# Adult learners and choice in further education and training markets: constructing the jigsaw puzzle

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## Abstract

*With the rise of education and training markets and the rhetoric of lifelong learning, individuals have been reconfigured as learner-consumers and vested with responsibilities as choosers of their own destinies and, by implication, agents of government economic policy. Against this backdrop, this paper reviews empirical research on adult choice in further education and training (FET). The nature and limits of existing knowledge are discussed, and gaps requiring further research are identified. The paper concludes that although extant studies have begun to assemble the jigsaw of adult choice in FET, the pieces do not always fit readily into place and many are still missing. Moreover, the overall form and character of the jigsaw remain sketchy and ill-defined. A more complete picture is required so that the grand designs of governments can be evaluated against the realities of adult choice in FET markets.*

## Introduction

Choice has been propounded since the 1970s as a human right and a central principle of andragogy, primarily because it was variously held to contribute to effective adult learning, active citizenship and progressive social change (e.g. Cross 1981; Freire 1972a,b; Knowles 1970). More recently, however, the concept of choice has been given a new rationale and resonance in education policy discourse. Since the early 1990s, choice has come to be viewed less as a collective social entitlement and precondition for self-realisation and democratic participation, and more as an individual responsibility and necessity for economic survival and competitiveness in global markets. Whereas choice was originally conceived as a means to enable individuals to become self-directed learner-citizens, it is now viewed as a mechanism for empowering individuals as self-

interested consumers of education and training services or learner-consumers. The explanation for this shift can be traced in large part to the convergence of two policy trends that have fundamentally reconfigured the nature and purposes of adult learning: the formation of education and training markets on the one hand, and the press for lifelong learning on the other.

Marketisation was the first of the two trends to appear on the policy radar, propelled by the ascendancy of neo-liberal economics and public choice theory during the 1980s. Tuijnman (1992 cited in Tuijnman 2001, pp.1-2) noted early last decade that:

> The concept of the adult education market has been introduced into the policy debate and seems to be making headway ... This (market principle) provides a powerful explanation of change in adult education in the 1980s. It was seen as presenting an attractive means of making the educational system flexible and responsive to the changes in social demand. Moreover, it was felt that the expansion of adult education could be achieved, by and large, without substantially increasing the recurrent public budget for adult education, as in most countries the additional funds needed for expansion would be borne by employers and individuals.

Tuijnman (2001, p.4) subsequently noted that by 1996 the OECD-conceived '"lifelong learning for all" framework' had emerged alongside the market paradigm, largely in response to the forces of globalisation, structural unemployment and the concomitant need for economic restructuring. According to the OECD (1996), 'Lifelong learning becomes reality in the further education and training market' (p.55), which is 'characterised by choice and individual pathways through learning and work' (p.147). In its review of developments in the governance and management of education, the OECD attributed the creation of markets for adult learning to the ascendancy of an economic theory wherein:

> (C)ompetitive forces are assumed to induce providers to use resources efficiently and to offer education services in response to the preferences, needs and interests of learners as consumers. It is a view of education that gives full weight to the freedom of individuals to choose, and by implication minimises the direct role of government. (p.165)

Despite deep and irreconcilable tensions between the market and lifelong learning frameworks with respect to social inclusion and equity, most OECD countries have become increasingly reliant on policies to promote markets and individual choice, and have placed greater emphasis on competition, autonomy and 'the role of employers and individuals in decision making and financing' (Tuijnman 2001, p.4).

In a similar vein, Edwards (1995, p.187) detected a shift from the initial notion of the 'learning society as an *educated society*, committed to active citizenship, liberal democracy and equal opportunities' to one of 'the learning society as a *learning market*, enabling institutions to provide services for individuals as a condition for supporting the competitiveness of the economy'. In response to changing economic,

social and cultural conditions, the learning market had overshadowed the earlier liberal-democratic notion of a learning society by the mid-1990s:

> Individuation, the market and economic relevance have become central (and) greater emphasis is placed on the learner to secure their lifelong learning in a marketplace of opportunities. Thus the notion of an 'educated society', which largely lacked influence, has been displaced by a more powerful notion of a learning market in which individuals take responsibility for their own learning ... Here 'new right' *laissez faire* approaches coalesce with some of the wider processes of cultural change and conceptions of a consumer society. (Edwards 1995, pp.187-188).

A recent International Labour Office (ILO) report, *Learning and training for work in the knowledge society* (2002), echoes many of the themes and issues raised by the OECD in 1996. It notes the emerging international consensus about the need to promote lifelong learning in response to globalisation, in part through the development of 'a wide range of education and training pathways'. Such developments reflect 'the paradigm shift towards empowering the individual to be the builder and architect of his or her own learning and self-development' (p.13). The ILO also observes that the increasing reliance of governments on quasi-markets in human resources development and training has led to a diversification of course offerings and a proliferation of new training providers. In its view, the twin imperatives of markets and lifelong learning suggest that: 'People need assistance in "navigating" and choosing between alternatives in a vast array of learning and training opportunities that can enhance their careers.' (p.23)

In effect, learning markets and lifelong learning have become inter-connected and mutually constitutive concepts in recent international policy discourse on adult education, training and human resources development. Both policy concepts accord a central role to choice as an organising principle and require learners to exercise choice in order to realise the putative economic benefits of markets on the one hand, and to take responsibility for their own learning and career development in the face of rapid social and economic change on the other hand. Moreover, individuals are expected to navigate pathways through the increasingly complex maze of learning and work opportunities available in further education, training and labour markets, and to do so in ways that underpin the global competitiveness of national economies. Through the mechanism and exercise of choice, therefore, individuals have been reconfigured as learner-consumers and vested with responsibilities as both choosers of their own destinies and, by implication, agents of government economic policy (Field 2000).

