State Government Victoria

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

Working lives: trade and bachelor graduates ten years on

ARC Linkage study 2006–09 (LP0667939)

Contents

1 Executive summary

Aim

The aim of the project was to investigate the work, skill and benefit (WSB) trajectories experienced over ten years of skilled workers who completed their initial trade and bachelor degree qualifications at RMIT between 1994 and 1996. Understanding WSB trajectories has significance for theory and policy on skilled worker retention, careers advice to youth and lifelong learning provision.

Two questions underpinned the design and formation of the Working Lives project, each relating to issues of skill shortages and the public and private value accorded to different types of qualifications and occupations. The first question asks: where do initial qualifications of young skilled workers (trade apprentices and degree graduates) take them over the first ten years of working life? The second question asks whether the experiences of the two groups are substantially different – and if so, how and why.

The study provides a detailed and dynamic portrait of the ways in which qualified workers find employment, seek promotion, develop additional skills, tailor their careers, and in general derive a range of benefits from their education or training. It also identifies the factors, motivations and critical events influencing the decisions of participants in their respective careers (Fehring, Malley & Robinson 2008).

Key findings

1 The research confirms that family and peer influences are particularly important in early career decisions. Reflecting this, university graduates were far more likely to have parents in professional or managerial occupations.

2 Those who entered university were more likely to have had parents who preferred this pathway, and to enter straight from school. Apprentices were less likely to come straight from school, and many felt their parents would have preferred them to go to university.

3 The research suggests an important role for personal contacts in gaining employment after graduation. For apprentices, direct experience with an employer was very important. University graduates were more likely to rely on other personal contacts.

4 Once in the workforce, university graduates were more likely to change jobs and employers and win promotion. Avenues to promotion were quite different, with university graduates more likely to move into management, and apprentices into self-employment, often employing others.

5 The research tends to confirm the positive short-term outcomes from apprenticeships. Completing an apprenticeship is an extremely effective pathway to employment and tends to lead to highly stable employment, with apprentice participants reporting fewer changes of employer than the university graduates.

6 Importantly, the research also suggests that other benefits such as job satisfaction, home ownership and life satisfaction are relatively similar between graduates from apprenticeships and university courses.

7 However, by ten years post graduation, some gaps open up. Apprentices by this stage are earning less than university graduates, which is reflected in slightly lower satisfaction with their financial situation. They are also less satisfied with their prospects for promotion. Perhaps related to this, apprentices are much less likely to have undertaken further study. This suggests that the financial gap may open up further over time.

The areas of dissatisfaction with the apprenticeship pathway that emerge over time mainly relate to a lack of opportunities for further career development and promotion. There may be a need for the VET and higher education systems to consider options for upgrading the skills of tradespeople. Ensuring that VET, including apprenticeships, is contained within the structure of the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) or the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), may enable the development of more generic skills and leave pathways open to further study. The case may be even stronger for non-apprenticeship VET, which has fewer certain pathways into initial employment.

One of the key research objectives of the project was to: 'analyse and compare benefit profiles, beyond simply wage-based income, at each job shift and at ten years after graduation'. The investigation raised interesting questions in relation to the measurement of the concept of 'benefit' in the 21st century workforce and found that individuals do not only consider their working lives to be directed, or governed, solely by financial considerations.

The continued imbalance between males and females in TAFE and bachelor degree courses in this study gives rise to questions about why females do not appear to choose TAFE studies as career options. Gender-based differences affecting career trajectories also emerged, in particular the impact of parenting.

The findings of the report have implications not just for education and skills provision, but for broader workforce reform and business partnerships. The reforms outlined recently by the Victorian Government in the Blueprint for education and early childhood development (DEECD 2008) and Securing jobs for your future. Skills for Victoria (DIIRD 2008) as well as national reforms detailed in the Melbourne declaration on educational goals for young Australians (MCEETYA 2008) and the National agreement partnership on youth attainment and transitions (COAG 2009) include measures to facilitate youth pathways in the post-compulsory years and increase motivation in young people to engage or re-engage with training and education.

2 Background

Australia faces an ongoing shortage of qualified young people in many skilled occupations. Such a situation has the potential to slow growth and to threaten competitiveness in a global economy; it has become a major focus of recent government reform to education, particularly in the vocational education sector (DIIRD 2008). The current era is also characterised by rapid technological change, an aging workforce, and transformations to traditional patterns of work.

The design of this research project was shaped by two related developments in the literature on skill and work, both of which are highly pertinent to a situation of skill shortage. The first is the critical discourse surrounding 'returns to investment' in education (Blundell, Dearden & Sianesi 2004; McIntosh 2002). The second is the development of longitudinal techniques to investigate occupational progressions throughout working life (Mayer 2000; Ruspini 1999; Walters 2002; Ziguras 2005).

Public perceptions about relative job worth have traditionally been influenced by large, cross-sectional, point-in-time surveys that compare average occupational wage levels and private returns to investment in education and training. Such approaches mask the dynamic nature of career pathways and life courses; they reinforce a static understanding of the individual's place or position in the labour market, and of the benefits and motivations that drive many to change jobs. Furthermore, such approaches tend to reinforce the perception that skilled trade occupations are low-wage, low-progression and of limited value and flexibility.

Methodology

The project was designed using a retrospective quasi-longitudinal analysis covering a ten-year period using life-course methodology (Elder & Giele 2009; Fehring & Bessant 2009; Giele & Elder 1998; Somekh & Lewin 2005). A life-course perspective emphasises both the importance of social and historical influences on people's lives and, conversely, the importance of human agency and the interactivity of individuals with their settings.

Data gathering for the project occurred in three stages:

Stage 1 consisted of a self-report questionnaire providing retrospective descriptions of education outcomes and employment journeys with respondents explaining why and how particular occupational or life events occurred (N=179).

Stage 2 involved extended telephone interviews with a sub-sample of Stage 1 respondents (N=94).

Stage 3 comprised intensive case studies selected from Stage 2 respondents which explored various interactions between job histories, skills development and other life events. This stage sought to provide a rich description of the motivational factors and critical events that influenced participants' decision-making at various stages of their working lives. Stage 3 brings the general data, its patterns and shifts, into individual focus in order to address issues of: motivation, job satisfaction, perceived benefits and change agents such as family/parenting considerations and workplace influences on career decisions (N=12).

This research makes two significant contributions to the existing information about the outcomes from different forms of study – a long-term (ten-year) perspective, and a more qualitative view of the benefits of the qualification. The 'retrospective longitudinal' design also allows reflection on the process of career development over time.

