outcomes.*

This observation suggests that while a strong focus should be maintained on strategies to support youth transitions to the labour market, greater attention should be paid to supporting post-initial transitions by adults, especially those at greatest risk of unemployment and social exclusion. However, in view of the limited relevance and influence of current employer and job requirements on individual choices in VET, and the prevalence of aspirational motives among learners, training transitions by adults should not be pre-structured and organised within a policy and curriculum framework dominated by current employer needs and interests, as is now the case in Australia (Anderson 1999a; Anderson et al 2004; Billett 2004).

Such findings indicate the need for a more learner-driven VET system that values and responds to the multiple goals and motives of individuals, both vocational and non-vocational, and expands their scope for choice. Reforms along these lines would realign VET with 'the paradigm shift towards empowering the individual to be the builder and architect of his or her own learning and self-development.' (ILO 2002, 13)

Observation 5: *The multi-faceted nature of individual motives and the increasing prevalence of intrinsic motives with age suggest that people are using VET not only to enhance their employability and labour market status, but also to achieve personal growth and transformation. The research suggests that this applies not only to the employed but also to unemployed people.*

This observation suggests the need to recognise that individual decisions to participate in VET are not solely, or even primarily, motivated by work-related goals. Although extrinsic motives related to human capital development and labour market outcomes remain important, VET fulfils a much broader (albeit intangible) role in the enrichment of individuals' resources, potentials and lives. By implication, this raises questions about the extent to which training transitions should be linked to, and determined by, labour market needs.

It also points to a partial blind spot in TLM theory, which 'emphasises the market and institutional aspects of qualifications, skills, certificates and training transitions in general' (Schömann 2002, 29-30), but tends to overlook the psychosocial and cultural dimensions of training transitions and their role in self-formation. Schmid (1998, 19) alludes to this when he acknowledges that 'transitions might also be voluntarily sought by individuals for virtually having "a break" in strenuous or monotonous jobs and to provide them with more flexibility in their careers.' Even here, however, individual agency is viewed as a process framed by labour market considerations. Training transitions initiated for 'non-vocational' or personal development reasons do not appear to be explicitly countenanced in TLM theory. Yet, as suggested below, such transitions may be inseparable from others in processes of self-adjustment.

Similarly, Reci and de Bruijn (2004, 32) note that TLM research neglects 'the psychological aspects – such as the degree of motivation, ambition, self-concept, and self-management – that influence the transition behaviour of individuals and their process of choices.' A better understanding of individual motivation, particularly of disadvantaged learners, is essential to the realisation of lifelong learning (see Davey and Jamieson 2003; Kearns et al 1999). Without such knowledge, the design of incentives and other mechanisms to support ongoing participation may be ineffective.

Observation 6: *The diverse range and mix of extrinsic and intrinsic motives suggest that the training transitions on which individuals embark are often provisional, fluid and multi-directional in nature, and as such are open to revision and reorientation over time. The multi-factorial nature of individuals' motives to engage in VET, and the seemingly unrelated nature of their extrinsic and intrinsic motives, suggests that they may be covering more than one base (or spreading risks) during their transitions.*

The multi-faceted nature of individuals' transitions suggests that the need for a more integrated and holistic model of critical life transitions. Notwithstanding the dynamic concept of 'coupled harmonic oscillators' (Schömann 2002) – which still assumes a degree of structural separation between subsystems and hence transitions – it may be difficult, if not artificial, to distinguish between different transitory states that may in reality be intertwined in complex and possibly irreducible ways.

Schömann (2002, 24) recognises the existence of 'bidirectional transitions' involving flows between education and the labour market. But this does not accommodate the possibility that multiple flows coexist and interact *within* ostensibly uni-directional transitions. Recí and de Bruijn (2004, 32) note a tendency in TLM transition studies to concentrate on 'the kind, nature, size and frequencies of certain flows between transitions', with insufficient attention being paid to flows within transitions. More research is required on continuity and change in transitions, particularly how 'social, historical, institutional and individual factors direct the trajectories and transitions over time.' (Recí and de Bruijn 2004, 34)

TLM researchers are alert to the need for longitudinal and integrated studies of learning, working and career development. Schömann (2002, 19) states that 'the connection between continuing learning activities and evolving careers in the labour market needs to be studied as a parallel process.' This highlights the relevance of a significant body of theory and research, originating in the United Kingdom, on the concept of 'learning career' (see Bloomer and Hodkinson 1997, 2000; Crossan et al 2003; Gallacher et al 2002; Hodkinson and Bloomer 2002). As Hodkinson and Bloomer (2002, 38) explain:

The development or evolution of a learning career is to be understood principally in terms of changes in the relationships between a learner's personal identity, his or her material and cultural surroundings and dispositions to learning ... However, transformations are also inextricably linked to the ever-changing social, cultural and economic contexts in which people live their lives, including ... those of employment and education.

Like TLM theory, learning career theory discards the traditional models of front-loaded education and linear careers, and adopts a life course perspective, which 'allows for the examination of the longitudinal dimensions of work-based learning in ways that are not constrained by restricted models of either linear progression or extreme uncertainty.' (Hodkinson and Bloomer 2002, 40) It also recognises the contextual and contingent nature of transitions, and the reflexive manner in which individuals exercise agency to construct their own learning and working identities.