Against this backdrop of market reform and the policy drive to increase, widen and lengthen participation in further education and training (FET), Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001) argue that:

> ... there is an imperative to understand the nature of choice in relation to education, training and careers. We need to know how choice occurs, what the outcomes of choices are likely to be, and what factors influence

> and shape choice. Only then can we fully understand the interaction of individual choice and the socio-economic structures, systems and decisions within which choice is made'. (p.3)

In their study of young people's decision making in education, training and careers markets, Foskett and Hemsley-Brown observe that the realisation of a learning society will necessitate an expansion of participation by adults, which 'requires more than simply "selling" learning to them' (p.220). Consequently, they highlight 'the imperative of researching adult choice, and choice processes in relation to career change, FE/HE (further education/higher education) participation decisions amongst adults, and the psychological barriers to choosing to learn' (p.221). To date, however, the vast bulk of research on choice has focused on young people at the end of compulsory schooling (for a review of much of this research, see Payne 2003). By comparison, as discussed below, adult choice remains an intriguing jigsaw puzzle with many missing pieces.

This paper begins to redress the above gap by reviewing available empirical studies of adult choice in FET in Anglophone countries of the OECD, examining the nature and limits of existing knowledge, and identifying issues in need of further investigation. Research on adult participation in FET, particularly in the United Kingdom (UK), is substantial and growing. Most of this work, however, does not explore adult choice beyond the initial decision to return to study. The studies covered by this review differ from the latter body of work in that they explicitly set out, in part or whole, to analyse the nature, dynamics and patterns of adult choice in relation to subject/course and provider. With one exception, the studies examine choice-making by learners aged 17 years and above in post-school settings. In most cases, these learners had left formal schooling some years before deciding to (re)enter further education and training.

The concept of an 'adult' is a social construction of course, and the distinction between 'youth' and adulthood is fraught with ambiguity. For the purposes of this paper, an 'adult learner' is viewed as someone who has undergone at least their first transition from school to work or further education, and is therefore relatively more independent than a post-compulsory school student. However, the primary interest of this paper (and of the studies reviewed herein) centres on choice by mature-aged and older adult learners, generally understood as those who are 25 years of age and over.

The scope of this review is limited to quantitative studies of adult choice in FET for two reasons. Firstly, there is a relative dearth of qualitative investigations of choice by adult learners, as defined above. Secondly and more importantly, this review is particularly interested in research that sheds light on the nexus between markets for FET and lifelong learning, and how adult learners make choices in this context. As Foskett and Hesketh (1997) contend:

> ... empirical investigation must recognise that market forces are the aggregate of individual behaviour. Whilst a great deal of rich data derived from ... 'lived markets' ... is lost through the large-scale analysis of educational markets, the true impact of market forces can in fact be detected. (p.302)

In this paper, 'FET' encompasses liberal adult education, vocational education and training (VET), and continuing education conducted in formal post-school settings, including workplaces but generally excluding universities.

## Studies of adult choice

Four empirical studies of adult choice in FET were identified for this review, as follows: a study of choice in the Scottish FE system by Connelly and Halliday (2001); a comparative study of factors influencing choice of initial qualifications and continuing development in Australia and Britain by Miller, Kellie and Acutt (2001); a national survey of adult learners in the UK by Sargant and Aldridge (2002); and a study of choice in the Australian VET sector by Maxwell, Cooper and Biggs (2000). All four studies were initiated to varying degrees in response to the lack of research on choice in FET, and in recognition of the need for a better understanding of processes by which adults make choices in FET. In doing so, these studies aimed to improve the evidential basis for decision making about FET policy and provision. All four studies also undertook statistical analyses of choice-making and generally used pre-constructed lists of choice criteria and information sources, among other factors. However, Connelly and Halliday (2001) and Maxwell, Cooper and Biggs (2000) supplemented their surveys with focus group interviews.

Also included in this review is a study of post-compulsory school leavers' choices in Britain (Foskett & Hesketh 1997). Although this study focuses on young people's choices, it provides some valuable insights into individuals' choices at a critical point in their transition to adulthood and, as such, is a useful counterpoint to the four studies of adult choice. Furthermore, it sheds some potentially significant light on the interaction of marketisation and individual choice.

The four studies of adult choice differ from each other in key respects. Each was designed around distinct, albeit sometimes overlapping, research questions. Each was conceived in isolation from the others, conducted at different times and places, and focused on different types of learners at varying stages of their learning trajectories. For these reasons, the distinguishing features and findings of each study are examined briefly in their own right in the first instance. The individual reviews are followed by an overview analysis which synthesises the studies' key findings in order to establish the nature and extent of our knowledge about adult choice in FET, and to identify gaps and shortcomings in the research base that require attention.