3   Findings

The study produced two major reports, referred to as Stage 1 and 2 Findings and Stage 3 Findings. Stage 1 and 2 Findings (Fehring, Malley & Robinson 2008) and Stage 3 Findings (Fehring, Malley & Herring 2009) are available at: <http://www.rmit.edu.au/browse;ID=0rmaoy8jxuwwz>.

Characteristics of respondents

The research design was deliberately exploratory and therefore not intended to be representative of the trajectories for all working lives. To minimise variation, however, membership of the participant sample was restricted on the basis of the following characteristics, namely that each participant:

- was 24 years of age or under at the time of course completion
- was an Australian resident or citizen
- had completed her/his course between 1994 and 1996, at the same institution (RMIT)
- had completed vocational qualifications in the broadly comparable fields illustrated in tables 1 and 2.

Table 1: Apprentice sample – by trade course completed and gender (N=54)

Apprentices	Per cent		
	Males	Females	Persons
Plumbing	27	–	24
Electrical/electronics	14	–	13
Refrigeration	22	–	20
Printing	25	–	22
Optical	8	60	13
Dental technician	2	40	6
Missing	2	–	2
Total sample	100	100	100

Table 2: Graduate sample: by higher education course completed and gender (N=125)

Degree graduates	Per cent		
	Males	Females	Persons
Physical sciences	15	8	11
Maths & computer science	15	3	8
Health sciences	17	49	35
Food & hospitality	4	14	10
Environment	15	14	14
Engineering	34	11	21
Missing	–	1	1
Total sample	100	100	100

From Stage 1 and 2 data, broad categories of responses to an open-ended question about why the members of each sample undertook the tertiary programs they did were recorded, and are shown in table 3.

Table 3: Initial influences on post-secondary career and higher education studies (per cent of Stage 2 respondents) (N=54)

	Apprentices		Degree graduates		
	Males	Persons	Males	Females	Persons
	Per cent		Per cent		
Family influence	81	79	31	26	28
Significant others– teachers, friends	4	7	4	15	11
Good at this subject area when at school	4	3	35	44	40
Work experience when at school	15	14	8	13	11
RMIT Open Day	–	–	23	26	25
RMIT course reputation	–	–	8	33	23
Interested in this area of work	48	45	54	41	46
Good career prospects	33	31	27	8	15
Personal goals	4	3	4	8	6
Advantage of income while training	15	17	12	–	5
Constrained choice	26	28	15	13	14
Other	11	14	12	21	17
*Number of respondents	27	29	26	39	65

*Percentages total more than 100 due to multiple responses

In general, degree graduates indicated a broader range of reasons for undertaking their post-school qualifications than did trade apprentices. Table 3 shows the strong influence of family on decisions about post-school options. This familial influence was much stronger for apprentices (79 per cent of whom mentioned it) than for graduates (28 per cent did so). The influence of 'significant others' such as teachers and friends was less frequently cited by respondents (seven per cent of apprentices and 11 per cent of graduates), and more often by females than by males. Almost half of the respondents in both samples (45–46 per cent) said they undertook their training because they were interested in the area of work represented by their respective qualifications. Accomplishment in a relevant subject area at school was an incentive for the higher education group (40 per cent), but not for apprentices (three per cent). Relevant work experience while at school was noted as an influence on subsequent choice of career pathways by 14 per cent of apprentices and 11 per cent of graduates. Among apprentices, both good career prospects (31 per cent) and access to income while training (17 per cent) were cited as important factors influencing the decision to pursue a trade qualification.

4 Findings Stage 3

Overview of major influences affecting choices

The range of influences affecting the career choices of all 12 case study participants, both TAFE and higher education, is shown in figure 1.

Figure 1: Major influences affecting choices
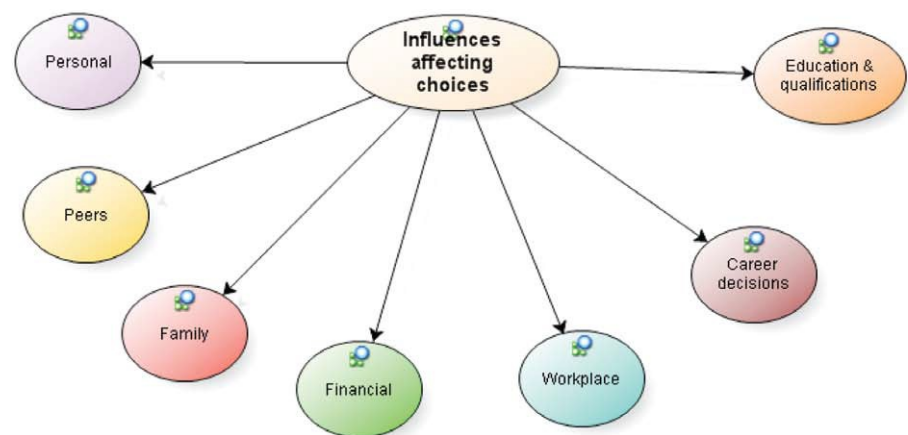
Each of these influences manifested with some variation between the initial or early part of the ten-year period, when compared with the later part. The seven major influences were:

1 Personal
2 Peers
3 Family
4 Financial
5 Workplace
6 Career decisions
7 Education and qualifications

The following sections expand and illustrate the significance of the seven major types of influence on career choices to the 12 case study participants.

1 Personal

The category labelled personal consisted of several interlinked influences. Some participants spoke about the confidence they had in their own skills which gave them the self-assurance needed to take on new challenges associated with occupation change. Belinda[1] exemplifies this confidence:

> I could actually do a whole lot of other things, because I have that skill set behind me. I've sort of got to that point now, where it doesn't matter when I leave or what I do, if I need to I can always come back to it. (Belinda/Higher Education)

1 Pseudonyms are used for case study participants

Post-Year 12 decisions
- 85% of graduates went straight to RMIT from school.
- More than 50% of apprentices tried other things first.
- Graduates (especially males) had greater certainty about post-school plans.
- 25% of apprentices said their parents wanted them to go into a trade.
- More apprentices (79%) than graduates (62%) came from government schools.