To date, neither body of work has connected or conversed with the other, yet potential exists for mutually productive dialogue and insights. Learning career research could enrich both the analytical and normative components of TLM theory, particularly in relation to transitions between education and training systems and the labour market. Conversely, TLM theory provides a framework for conceptualising and analysing learning careers in relation to labour market conditions and other life course transitions, and redesigning education and training to support learning transitions.

Observation 7: *The high priority that individuals place on exercising choice in relation to a broad range of VET-related factors (including those declared 'off-limits' by official policy), together with the active and independent nature of adult learners' choice processes in VET, suggests the need to maximise the scope for individual choice and empowerment in substantive ways.*

Schömann (2002, 30) observes that:

The concept of a specific transitional labour market for training and education raises the question of who the 'market maker' is in a transitional labour market. Is it the state, firms, the social partners or individuals, or a combination of these actors? The role of each ... needs closer investigation ...

One of the main insights provided by the research is that, despite the riskiness and complexity of transitions, individuals are generally confident of their navigational skills, and value a wider range of choices than they are presently afforded. This suggests that learners would embrace an expansion of the current scope for exercising choice and steering transitions through VET. This applies to potentially at-risk groups, such as women, part-time employees and the unemployed, who were among the most active choosers. The differentiated nature of choice-making preferences suggests that central regulation would constrain, rather than empower, individuals and their diverse needs and interests. Retention of decision-making power in the hands of employers or the state would compromise the TLM conditions of empowerment and flexible coordination.

The need to empower individual learners as market makers in VET is emphasised by Maxwell et al (2000, 82, 84), who concluded in their large-scale study of choice in the Australian VET sector that 'choice is essentially a personal matter, rather than an employer-driven prerogative', and VET policy should therefore 'recognise the primary agency of student interests and needs'. This does not negate a role for employers and unions in shaping VET policy and provision, particularly in relation to apprenticeship and in-firm training. But it does underline the need to redistribute decision-making power in the direction of individual learners.

Empowerment of individuals, or for that matter any key stakeholder group, as the principal market makers in TLMs poses a number of dilemmas. Who decides what constitutes valid and legitimate training as part of a transitional strategy? Who is responsible for supporting self-initiated 'aspirational transitions' involving a change of employer or career direction, including by the unemployed? Who pays for training transitions that do not appear to have a direct link to current employer needs or a specific labour market outcome? As Tuijnman and Schömann (1997, 467) observe, 'it is impossible to predict the uses to which knowledge and skills might be put in the future.' When conflicts arise, whose interests should prevail? Such questions point to potential tensions between central regulation and self-organisation in TLMs.

Conclusion

The nature and dynamics of choice and transitions through VET, as revealed in this paper, suggest the need to realign VET policy and provision with the concept and principles of TLMs. As paid jobs-for-life disappear for an increasing proportion of the working population, and career paths become more fragmented and non-linear, lifelong learning (or at least recurrent training) becomes increasingly important and necessary. Accordingly, VET needs to be redesigned so as to prioritise the needs, interests and aspirations of *homo transitus*. The research also suggests that individuals are negotiating a range of critical transitions and participating in VET as lifelong learners, largely of their own volition and for diverse vocational and non-vocational reasons. While predisposed to exercise choice in relation to most aspects of their training transitions, the scope for individual choice is restricted by current policy arrangements. However, as Schömann and O'Connell (2002, 1) argue, 'in order to respond to a lack of employment opportunities, and to risks of unemployment and social exclusion, individuals need to be enabled to organize and pass through multiple transitions between working and learning throughout their life course.' In effect, both TLM theory and the research suggest that VET should empower individuals to manage the multiple risks and opportunities they encounter to a greater extent than is currently the case. Affording individual learners greater choice during the course of their training transitions would be an important step in this direction. Further research, however, is required to verify the underlying premises and to assess their applicability beyond the Australian context.

In light of the research, some apparent blind spots in TLM theory have been identified. It has been suggested that learning career theory and research has much to contribute to the concept and design of TLMs (and vice versa). While aware of the constraints on individual agency in career formation and the need to address structural inequalities in employment and education, 'the thrust of learning career theory points to the wisdom of replacing universal work-based learning patterns and structures with supporting systems and frameworks to maximize the chances for locally developed approaches to flourish, which are more focused to individual needs and circumstances.' (Hodkinson and Bloomer 2002, 42) Consistent with this thrust, this paper argues that individual learners should be deemed the principal market makers in VET, rather than employers or the state. This points to potential tensions between the TLM principles of empowerment and flexible coordination, given that TLM theory argues the need for a tighter connection between publicly funded training and labour market needs (Schmid and Schömann 2003; Tuijnman and Schömann 1997). The multi-faceted nature of individual motivation to participate in VET, together with the active and independent manner in which adult learners exercise choice, suggests that training transitions in TLMs may only be effective when individuals are empowered to build their own learning careers in relatively autonomous ways.

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