## Choice in post-16 FET markets in Britain

Foskett and Hesketh (1997) report the key findings of a national survey in mid-1995 about students' choices at the end of compulsory schooling in Britain, and the influence of marketing by FE providers. They note that legislative and funding reforms in the early 1990s had stimulated intense provider competition and 'the creation of an active expansionist market'. In view of the dearth of public domain studies on student choice, they argue that:

> The development of a better understanding of the operation of post-16 markets is essential ... both at a national policy level and also at the level of individual institutions seeking to compete and survive in their own marketplace. Understanding how customers make decisions, and how that is affected by and interacts with institutional and marketing strategy are two key components of this developing insight. (p.301)

A constructed sample comprising 1,284 school students aged 15 and 16 years was surveyed about the process of choosing post-compulsory pathways, with special reference to the nature and timing of their choices, the role of various information sources, and the factors that influenced individual choices.

The researchers note that the 'proliferation of the number and type of FE courses amplifies the challenge of "choice" for prospective students' (p.4), as they are now confronted with '"thickets of complexity and jargon"' (Dearing Report 1996 quoted in Foskett & Hesketh 1997, p.303). At a general level, they find that:

> School leavers' decision-making about post-16 education trajectories is complex and multi-factorial. It is clearly a process that takes place over a period of time ... This process involves many iterations and reiterations in relation to specific educational choices with a continuous matching, re-matching and filtering of new perceptions and available information within the existing choice structures of both pupils and their parents. (p.302)

Young people were found to assume greater individual responsibility for making post-compulsory choices as they approached the final decision. However, their choices were made within 'framed fields of decision-making' that had been pre-structured by their parents. Once the broad parameters of choice had been set, young people exercised 'unconstrained choice within non-excluded options' of career, course and institution. Consequently, young people are 'composite consumers' as their final decisions are a result of 'the combined choice-making of parent plus pupil'.

The centrality of 'choice' as the driver of FET provision in Britain was one of the policy assumptions that Foskett and Hesketh set out to test by evaluating the extent to which students behave overtly like active consumers. Surprisingly, school leavers were found to have based their specific reasons for choice of provider on formal, rather than informal, information sources (e.g. parents, family members, friends). The four main sources of information were careers teachers, open evenings/days, teachers and provider literature. The researchers contend that 'the dominance of formal factors in pupils' information sources, as well as in the specific factors they cite for institutional choice, would appear to be evidence of a growing consumerist approach to post-16 education by the contemporary school leaver.' (p.311) Provider marketing was found to have shaped young people's choices, although its influence was 'one of presentation to increasingly informed consumers in a competitive market, as opposed to the tapping of rich seams of demand within the local marketplace' (p.317). As with parents, teachers and careers teachers also perform an influential role as 'information gatekeepers' who filter the messages directed at young people.

Foskett and Hesketh found that the criteria adopted for institutional choice were also largely formal in nature, with academic reputation having been the most important factor for 23% of respondents, followed by: 'wish to stay in current school sixth form' (16%); 'only provider offering a suitable course' (15%); and 'impressed when visited (open days/evenings) (11%). The most important informal criterion was proximity (14%), the significance of which suggests that young people's choices do not always conform to the model of rational choice implicit in official policy. Nonetheless, Foskett and Hesketh conclude that the motivations and behaviours of young people appear to have been altered by the redesign of FET provision along market lines:

> The dominance of formal factors appears to represent a growing market ideology among school leavers in which dogma of academic performance and perceptions of institutional type predominate. The process of choice does involve to some extent a certain degree of engagement in the formal process of information gathering and choosing. At issue here is whether this involvement with formal issues has increased in the wake of the marketisation of education. (p.313)

As Foskett and Hesketh indicate, further research is required to determine the nature and extent of the impact of market ideology on the choice processes of young people.

## Choice in Scottish further education

In their study of choice in the Scottish FE system, Connelly and Halliday (2001) indicate that participation in FE has been growing and the range of courses has been expanding. Against the background of an increased emphasis on FE as a pathway to work or higher education, they examine the relative importance of extrinsic and intrinsic reasons for the decisions by 700 students to enrol in FE colleges. Their primary aim was to identify the non-instrumental reasons why adult learners choose FE courses and institutions, and to assess their significance relative to work and education outcomes.

Connelly and Halliday note that flexible timetabling of classes and availability of child care facilities are key determinants in initial decisions by female students to return to study. The most important group of factors influencing students' choices of FE provider were employment-related (upgrade skills, gain qualifications, make a career change, and improve job prospects). Social reasons, such as meeting people and improving personal confidence, were also important. Of the factors influencing choice of FE college, the most important was location (49%), followed by resources (22%), and reputation (18%). Comparatively less influential were atmosphere (6%) and facilities (5%). The most important means of communication between colleges and prospective students was print material, in the form of leaflets and prospectuses.

Although choosing their broad area of study was important to students, Connelly and Halliday state that 'they were more than happy to leave the precise choice of

lesson content up to lecturers', including specific competencies (p.190). However, they conclude that there may be a need to reconceptualise the relationship between learning and life in the context of FE provision:

> The idea that it is principally about a vocational instruction or a step on the way to a higher education may be outdated. It is clear that students want learning to connect to life as they live it locally and *vice versa*. (p.191)

In their estimation, relationships among students and teachers are more important than technical aspects of the learning environment, and the most important resources for lifelong learning are those that support both learning and living. It should be noted, however, that such findings were based on a relatively small sample of FE students.