Other participants spoke about self-esteem in relation to a desire to maximise their abilities. Sometimes this meant moving to new and more demanding jobs. The desire to travel overseas and experience the world before having a family was important for a number of the case study participants. The desire to be one's own boss was a personal consideration for a number of participants. A desire for lifestyle change affected some participants' career pathways, especially later in the ten-year period since graduation. Belinda commented:

> I've worked very hard to get where I am, but I don't know if I could do this for the next ten years. And so now for me it's about looking at other things that can give me the lifestyle, rather than just working hard every day ... before when I was building my career, it was so important to work hard! ... now it's not the be-all and end-all. (Belinda /Higher Education)

2 Peers

The influence of peers includes instances in which friends had assisted participants to find a new job. Networks refers to the ways in which social relations influence career choices. Maddy, for example, commented on the influence of networks and peers:

> Our world is very small, in my profession, so as soon as someone knows that someone's on the hunt for a job, they know who you are, they know what skills you have, and ... word goes around ... Your reputation precedes you wherever you go. (Maddy/Higher Education)

3 Family

The category of family encompasses the advice, support and guidance offered by both parents and siblings in the immediate post-Year 12 period, and, later in working life, consideration of the needs of partners and children. It also includes, almost exclusively for women, taking family leave in order to care for children.

4 Financial

Financial considerations affected decisions about careers differently at various points of the ten-year period. Initially some post-Year 12 study decisions were made based on whether or not a student received a scholarship or funded place in higher education. Some TAFE graduates reported that they chose TAFE studies because they could work (i.e. earn an income) and study at the same time. Later in their working lives, financial considerations often involved such transitions as getting married, becoming a parent, buying a home, or setting up a business.

5 Workplace

The workplace influence refers exclusively to the ten-year period post-graduation. The category consists of a complex set of interrelated influences on career and occupational decision-making including: working hours; redundancy, family leave; work mentors; industry policies; changing workplaces; changing technology; promotion; job shortages; and company loyalty.

6 Career decisions

The career decisions category relates mainly to influential secondary school experiences such as advice provided by careers counsellors. Some participants expressed an initial uncertainty as regards choice of career. Others exemplified forward planning, thinking 'into the future', and commented on having considered the 'portability' of some occupations relative to others. A number of comments related to the influence – whether negative or positive – of work experience while still at school.
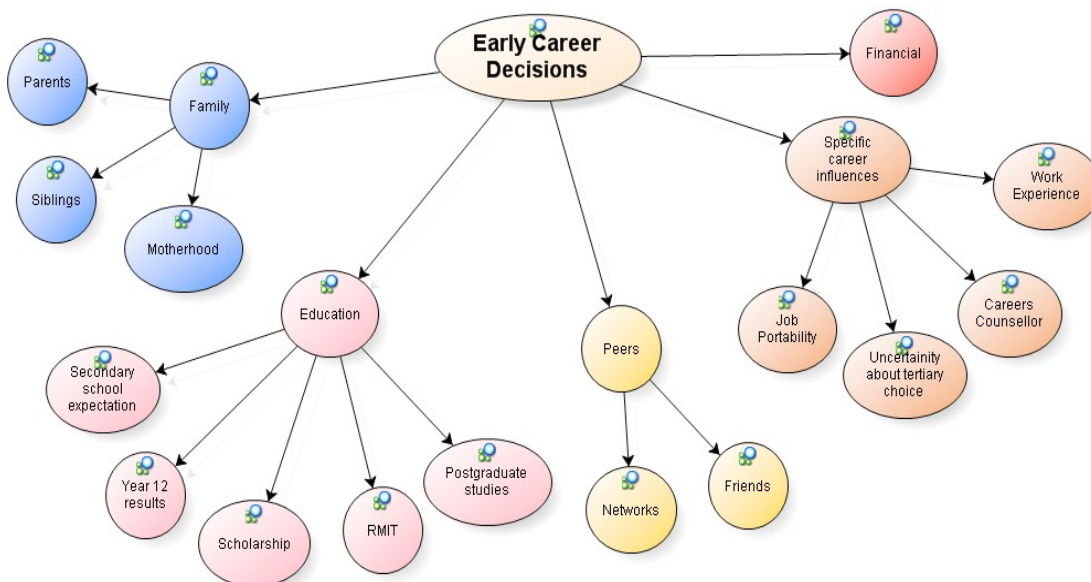
7 Education and qualifications

Education and qualifications comprises a complex mix of the secondary school expectations of peers and family in terms of participants' choice of tertiary qualification. This category also includes Year 12 results in VCE and their effects – enabling or constraining – on participants' choice of an occupational pathway. Later in participants' working lives, this influence referred to upgrading and/or changing qualifications, or obtaining on-the-job education in order to maintain or improve job prospects.

Early career decisions

Figure 2 illustrates the interconnections of the early career decisions that the 12 participants commented on in Stage 3 of the study. There were five main categories of response: Family (parents and siblings); Education (factors such as Year 12 results, receiving a scholarship, tertiary teaching staff influence); Peers (friends and networks); Specific career decisions (such as the advice of a secondary school careers counsellor, the impact of work experience through school and tertiary studies); and Financial factors.

Figure 2: Influences on early career decisions reported by participants in Stage 3

1 Family

The research confirms that family and peer influences are particularly important in early career decisions. Reflecting this, university graduates were far more likely to have parents in professional or managerial occupations:

> Because I'd grown up in an environment where tertiary education was pretty common, y'know, with my dad, and with my dad's peers, and with my sister and her friends – they were all pretty-much tertiary people, and not many that weren't really. (Colin/Higher Education)

2 Education

The assumption that school results determine career choices is not reflected in the responses of case study participants. However, one TAFE graduate's response would seem to conform with the stereotypical view of trade apprenticeships as an alternative option – a career pathway for those who 'can't get in to university'. Shane explains his post-Year 12 predicament in these terms:

> Because I knew I didn't quite do well enough at Year 12 ... I knew I wasn't going to get into the course I wanted to ... and I just saw the ad in the paper [for a printing apprenticeship] and I thought ... I'll give that a go ... I wasn't really keen on going back to school ... for another 12 months ... (Shane/Trade)

This sense of 'missing the boat' regarding university entrance – and so 'taking what was on offer' – also informs the story of Colin's early career choices. In his case, he sampled university life but not in his 'first preference' course, and soon recognised a need to change tack. Although Colin would eventually graduate with a higher education degree (in building and construction), his career began as a labourer, an option taken, again, in light of particular circumstances, namely 'needing a job' in the here and now.

For one participant, being offered a scholarship was a decisive factor in his choice to attend university. Wayne was offered both a cadetship at Coles and a place at university (Applied Physics). His thinking at the time indicates financial considerations – 'do I take the money now [cadetship] or go to university?' His decision was ultimately swayed by the offer of a scholarship to offset the fees associated with the university course.