## Choice in Australian and British FET

By way of introducing their comparative study of factors influencing choice of initial qualifications and continuing development in Australia and Britain, Miller, Kellie and Acutt (2001) note that, despite the prevalence of policy rhetoric in both countries promoting the development of learning organisations and lifelong learning, particularly vocational training:

> There has been no systematic investigation made of whether motivations change over the lifespan, whether there are gender differences in motivations ... We do not know whether these, or any other factors in particular, drive individuals to choose to undertake different types of qualifications. (p.200)

Their own research was based on a survey in early 2000 of a random sample of Australian and British individuals aged between 18-60 years, to which 332 Australian and 234 British people responded. Information was sought about individuals' training and education decisions before and after gaining employment, and about their future intentions for further study. The proportions of both qualifications attainment and intended future studies were found to be increasing over time, with higher rates of both indicators evident among respondents aged less than 40 years.

The six most important factors influencing choice of qualification between leaving school and gaining employment were, in descending order of importance: 'respected qualification'; 'the best qualification for the area of work'; 'best qualification to help me gain a job'; 'employers view this as best qualification'; 'a pre-requisite for employment'; and 'know what the qualification means in terms of level of achievement'. The six most important factors influencing choice of qualification after gaining employment were, in descending order of importance: 'the best qualification in terms of my own personal development'; 'would help gain career progression at work'; 'it's a respected qualification'; 'knew what the qualification meant in terms of level of achievement'; 'help gain a higher salary'; and 'help move to a job in another organisation'. The influence of current employers was significantly weaker for individuals already in employment than for those seeking their first job.

The six main factors influencing respondents' future choice of qualification were, in descending order of importance: 'the best qualification in terms of my own personal development'; 'know what the qualification means in terms of level of achievement'; 'it's a respected qualification'; 'will facilitate a move to job in another organisation'; 'facilitate career progression'; and 'help achieve higher salary'.

The researchers note that the reasons for choosing an initial qualification were largely instrumental in nature and focused on gaining employment. Also, the influence of parents at the pre-employment stage was strong compared to that of careers advisors, teachers and friends. Once individuals had entered the workplace, the factors influencing training decisions were found to change, with a much greater emphasis on self-development and instrumental factors, such as achieving a higher salary or moving to a job in another organisation:

> To some extent this may be expected, since individuals now become focused on development rather than the task of entering an occupation, but nonetheless the extent of the change in focus in some respects is surprising ... Across these later stages of the working life, although instrumental issues may be key concerns, personal development is the priority. (pp.216-217)

Despite an anticipated focus on strictly instrumental reasons for undertaking FET, unemployed people rated getting back into work and personal development as equally important motivational factors. Moreover, there was a marked decline in the pre- and post-employment influence of employers for all adult learners.

Relatively few gender-based differences in choice criteria and motivations were identified. However, significant differences were detected in the factors influencing individuals' training decisions across the lifespan, as noted above. Less notable differences were found to exist between respondents in the two countries and different types of qualification (i.e. vocational versus academic). Compared to their Australian counterparts, British respondents accorded greater significance in later life-stages to the level of recognition, achievement and challenge represented by awards. Employer perceptions and support tended to exert a stronger influence on those enrolled in vocational, rather than academic, courses.

Miller, Kellie and Acutt conclude that 'particular attention needs to be paid to improving the "personal development" aspect of vocational awards if their "brand value" and hence public standing in relation to traditional (academic) awards are to be improved.' (p.219) They draw particular attention to the need for further research into: the influence of age or life-stage and socio-economic status; and the motivations, experiences, perceptions and attitudes of people who attempt higher level vocational awards as part of their continuing professional development. As with the study by Connelly and Halliday (2001), this study was also based on a small sample and caution should also be exercised when interpreting its findings.

# Adult choice in UK post-school education and training

Sargant and Aldridge (2002) report on the findings of the third in a series of national surveys of adult participation in education and learning in the UK, the first two of which were conducted in 1996 and 1999. Although the scope of the 2002 survey is much wider than for the other studies reviewed herein, the findings provide an insight into key aspects of adult choice in the UK post-school education and training sectors. Administered in early 2002, the survey by Sargant and Aldridge comprised 2,073 respondents around one fifth of whom were aiming for school or university-level qualifications. Most respondents were enrolled in adult education and FE courses or participating in workplace training and community-based education programs.

Sargant and Aldridge note that 'Participation in learning is, for adults, a matter of choice and has to be fitted in with work, family and other interests and obligations.' (p.x) They investigated the reasons why individuals chose the main or only subject of their current or recent study, but not the criteria for provider choice. The aggregate categories of choice criteria with respect to individuals' main subject of learning were: personal development reasons (62%); work-related reasons (53%); and education/ progression reasons (27%). Six per cent said that they had no choice, as participation in learning was either an employer or professional requirement. The most important personal development reasons for re-engaging in study were: interest in a subject (34%); enjoyment of learning (31%); a desire to develop as a person (25%); to improve self-confidence (12%); and to meet people (8%). Key work-related reasons were: to help me in my current job (26%); to get a job (17%); to make my work more satisfying (13%); to change the type of work I do (8%); to gain a rise in earnings (8%); and to gain a promotion (7%). The main reason given relating to education/progression was to get a recognised qualification (24%).