3 Peers

Many of Belinda's peers were working in professional areas (as lawyers, doctors etc.) and she felt that by adding an MBA to her Applied Science Degree (in Hospitality) she would 'prove to herself' that she could 'keep up with' her peers.

In Simon's case the influence of a family friend was instrumental in gaining him an apprenticeship as a plumber:

> The only reason I got into it was, a friend of ours had his own roofing company and said, 'If you want an apprenticeship, there's one there for you'. (Simon/Trade)

Simon revealed other reasons underpinning this seemingly simple offer from a friend. The contextual circumstances of his early career choice include an economic recession and the fact that he was in 'limbo' after failing to achieve the final Year 12 grades he had wanted.

4 Specific career influences

Two participants used the term – 'job portability' – to explain their early career choices. For Maddy, the concept referred both to a qualification that may be taken with her as she moves geographically and to a job that can be 'put down and picked up again' as personal circumstances warrant, for example becoming a parent. Colin also cited job portability, referring specifically to the ability to travel.

When reflecting on their working lives across the whole ten-year period, many participants – both TAFE and Higher Education graduates – commented on the unplanned nature of their careers.

Many expressed confusion and uncertainty about their careers at the point of leaving school. Wayne describes an ongoing uncertainty throughout his university years:

> I thought well, I've done one year; I might as well stick out a second year and see what it's like. So I finished the second year and thought, okay, I've done two years now, I've only got one more year, I can finish this off in another year and – it's no use stopping now I've done two years I might as well finish it off. But I still, at that stage, didn't know what I was going to go into. (Wayne/Higher Education)

Only one case study participant commented on the influence of their school-based careers counsellor on their career path:

> We had a careers counsellor at school, and when I sat down and said what my preferences were to getting in to university ... it came back as ... 'Look at nursing, and look at teaching', and some of what you probably call the softer professions, and of course I didn't do that. I did my work experience in a hospital and went 'No I don't want to do that, I want to just follow a more structured and business-oriented career', and yet I ended up doing a Hospitality Degree. So, where I am now sort of didn't relate to where I was back there, at all. (Belinda/Higher Education)

One participant commented on the influence of teaching staff at RMIT and its effect of orienting students toward a greater variety of available occupational pathways.

Colin, having started an Arts degree and then taken up work as a labourer, found his career direction in building and construction, via his work experience. Wayne too describes the beneficial grounding he gained from his part-time work with Coles, which he undertook in conjunction with study in his later years of school and through university. The people skills he gained from this experience, he recounted, were beneficial to the managerial roles he undertook later in his career.

5 Financial

One feature of the financial motivation of participants, in general, is that this influence changes across time. As an early career influence, comments about financial concerns tend to centre on the need participants felt to 'set themselves up early'. In general this implied a willingness to put up with less than ideal conditions in the short term, in order to make the future easier, financially. Two participants expressed this very clearly. One is Maria, whose later working life involves providing support for her husband's business. In describing her early working years she spoke of them as being dominated by thoughts of establishing their future business:

> It was a funny workplace – but hey, they were paying me good dollars to do very little, so that was the only reason – and it was a good year, because we needed as much money as we could to get the clinic up and running. (Maria/Higher Education)

This urge to work hard 'while you can' (i.e. in the early years), seems to permeate the thinking of many participants, at least insofar as they were able to reflect on their working lives. In later years, these same participants make it clear that when family considerations assume a greater importance in their lives, they feel less willing to put in long hours or to tolerate less than satisfying employment.

Later career decisions

In their current working life (ten years from completion of studies) participants reported that relationships (family, personal and peers) were more influential in career decisions than education and qualifications and financial considerations.

Figure 3 shows the range of reasons given by all 12 case study participants for their later career decisions. These decisions were made after entering the workforce, and thus in light of work and other experiences.

Figure 3: Later career decisions
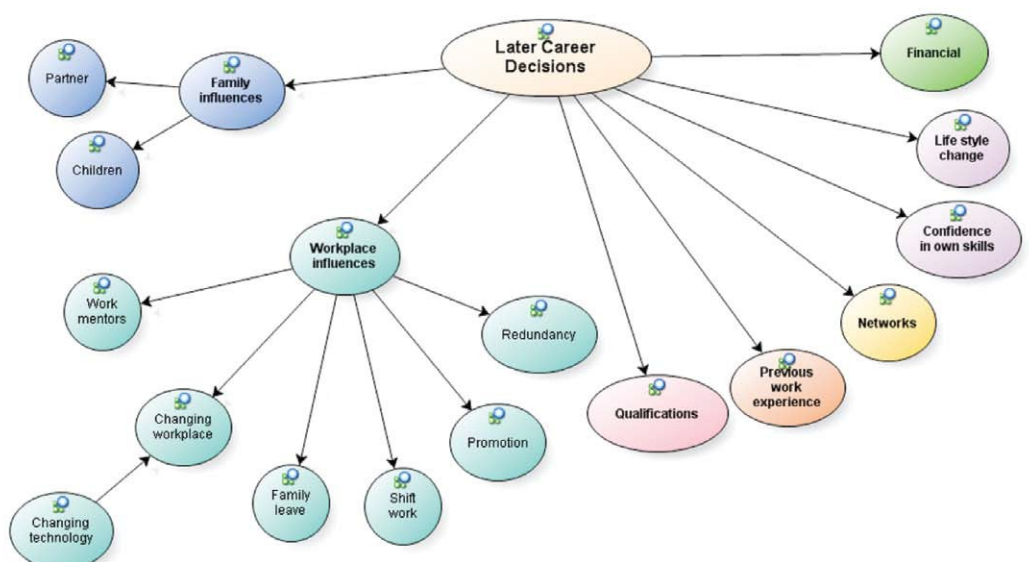
The following section expands on the range of reasons case study participants gave for their later career decisions, based on: family influences, workplace influences, qualifications, previous work experience, networks, confidence in own skills, lifestyle change and financial influences.

1 Family influences

In terms of responses in relation to early career choices, family most often denotes the influence of parents and siblings. Later in participants' careers, the influence of family often comes to signify the needs and demands of partners and children.

Family concerns feature very heavily as an influence on the later career decisions of participants. Frequently such concerns centre on financial issues, and yet often the family–financial nexus incorporates other factors such as employment conditions (working hours, the availability of leave, the perceived need for a more balanced life, etc.). In this sense, family concerns are often difficult to disentangle from other kinds of career influences.

For Troy, concerns for family underpinned his career decisions:

> One of the biggest factors ... when I'm making a decision is, what's good for the family and our financial stability. (Troy/Trade)

2 Workplace influences

Work mentors
Most participants in the case study interviews referred to the effect a work mentor had on expanding skills and opportunities in their working lives.

Changing workplace
This influence refers to the constant changes occurring within different workplaces and the effect such changes can have on occupational expectancies. In Stage 3 this influence manifested as change brought about through such things as internal restructuring, privatisation, and enforced status changes after maternity leave.

Changing technology
This was a direct influence on career pathways and can be regarded as a sub-set of changing workplace. It refers to the changing nature of work in the 21st century. For two members of the trade cohort, the introduction of computing technology to the printing profession has had an impact on their careers:

> [Printing holds] ... no challenges ... because a lot of [the problem solving] is done for you by the computer. [Printing is] something I don't want to continue to do. With new technologies, with the internet, I don't see a very long lifespan for newspapers ... maybe six or ten years ... that's why I'm looking at my other options. (Shane/Trade)

Family leave

Female case study participants were more likely to speak about the availability of family leave and the consequences for their working lives and occupational changes. Maria sums up the effects and speaks of the potential for change as follows:

> I know when I was at [xxx] they never took people back part time. It was full time or nothing. However, after I left they had to start thinking about that, because they were suddenly getting very short-staffed, and ... quite a few people in senior roles ... were having babies. And they did come back part time, and they suddenly realised that part-time workers were actually sometimes better than their full-time workers, because they enjoyed it more and they weren't entrenched in it. So they had a bit of a culture change there, and learnt a lot from that. (Maria/Higher Education)

Working hours

Long working hours, inflexible working hours, and shift work all have impacts on skilled workers and their families. A number of participants referred to the effects that the inflexible working hours imposed by some occupations have on both the workers themselves and their families.

Industry policies

This was an influence that referred to industries that did not have Enterprise Bargaining Agreements[2] and the impact that such a workplace could have on a worker. For some women wanting to take family leave and then some form of part-time work the impact was devastating and necessitated an occupational change.

Promotion

Some participants referred to the influence of (internal) promotion on remaining in a job because the culture was to promote from within owing to the occupational experience advantage. However, other case study participants spoke of the need to change occupations to gain promotion.

Redundancy

Several participants spoke about the impact being made redundant had on their sense of self-worth and ability to secure another job.

2 Enterprise bargaining is the process of negotiation generally between the employer, employees and their bargaining representatives with the goal of making an enterprise agreement. A registered agreement sets out the terms and conditions of employment between an employee or group of employees and one or more employers. (Source: Fair Work Online http://www.fairwork.gov.au/)

This influence refers to the impact that lack of available staff can have on certain occupations and the different working arrangements that need to be put into place to cover the workload. In the words of several Stage 3 participants, job shortages also referred to the possibility of achieving preferable conditions when there is a lack of staff competing for positions. For example, Maddy was able to achieve the part-time hours she sought at one workplace, largely because they 'really needed staff'.

Company loyalty

This influence referred to the existence and non-existence of the concept of company loyalty in the 21st century. Wayne, who is categorised as 'upwardly mobile within field'[3] spoke very highly of the company he worked for and how they retained his loyalty by providing for the various needs and professional development of their workers to keep the skill within the industry. However, Belinda experienced the opposite and had no company loyalty at all:

> There is no loyalty at work. Everyone's here to make a dollar. And at the end of the day why should I give my loyalty up if I'm not going to get it back? (Belinda/Higher Education)

3 Qualifications

Particularly in the later part of their careers to date, participants felt a need to upgrade or change qualifications, or to undertake on-the-job education, in order to maintain and/or improve job prospects. A number of comments were made in passing, such as Melanie's description of herself as being 'trapped', career-wise, by a combination of family commitments and a first degree in Applied Physics:

> I don't think it [the degree] equipped me with a lot of skills to ... progress in jobs ... I think very few skills were translatable. (Melanie/Higher Education)

Ongoing study and multiple formal qualifications are features of the career trajectories of both Helen and Belinda. Helen, who considers herself a lifelong learner ('I don't ever want to stop learning'), recognised within six months of finishing her first degree that further study was a means of fine-tuning her career, with respect to her original engineering qualification. She explained:

> And so yeah, I was just bored [in mining] and within six months I started studying again because I knew ... I wouldn't be happy doing that for the rest of my life. And I knew that, by then, that I didn't want to do engineering either. And I knew business improvement was what I wanted to get into. (Helen/Higher Education)

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3 The Stage 3 case study sample selection process involved examining the participants' career trajectories. 'Upwardly mobile within field' is one category applied to degree graduates who had sought promotion within occupations related to their initial qualifications.

However, one respondent commented that further qualifications were virtually irrelevant to his later career. Troy quoted his father, who subscribed to the belief that 'you don't have to go to school, if you do that apprenticeship and ... basically what it [career/business success] revolves around now is just networking'.

4 Previous work experience

Comments made by those who saw little career benefit in further qualifications imply a corollary belief, namely that an individual's skill base is consolidated by work experience. Wayne, who has held many roles within the same company across the ten-year period since graduation, remarked:

> [This is] a large company, so I've worked in many areas over the 12 years. If somebody asked me to write a book on everything I know ... well, it's like ... you can't write it down because you need to live it, you need to do it, you need to learn – and you've got to have the right attitude to want to do that ... so you're constantly learning new skills, constantly mentoring. (Wayne/Higher Education)

5 Networks

Wayne described networks as being very powerful in his field: 'in [my company] it's not what you know, it's who you know, to get things done'. Wayne even described the process of changing jobs, almost as if jobs 'came to him' on the basis of networking, by virtue of the fact that people within his company (and more widely within his field) already knew his strengths.

6 Confidence in own skills

Later in their careers respondents commented on job satisfaction arising from confidence in an established skill set; a desire to continue to improve skills; and loss of confidence in an existing skill set caused by absence from work or changes in the work context.

In Simon's case, confidence in his skill set was explained as one of the motivations for establishing his own business, together with his brother:

> So ... we just got sick of him [our former boss] and we were doing most things [ourselves] and thought we should have a go ourselves. (Simon/Trade)

7 Lifestyle change and financial influences

Participants' comments concerning Lifestyle as an influence in the later parts of the ten-year period are strongly linked with comments that relate to financial matters. The influence of financial considerations in occupational decision making is increasingly complicated, it would seem, as careers mature. The seeking of a better salary would seem to be the most intuitive driver of career or job change but comments by case study participants revealed that financial concerns are frequently subsumed by other considerations, such as family.