Despite the importance of individual reasons, adult choice of subject is multi-factorial and contextual in nature:

> Adults are rarely motivated to learn by just a single factor, but will often only begin learning when a range of factors come together. For example, two thirds of those who identified education/progression reasons for starting learning also cited personal development and work-related reasons. (p.xxi)

Age was found to be a much clearer discriminator than gender with respect to adults' motives for learning. Intrinsic reasons were important both for younger age-groups and older groups, while 'work-related reasons become increasingly important for individuals until they reach their thirties, after which they become less so.' (p.74)

With respect to sources of information informing adult choice, Sargant and Aldridge observe that:

> Information advice and guidance become more important as people enter and re-enter learning opportunities throughout their lives. Different

> age-groups gain information about learning opportunities from different sources. Information technologies, both old and new, are expected to play an increasingly important role in the provision of information and advice, but the majority of sources are still local and personal. (p.xviii)

Their survey findings suggest that formal sources of information are collectively more influential than informal sources. In aggregate terms, post-school providers (22%) – including adult education centres and FE and HE providers - were the main formal source of information, followed by work/employer/training officer (20%), print media (7%), school (7%), and printed publicity (5%). The main informal sources of information were friends/family (13%) and workmates (12%). In both cases, only 2% of respondents identified careers/guidance services and a job centre/job club/ employment service as their main information sources.

Overall, the workplace was the dominant source of information about (and often motivation for) learning for individuals aged from 25-64 years:

> The workplace is not only a major location for learning, but also provides adults with information about learning opportunities, as well as the finance and motivation to take them up. (p.xiv)

Collectively, media advertising/publicity - including newspaper/magazine and printed publicity delivered to home and accessed elsewhere – accounted for 12% of all information sources. Contrary to expectations, only 2% of respondents identified the internet or World Wide Web as their main source in 2002, up from 1% in 1999. More men (4% compared to only 1% of women) and individuals aged 20-24 years (4%) identified the internet as their source of information. As 'newer sources of information have still not yet reached most people, particularly older ones' (p.xviii), Sargant and Aldridge conclude that information about learning opportunities should be provided through a diverse array of old and new sources that cater for different client groups.

Although direct and accurate comparisons are not possible, due to differences in research scope, sampling techniques and other factors, it is nonetheless interesting to note some broad differences between the 1999 survey findings of Sargant (2000) and those from a 1981 national UK survey of adults in education (Woodley et al 1987). Sargant (2000) was the second national survey in the abovementioned series and, unlike Sargant and Aldridge (2002), allowed respondents to identify only one reason for choosing their main subject of learning. In Sargant (2000), 47% of respondents identified work-related reasons for undertaking further study, compared to 62% in the Woodley et al (1987) study. Personal development reasons were identified by 35% in Sargant (2000), compared to 32% (including social reasons and subject-related interest) in Woodley et al (1987). Only 2% of respondents in Sargant (2000) said they undertook further study to qualify for a higher level course, compared to 5% in the Woodley et al (1987) study.

The most significant variation between the above findings of the two studies relates to work-related reasons. Where the explanation for such a difference lies is unclear, but the apparent decline in the significance of work-related reasons is somewhat

surprising given the strong emphasis and priority placed by government on upgrading the vocational qualifications of adult workers from the early 1980s onwards. While the job market and employment levels may have been healthier at the end of the 1990s than during the recession of the early 1980s, these findings suggest that the influence of official policy rhetoric on the motives of adult learners during the intervening two decades has been relatively weaker than had been anticipated. Also noteworthy, and rather unexpected given the considerable importance attached to lifelong learning by government, is the apparent decline in reasons relating to education progression.

What has increased markedly during the two-decade period separating the above two surveys, however, is the influence of work-related sources of information on adult choices. Work-related sources were identified by 32% of respondents in Sargant (2000), compared to none in the Woodley et al (1987) survey. At the same time, the influence of both print material, particularly course prospectuses, and friends/family appears to have declined significantly.

## Choice in the Australian VET sector

A large-scale investigation of choice in the Australian VET sector was undertaken by Maxwell, Cooper and Biggs (2000) in a context of changing labour market demand and training market development. They note that research on choice in VET is limited and has concentrated largely on post-compulsory students, with the result that:

> ... there is a need to have empirical data on the reasons why people in employment undertake further study in VET ... There is a need to discover the motivations and methods of choice of those who begin their VET studies when they are already in the workforce or following other studies to improve their employability. (p.12)

Simultaneously, the development of competitive training markets has also generated 'an urgent need to ensure that trainee choice is well informed and that there is a close match between trainee expectations and course offerings.' (p.16)

Their study comprised a questionnaire survey of a national sample of 3,000 VET students enrolled in four fields of study (which produced 1,501 responses), and in-depth interviews at eleven public and private VET providers in three States. Their sample population was broadly representative in most respects and 'covers a more comprehensive range of individuals than ... earlier studies, focussing on students in VET rather than in school.' (p.73) However, 46% of their survey participants were less than 20 years of age, which is much higher than their proportional representation in the total Australian VET student population (NCVER 2003). This should be borne in mind when considering their findings as it is likely to have affected response patterns in significant ways, as indicated below.

Maxwell, Cooper and Biggs found that by far the most significant factor influencing individuals' choices of VET program is work experience or employment, followed by: parental or guardian influence; performance in school subjects; advertising booklets or handbooks; personal experience of study at college or university; personal friends;

and employers. The least influential factors were, in ascending order of significance: the internet; job centre or job club; radio or television advertisement; and newspaper or magazine advertisement. The factors influencing choice of provider were found to be: course offerings; convenience factors such as proximity to home and course timetable; program affordability; opportunity for practical experiences; quality factors such as reputation of the institution and its qualifications; and institutional ambience, especially whether it is friendly and caring. Overall, Maxwell, Cooper and Biggs conclude that no single factor exerts a definitive influence over individuals' decisions, which are typically based on a combination of various influences that differ according to personal circumstances.

Maxwell, Cooper and Biggs identify three different reasons for enrolling in VET, in order of prevalence: to obtain a job; to realise personal aspirations; and to acquire or upgrade skills for current employment. As employers influenced only about one in ten enrolments, they argue that immediate employer requirements are comparatively unimportant drivers of individual choice in training markets, and have therefore been accorded too much significance in national policy. Consequently, they suggest that greater flexibility in training market arrangements is required so as 'to recognise the primary agency of student interests and needs, to put more emphasis on long-term future-oriented training needs, to recognise the broader role by training institutions in assisting personal development'. (p.x)

Overall, Maxwell, Cooper and Biggs find that individuals are faced with 'many choices and confusions' (p.51) when considering further study options, are poorly informed and unaware of their course options and pathways, and lack the skills they require to make effective long-range choices. In particular, they note the need to develop new strategies for career guidance in schools and VET institutions, and decision-making strategies and skills for developing strategic long-range visions of future career trajectories.

# Overview analysis

As the foregoing reviews indicate, the four extant studies of choice in FET vary from each other with respect to research aims, scope, national and institutional context, populations and methodology. Despite such differences and inconsistencies, some of the central research questions explored in these studies correspond or overlap sufficiently with each other to enable the construction of a comparative grid of research findings (see Table 1). This grid, together with the above reviews, provides the basis for the following overview analysis that attempts to assemble the existing pieces of the jigsaw puzzle of adult choice in FET, and to identify the missing ones. Taken together, these studies yield a number of significant insights into adult choice in FET and suggest directions for further research.

Ironically, three of the studies of adult choice in FET are silent on the question of whether, and if so to what extent, age influences individual choice. Except for Sargant and Aldridge (2002), none of the studies draws any clear distinction between the age

**Table 1: Overview of key research findings on adult choice in further education and training**

| | Connelly & Halliday (2001) | Miller, Kellie & Acutt (2001) | Sargant & Aldridge (2002) | Maxwell, Cooper & Biggs (2000) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Time/place of survey** | Approx. 2000, Scotland | Early 2000, Australia and Britain | Early 2002, United Kingdom | Early 1999, Australia |
| **Target/age group** | FE students: not specified | FE/VET students: 18-60 years | Adult students, 17yrs & over | VET studs all ages (<20 yrs = 46%) |
| **Sample size** | 701 participants | 566 respondents | 2,073 respondents | 1,501 respondents |
| **Sources of information/influence** (1) | Printed material (leaflets, brochures) | Not applicable | AFE/HE providers (22%)<br>Work/employer/trainer (20%)<br>Friends/family (13%)<br>Workmates (12%)<br>Newspaper/magazine (7%)<br>School (7%)<br>Print material (5%)<br>Other (11%) | 1. Work experience/employment<br>2. Parent/guardian<br>3. School subject performance<br>4. Provider advertising<br>5. Prior experience of tertiary study<br>6. Friends<br>7. Employer |
| **Reasons for choice of subject/course/ qualification** (2) | 1. Work-related reasons:<br>• *upgrade skills*<br>• *gain qualification*<br>• *for career change*<br>• *improve prospects*<br>2. Social reasons:<br>• *meet people*<br>• *improve self-confidence* | Pre-employment reasons:<br>1. *respected qualification*<br>2. *best qualification for work*<br>3. *to get a job*<br>4. *employers value qualification*<br>5. *job pre-requisite*<br>Post-employment reasons:<br>1. *personal development*<br>2. *career progression*<br>3. *respected qualification*<br>4. *level of achievement*<br>5. *higher salary*<br>6. *help change job* | Personal development (62%):<br>• *interest in subject (34%)*<br>• *develop as a person (25%)*<br>• *enjoy learning (31%)*<br>• *meet people (8%)*<br>• *improve confidence (12%)*<br>Work-related (53%):<br>• *to help in current job (26%)*<br>• *to get a job (17%)*<br>• *for job satisfaction (13%)*<br>• *to change type of work (8%)*<br>• *to increase earnings (8%)*<br>• *to gain promotion (7%)*<br>Education/progression (27%) | All reasons:<br>1. *to get a job*<br>2. *personal aspirations*<br>3. *to get/upgrade skills for current job* |
| **Reasons for choice of provider** | 1. Location<br>2. Resources<br>3. Reputation<br>4. Atmosphere<br>5. Facilities<br>NB: Flexible timetable and child care for some female students | Not applicable | Not applicable | 1. Course availability<br>2. Proximity to home<br>3. Course timetable<br>4. Affordability<br>5. Practice opportunities<br>6. Reputation<br>7. Ambience |

**Notes:**

1. This row reflects the sources of 'information' identified in all studies, except Maxwell, Cooper and Biggs (2000) who identified sources of 'influence'.
2. This row reflects reasons for choice of subject/course/qualification identified in all studies, except Connelly and Halliday (2001) who identified reasons for choosing further education and training *per se*. Also, Sargant and Aldridge (2002) allowed multiple responses for main subject choice.

profile of research participants or, by extension, analyses the resulting data with reference to age or life-stage. Despite the size and inclusive age-range of their sample population of students in post-school VET programs, Maxwell, Cooper and Biggs (2000) draw no age-based distinctions between the response patterns of their survey participants. Nor do Connelly and Halliday (2001) or Miller, Kellie and Acutt (2001) disaggregate or analyse their data by age.