Many participants explicitly stated that concerns 'other than money' were currently driving their working lives. In several cases, participants acknowledged that it is only when one achieves a certain level of financial independence that one is able to make such an assertion as 'money is of no concern to me'.

Some commented on that money had shifted in their priorities, having now become secondary to 'lifestyle', particularly in relation to family. Maria described just such a change, having taken a 'job of convenience' in place of what had been 'a career':

> But it's more about lifestyle, it's a lifestyle job, and I don't think I could turn my back on that because it's given me so much that you can't measure with money. (Maria/Higher Education)

The acknowledgment that money, while less of a concern than it was earlier in her career, nevertheless still is a consideration – points to the fact that it takes a certain amount of prosperity to be able to say that 'money is not important'. Colin, for example, spoke of a sense of growing 'detachment' from career and its financial benefits, once he had 'reached a certain level' of financial stability.

5   Ongoing education

The Working Lives project was also interested in exploring further the participants' opinions in relation to the issues of lifelong learning and further education. In Stages 1 and 2 the respondents were asked to consider their current job skills, and to indicate how important each of a number of ways of acquiring those skills had been over the preceding ten years (Fehring, Malley & Robinson 2008, p. 31).

Learning on the job and teaching yourself were regarded as either very important or important by the overwhelming majority of both the trade and higher education samples. Eighty-two per cent of apprentices and 78 per cent of graduates rated learning on the job as very important. Sixty per cent of apprentices and 60 per cent of graduates rated teaching yourself as very important. Employer-provided training programs ranked next highest in importance, for both samples; a combined total of 83 per cent of apprentices and 78 per cent of graduates indicated that this method of gaining skills was either important or very important. Less frequently cited as being of importance were formal learning and participation in short courses available through organisations such as trade or professional associations.

During the in-depth Stage 3 interviews, case study participants gave more detailed comments in relation to on-the-job training and continual formal education.

On-the-job training

On-the-job training refers to informal training opportunities and short courses available in the workplace. Stage 3 participants were asked whether such forms of education had impacted on their working lives over the last ten years. Helen's view reflects the practical nature of such on-the-job training:

> There was a one-week block of accelerated change training, called ACT for short, and basically that is all the tools you can possibly imagine to manage the people side of change. And that was much – probably much more useful, in practical terms, than doing the Graduate Certificate in Change Management – which is a lot of theory, you know typical uni stuff: you're given a theory, you're given a case study, you say how you'd improve it or you take what's happening at work and work on how you'd improve it. (Helen/Higher Education)

In contrast to these positive experiences of on-the-job learning, other participants expressed dismay at the lack of formal structure witnessed in some workplace training programs:

> I find learning in organisations very difficult; because no-one really knows what it is that you're going to get out of it at the end. So ... you might go on a training course, and they'll say this is what we're going to do, but the actual application back to your workplace I find is very grey – so I don't put a lot of value on them. Definitely not as much as what I would a more structured university program. (Belinda/Higher Education)

Continual formal education

Continual formal training refers to structured training opportunities and courses offered by tertiary institutions, professional organisations and similar authorities. The responses below indicate how such formal education has featured in the first ten years of participants' working lives.

When reviewing her formal education – which includes two undergraduate degrees and a masters degree – Belinda commented on the role that formal education has played, she believes, in 'keeping her options open':

> [When I took on the second degree] I was making the conscious decision that I wouldn't actually narrow down my skill set but I'd try to build it horizontally by taking a management focus and doing the Bachelor of Business Administration to actually try and achieve, I guess, that horizontal skill set. Because from there I truly believed that I could go forward in any way, shape or form ... which my career has sort of done. (Belinda/Higher Education)

Wayne, when asked about the mix of formal education and on-the-job learning in his working life, offered the following anecdote:

> [The company] brought you in and said, 'Okay, you've learnt the basics at university, you've proved you can learn – that's all we wanted you to do, so forget everything you learned at university, now we'll train you. (Wayne/Higher Education)

Maria and Maddy, both trained in radiography, believed that their degree had provided them with a good preparation for working life. Clinical placements, the practical component of their formal education, contributed to both their sense of confidence and professional competence. Beyond the degree, however, Maria felt that her on-the-job skills development had been somewhat ad hoc. When discussing the skills she needed as a supervisor, she commented:

> There was no formal – there's nothing out there, it was all on the job ... We were never taught how to train people, it was just trial and error. (Maria/Higher Education)

When asked what mix of formal education and on-the-job learning had contributed to his skill development, Colin felt that university had provided, for him, a valuable 'foundation', but also that there was no substitute for experience in the workplace.

As an employer, Colin sees formal education as part of an employment network, but hires on the basis of personal attributes and individual merit, rather than on a candidate's formal education alone:

> I would rate the influence of individuals higher than I would rate the experience of doing a degree, or a TAFE course ... I'll look at the individual and say what are they like? Not where did they go to university? I'd want to know that they have some formal training, but even that's not necessarily a prerequisite. You know we've got a number of older employees that have got no formal training but they are absolutely unstoppable you know because they've got relevant experience and they've got the right personality. (Colin/Higher Education)

A quite unusual view about 'what it means' to have a university education was shared by two higher education graduates who spent time working in the field of mining. They both expressed similar attitudes as regards 'being careful' not to appear 'too clever' or authoritative in the workplace. Helen explains this in discussing some of the positive elements of her engineering degree:

> In our course we were taught that ... we need to go in with the belief that we know nothing, and that the people who were working at the coal face [literally]: they have the knowledge, they have the experience, and they have the ideas, and what we're there to do is to capture that and pull that into the analysis. Not to go in and tell them we know it all. (Helen/Higher Education)

6 Benefits

Stage 1 & 2 findings

Life at work: benefits
- Pay, working conditions, and relationships with co-workers were viewed positively by a large majority of both groups.
- Apprentices were less likely to have access to flexible working times, but one third listed their working hours as one of the main benefits of their job.
- Apprentices had more autonomy over what to do at work, whilst graduates had greater control over how they did their work.

One of the key research objectives of the project was to: 'analyse and compare benefit profiles, beyond simply wage-based income, at each job shift and at ten years after graduation'. The study sought to investigate if the concept 'benefit' could be identified by a more diverse range of descriptors than simply 'income'. It found that individuals do not only consider their working lives to be directed, or governed, solely by financial considerations. While financial considerations are important, decisions about changing occupation are informed by a broader range of work-related benefits than simply income or earnings.