Yet considered as a whole, the studies suggest that the nature and process of choice-making alter according to age or life-stage and related changes in an individual's work and family circumstances. Sargant and Aldridge (2002, p.74), for instance, find that age has a stronger impact on individuals' motivations to learn than gender. Specifically, the influence of personal development reasons generally increases with age, whereas education/progression reasons tend to decline in importance with age. They also found that 'certain life circumstances can act as a trigger in encouraging adults to participate in learning.' (p.81) As noted earlier, older adults tend to rely to a greater extent on personal and local sources of information when making choices.

Although Foskett and Hesketh (1997) find that young people assume a more active and independent role in choosing their post-compulsory pathways as they approach the end of compulsory schooling, they do so within significant external constraints. Typically, a young person is a 'composite consumer' who exercises choice in conjunction with her/his parents, and within the frame of reference pre-structured by the latter party. By comparison, adult learners appear to exercise choice with greater clarity, confidence and autonomy, a finding well summarised in an excerpt from an interview with a student counsellor, reported by Maxwell, Cooper and Biggs (2000):

> When students come in they generally have some idea about what they want to do. The more mature person definitely has thought more carefully about it than the recent school leaver. The recent school leaver is up against parental expectations and family traditions but as they get older they determine for themselves. (p.60)

Not surprisingly, choice of FET by individuals (generally school leavers) prior to entering the labour market tends to be influenced strongly by earlier work experiences and job-seeking objectives (Miller, Kellie & Acutt 2001; Sargant & Aldridge 2002). In contrast, choices in FET by individuals after having gained employment are more strongly influenced by personal development goals and highly specific employment-related objectives, generally oriented towards career change and advancement (Connelly & Halliday 2001; Maxwell, Cooper & Biggs 2000; Miller, Kellie & Acutt 2001; Sargant & Aldridge 2002). Broadly speaking, therefore, age and life-stage appear to make a significant difference to individual choice processes and require closer investigation, as Miller, Kellie and Acutt (2001) suggest.

Not all adult learners in FET exercise choice in a voluntary and autonomous manner. Field (1999, p.11) notes the 'quiet explosion in compulsory education and training for adults' over recent years in Britain, due to employer demands and the pressures of contract compliance, regulatory frameworks and statutory requirements. The

studies reviewed herein also identify employer requirements as a reason why some adults enrol in FET courses. In general, however, the influence exerted by employers and job requirements on decisions by adults to undertake further study is relatively insignificant compared to other factors (Maxwell, Cooper & Biggs 2000; Miller, Kellie & Acutt 2001; Sargant & Aldridge 2002). In view of this apparent disparity, together with the policy emphasis on developing employer-led FET systems in each of the countries covered by this review, the extent to which adult learners participate involuntarily in FET requires clarification.

No clear patterns emerge from the studies about the relative influence of particular sources of information on choice in FET, with one possible exception. Formal sources of information, specifically provider-generated marketing and promotion (e.g. media advertising, open days/evenings) about education and training options appear to overshadow informal sources, such as parents, teachers and friends, which have traditionally predominated (Foskett & Hesketh 1997; Connelly & Halliday 2001). This increased reliance on provider-generated sources applies to individuals of all ages engaged in the process of choosing FET providers and courses, including school students approaching the end of compulsory schooling. Foskett and Hesketh (1997) suggest that the greater reliance of young people on formal sources of information is evidence of the growing influence of supply side marketing strategies in FET markets. While the claim that consumerism is rising among young people in FET markets needs further investigation, research is also required to establish whether adult learners are behaving like active consumers to a greater degree than was the case prior to marketisation.

Although the research findings about choice criteria vary between the studies, the following factors are consistently identified among the main reasons why individuals choose particular providers: perceived quality (i.e. provider reputation); location/ convenience (i.e. geographical proximity, flexible/suitable timetabling); and course availability (i.e. preferred course offered, 'only provider offering course'). Although the available research is inconclusive, the relative significance of perceived quality and convenience appears to be affected to some extent by gender, with some women making choices on the basis of child care availability and suitability of class times (Connelly & Halliday 2001). Course costs or affordability were identified by Australian VET students as an important consideration, although Maxwell, Cooper and Biggs (2000) were the only researchers to examine the influence of this factor. Although considerably less influential than the aforementioned factors, a provider's ambience/atmosphere and facilities also figured among the main choice criteria used by Scottish FE and Australian VET students (Connelly & Halliday 2001; Maxwell, Cooper & Biggs 2000). Overall, the research suggests that adult choice of provider is driven by a diverse mix of factors.

Work-related reasons predominate among the criteria that adults employ to choose a FET course/qualification, particularly those attempting to enter the labour market for the first time. However, reasons relating to personal and social development are equally significant, and indeed outweigh work-related reasons of a general nature for individuals already in (or attempting to re-enter) employment (Connelly & Halliday

2001; Maxwell, Cooper & Biggs 2000; Miller, Kellie & Acutt 2001; Sargant & Aldridge 2002). For the latter group, specific work-related reasons (e.g. job/career change/progression, improved skills for current job or a salary increase) displace the more generalised work-related criteria used by individuals in a pre-employment phase (e.g. to get a job). Also of note is the apparent, though unexpected, tendency for unemployed people choosing a course/qualification to give equal emphasis to personal development/interest and job-seeking objectives (Maxwell, Cooper & Biggs 2000; Miller, Kellie & Acutt 2001). As mentioned earlier, an intriguing trend suggested by the research is the apparent growth in importance of workplaces as sources of information in the choice process, coupled with an apparent decline in the significance of work-related reasons for undertaking further study.