The study found there was little difference between the two samples in terms of respondents' satisfaction (largely high) with various aspects of their current jobs (interest, variety, prospects). The majority from both samples stated that their jobs: required them to take initiative; were complex; and gave them opportunities to improve their knowledge and skills. The two cohorts ranked the benefits of their job (in order) as:

- Trade:
  1. working hours and the financial benefits
  2. job satisfaction/enjoyment
  3. favourable working conditions
  4. the longer-term prospects of their jobs.

- Graduates:
  1. learning at work (new skills, technology, new areas of the business, experienced colleagues, ongoing education)
  2. favourable working conditions and job satisfaction/enjoyment (including independence and responsibility, working for a good cause or being socially useful, and gaining in self confidence)
  3. the longer-term prospects of their jobs
  4. working hours (female), financial benefit (male), and work relationships (female).

Roughly two-thirds of each sample indicated overall satisfaction with their working lives. Apprentices have slightly lower percentages of satisfaction with their incomes, their overall financial situation, and their standard of living. Less than one-third of the apprentice sample, compared with half of the graduate cohort, indicated satisfaction with their prospects of promotion.

Rates of home ownership, mean house values, cohabitation, and overall life satisfaction were comparable. Data suggests a relative delay in graduates assuming a parenting role due in part to the pursuit of career advancement.

The five key factors that case study participants indicated as being important to their concept of work-related benefit were: self-employment, lifestyle change, self-esteem, skill set confidence and financial.

1 Self-employment

It is difficult to compare trade and higher education graduates in terms of income alone, because so many of the trade graduates are self-employed, and consequently their 'net income' is structured in different ways. Simon explains the relationship between gross and net income, and between long- and short-term financial rewards, as factors informing his occupational choices:

> I don't have a heap of money week-to-week, but ... I'm sort of hoping at the end of the ten-year plan that, hopefully I can be sort of set up. And I'll never stop working, I'll keep doing something, but hopefully I can go to something where I don't have to worry as much and that sort of thing – hopefully relax a little bit more. (Simon/Trade)

Colin, who is also self-employed, speaks of life satisfaction in terms of his assets, career and family: 'I've got a very stable family, I've got a very well-established career, and a house, and everything like that'. Colin leaves no doubt that he is happy with the trajectory his career has followed, particularly his pathway into self-employment – which he says he 'wouldn't swap for quids' – although he does acknowledge that self-employment brings with it new responsibilities and worries.

Interestingly, every case study participant who was self-employed expressed some measure of limit: that the responsibilities of self-employment may not be sustainable in the long term. In Colin's words:

> I always wonder ... am I going to wake up one day and think, 'Oh it's all too hard, like y'know I've paid the house off now, I've got the kids through school ... will I go and get a job, y'know not have to worry about all this other stuff. (Colin/Higher Education)

Sue spoke of benefits of self-employment which were not specifically financial in nature, even though underpinned by a certain level of prosperity. Such benefits of self-employment were intangibles like work/life 'balance' and 'choice' among various options including sport, leisure and personal development.

2 Lifestyle change

Long working hours factored strongly in participants' decisions to make changes in their working lives. Maria summed it up as follows:

> We get to a stage where we're living to work rather than working to live ... That's not what you want to be. No, it's about having balance and work not owning you. (Maria/Higher Education)

In Maddy's case, she sees her career trajectory as deviating in order to accommodate her young family. She acknowledges that 'if it was just for me, if I was looking at my own career structure and I had oodles of time, I would love to do' more demanding, specialised tasks, but for the moment she is content to put her career second, in order to 'look after my family's interest'.

Other aspects of lifestyle change which are relevant include elements such as: enjoyment of work; excitement and passion as regards work; things that can't be measured with money (including health, time spent with children and a simpler, less busy life); a significant measure of personal satisfaction to be derived from work; achievements which are non-financial (including the benefit of helping others).

2 Self-esteem

When asked to indicate the key benefits derived from different jobs, and whether or not different workplaces offered different kinds of benefits, one higher education graduate responded:

> The journey through all the different jobs has been a good personal journey. I think it has helped me grow as a person, 'cause I've grown stronger as a person – 'cause I knew what I wanted, when I finally saw something that I really fell in love with, I knew how to go and get it. (Helen/Higher Education)

Others expressed intangible benefits related to personal growth and helping others. For Belinda, work satisfaction was achieved by 'helping others to develop their skills', an aspect of her working life oriented towards community, rather than financial interests:

> I would rather work for somebody else that has some benefit back to the community or doing something else, so that's partly the reason why I can't see myself being here [at an insurance company] forever ... and at some point I will change and, yeah, take a more community-oriented role or something like that ... I guess I'd like to be recognised in a way that was developing something or someone or something new that could contribute back to the community in some way, it's not always about the dollars. (Belinda/Higher Education)

3 Skill set confidence

This consideration referred to the individual's perception of his/her own confidence that s/he could adapt and change to new occupational demands if necessary. This gave the individual the confidence to change when needed because there was a belief in his/her own abilities to do a new job. Belinda exemplifies this confidence, later in the ten-year period, in regard to her 'bouncing back' after a second redundancy:

> I had a better network. I just had more confidence to be able to pick up the phone and call someone and say 'Great, you've been recommended because – this is what I want' and then just follow things up. Whereas the first time around I was ... I would get leads and then I'd be too scared to phone someone, why do they want to hear from me. Whereas now, it's like, I can do this, and I just did. (Belinda/ Higher Education)

4 Financial

When asked about the benefits of working, Wayne is direct: enjoyment is one thing, but his motivation to work is financial:

> What are the benefits ... well, in short, you need to enjoy your job but you really come to work to earn a living. I mean, I've got a family, I've got kids, I've got a mortgage ... so, you've got responsibilities. (Wayne/Higher Education)

For Helen too, money is still part of the equation, but, 'dollars' are no match for 'life satisfaction' and 'balance':

> I don't find dollars personally satisfying, like – I'd like to have them, it would get me to my dream shorter. But I can't sacrifice ... like, life satisfaction, I guess, because it's more than just being in a job. Like I said, at [the mining job], I had a great lifestyle, really crap job: the balance was so out of whack – I was just unhappy overall. I can't do that again, it just doesn't suit me. (Helen/Higher Education)

7 Gender

Bearing in mind the small sample size, a number of pertinent gender issues have emerged from the data collected by the Working Lives project.

First, it is noteworthy that there were no female TAFE participants in Stage 3. In fact, there were very low numbers of female TAFE participants throughout the entire study: five (of 54) female TAFE participants took part in the Stage 1 questionnaire, of whom only two (of 29) took part in the Stage 2 telephone interviews. Further research investigating the participation (or apparent lack thereof) of women in TAFE-based occupations may shed light on larger questions of skill shortages in the workforce.

The extended interviews in Stage 3 revealed various gender-based differences affecting career trajectory. Most notable is the impact of parenting on the career trajectories of female workers. Some of the main points relating to gender, parenting and career are:

1 Once a parent, there was a tendency to find oneself in – or to feel the need for – a low-demand job, in terms of time and in terms of 'self'. Often these were also considered low-interest and low-satisfaction jobs. For example, Maria believed it was a 'fallacy' that women could have both a satisfying job and family time.

2 Once a parent, there was a tendency to become 'stuck' in a field, without the time or resources to retrain in order to effect a sideways shift. This was noted by Maria:

> ... and I suppose that's why I don't enjoy radiography anymore because I'm stuck ... Stuck! And I don't have the time to put into continuing education to move forward. (Maria/Higher Education)

3 Once a parent, one could expect a life of 'juggling': often concurrent part-time jobs or a series of part-time jobs, sometimes concurrent, sometimes not. This routine made for complex and hectic lives.

4 In the transition to part-time work and/or during a period of maternity leave, case study participants observed a loss of personal income, and with it a perceived loss of power, and of 'self'.

5 Job change is often assumed, especially of female parents. Maria, in particular, expressed a sense that the changes to her career on becoming a parent – as opposed to change being imposed upon, or being expected of, her partner – were 'just assumed'. She said that the decision for her to step out of her primary career for parenting 'just evolved'.

This last point, in particular, brings home the 'unstated' nature of gender-based influences on career trajectories, as regards parenting. For all of the women case study participants who had children, it was impossible for them to discuss their careers without addressing the impact of parenting. Five of the six male participants were also parents, and yet none of them referred to any period of part-time work, and most spoke very little of the impact, career-wise, of becoming a parent.

In general, it seems that the responsibility – or burden – of putting parenting ahead of one's personal career falls to the female parent. As a corollary, the domain of part-time work remains a predominantly female domain. The struggle described by Maria and Maddy to find positions and hours that would accommodate their familial obligations seems to indicate that recent policies and rhetoric concerning 'family-friendly' workplaces are still not achieving enough, at least at a grassroots level. When asked about her return from maternity leave, and her re-orientation to work, Melanie was highly critical:

> Look they don't support [you] at all – I think they're almost annoyed with part-time workers at [my workplace], I think they like to see themselves as – you know – employer of the year for females, but they certainly don't have any real loyalty to people returning from maternity leave. And they don't see a benefit of someone working three days. (Melanie/Higher Education)

Melanie openly and passionately describes a sense of frustration: 'I just can't do what is needed' – and a sense of being torn between career progression and parenting. She describes feelings of being 'confronted or angry' about the way in which her career has stalled, a process of 'coming to terms with being female'. Like Maria, she speaks of 'having lost something' and yet conveys a sense of being somewhat mystified as to how that happened.

Maria and Maddy both expressed an unwillingness to 'fight' for family-friendly working conditions. Both women described a reluctance to 'make a fuss' by attempting to achieve conditions that would allow them to remain at their current workplace while parenting. This reluctance arguably reveals something about women and their perceived role in the workplace.

In relation to loss of power, income and even 'self' as a result of reduced workforce participation, Maria very candidly described what it can mean to postpone one's career for the sake of partners and children. In her interview, she explained that although she stands by her decision, its consequences have been considerable:

> On the whole, I can be there for my kids and that's really the most important thing on our agenda at the moment ... But ... when I stepped out of radiography I felt like I lost a bit of me – felt it was the only thing that was mine, outside of my family, so I didn't like that. And then I realised that I'd worked for this degree and now I've just said 'See ya' without giving it much thought – it felt like I hadn't given it much thought, but it had been brewing for a while; but yeah it was really hard to turn your back on it and say it doesn't mean anything, but it does. (Maria/Higher Education)

Underlying Maria's words there is a grappling with the meaning that culture attaches to 'work', 'qualifications' and 'self'. She described her career as 'a bit of me ... the only thing that was mine', and her qualification as something she'd 'worked for' but then 'turned her back on'. Maria went on to explain some of the other 'losses' she had suffered, both minor rewards (such as promotion, appreciation, recognition), and of course, remuneration.

Interestingly, two of the female participants who were yet to start a family, both implied that 'as a female' they assume their working life will be cut short.
That is, Helen and Sue both assume a shorter career span for themselves by virtue of their gender.

8 Conclusion

This small-scale exploratory study involved three stages of data collection and analysis of 179 trade and higher education graduates who had completed their course at RMIT between 1994 and 1996. Using a life-course methodology, the research team documented the various influences on decisions of these young men and women during the ten-year retrospective survey period.

The study documents the strong influence of families in the first occupational choice post-Year 12, and then the strong influence of family considerations – referring to the expectations of partners and the needs of children – in the post-qualification period of career-building and decision-making.

A workplace issue raised by many of the participants in this study pertains to working hours – comprising the effects of shift work and inflexible or long working hours. A number of participants were clearly influenced in their career choices by this situation, as they considered long working hours detrimental to their personal life and wellbeing.

The impact of long working hours on career decision-making is related to another point requiring further investigation. This pertains to a variety of contractual arrangements put in place to meet the needs of both employers and employees. Issues relating to permanent part-time work, and part-time contracts that maintain employee rights and working conditions, were raised by a number of participants in this study.

This study also highlights the constant educational needs – including re-education – of a workforce changing and adapting to the impact of computerisation. The current skill shortage reflects the imbalance between old skills no longer required and new skills not yet acquired in the various processes of employment change. However, there is a work culture, or mind set transformation, required in the re-education process for both employees and employers if change is to occur.

Another issue raised by participants in this study is that of post-qualification and further education. Participants provided varied perceptions of the value of further formal academic studies, as compared to on-the-job training and short courses.

Various gender-based differences affecting career trajectory emerged from the study. Most notable is the impact of parenting on the careers of female workers. Female participants, in particular, felt the major impact of career interruptions and the effect they have on career trajectories. In a time of skill shortage, improvements in part-time employment arrangements may yield considerable benefits for employees and employers alike.

The study also raises the question of how to adequately measure 'benefits' of work to individuals in the twenty-first century. No longer is a simple monetary indicator adequate to a person's concept of occupational benefit. The research suggests the need for a new, more complex, measure of work-related benefit in order to investigate career and job changes with a view to understanding skill shortage in Australia.

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