In view of the high priority placed on personal development/interest by individuals enrolled in FET courses, a major implication highlighted by the studies is that courses should reflect non-instrumental and intrinsically worthwhile learning goals to a much greater degree than is presently the case. The relatively insignificant role and influence of current employers on individuals' choices suggests that national policy in Australia and the United Kingdom has given undue emphasis to the development of narrow, job-specific skills and competencies, at the expense of the broader personal/social development needs, interests and aspirations of adult learners. Unless account is taken of the latter motivations of individuals for undertaking further study, the research suggests that the ideal of lifelong learning is unlikely to be realised, at least by way of self-initiated engagement (Connelly & Halliday 2001; Maxwell, Cooper & Biggs 2000; Miller, Kellie & Acutt 2001).

From a theoretical perspective, all four studies conceptualise adult choice as a distinct, time-limited and largely rational process. Although their surveys were conducted at the start of an academic year, the data collected on choice processes are largely retrospective in nature, and focus on isolated 'moments' of decision. In their study of young people's career and study decisions during their school-to-work transitions, Hodkinson et al (1996) criticise this concept of choice for being individualistic, overly reductionist and largely decontextualised. Their work suggests that point-in-time surveys produce unrealistic and oversimplified representations of choice. In the light of their own case study research, which found that young people make 'pragmatically rational choices' within culturally bounded 'horizons for action', they reject the instrumental or technical-rationalist assumptions about choice that underlie government policy and survey research. Instead, they argue that learner choice should be understood as a complex social process that unfolds over time, and often in irrational and unanticipated ways. Such insights have been elaborated and used in studies of the 'learning careers' of young people (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000, 2003) and also adults (Gallacher et al 2002; Crossan et al 2003).

# Further research

Each of the studies reviewed in this paper establishes a strong warrant for research on adult choice in its own national policy and institutional context. Although these

studies, individually and collectively, extend our understanding of adult choice in FET, the empirical foundations remain weak. Aside from the self-evident need for more research, the question remains as to what types of research would be most informative. Firstly, as the concept of choice in FET markets is relatively new, there is value in continuing to utilise a diverse range of research designs and approaches. Secondly, however, it would be desirable to aim for greater consistency between past and future study designs in the interests of generating more comparable data, and testing and building on existing knowledge over time. As neither approach necessarily discounts the other, efforts should be made to balance creativity with comparability. In the latter respect, particular consideration should be given to: the way in which research questions are framed, which choices, influences and choice criteria are investigated; and when the research is conducted. Some of the variation in the research findings to date can be attributed to the differing factors and related descriptors used by researchers, and the timing of survey administration. The predominant practice of conducting such surveys at the start of the academic year only requires reconsideration. Important new insights could be gained from before-and-after studies of adult choice.

The research on adult choice is framed largely within the individualist paradigm that characterises the field of FET policy as a whole, a tendency that has been accentuated since the sector was marketised. Greater attention must be paid to the roles and interaction of social structure and individual agency in shaping the choices and decisions of adult learners, particularly with respect to the influence of socio-economic class, gender, race, and ethnicity. All four extant studies of adult choice touch on one or more of these dimensions to varying degrees, but none explores the nature of, and inter-relationships between, structural and agential influences in a rigorous and systematic manner. Adult choice needs to be understood as structured agency, the real nature of which can only be fathomed when choice is analysed in relationship to the social factors that shape and constrain it. As Gorard et al (2001) observe, choices are made within 'subjective opportunity structures' and 'People generally only consider a segment of the full objective choice open to them, and the nature of that segment can be constrained by social factors ... such as class or gender' (p.169). In effect, future research into adult choice must conceptualise the choice process more explicitly and data analysis should be linked more clearly to the theoretical framework informing such research.

Such observations point to the shortcomings of quantitative factor-based analyses of choice, an approach which all four studies adopted and which Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe (1995) dismiss as 'artefactual empiricism' and 'social arithmetic'. Such criticism highlights the need for qualitative studies of adult choice that investigate individual biographies and the complex interplay of structural factors and subjective influences. Examples include studies of the learning careers of adults returning to FE in the UK by Gallacher et al (2002) and Crossan et al (2003). Such research is likely to yield deeper and more nuanced insights into the structured agency of adult learners. The

overall efficacy of research on adult choice in FET, however, would be enhanced by stronger links between qualitative and quantitative studies, and cross-methodological testing and validation of findings. As Foskett and Hesketh (1997) argue, macro-quantitative and micro-qualitative studies of choice 'are complementary and essential as they represent two sides of the same education market coin.' (p.302)

Future research, including quantitative surveys, will need to take greater account of continuity and change in contexts for adult choice, particularly in relation to FET policy and financial settings, institutional arrangements, and cultural norms and values. In particular, the changing form and dynamics of markets for FET need to be explored and mapped out in a more precise manner, and their inter-relationships with other education and labour markets and surrounding communities must be better understood. A mix of macro and micro-level studies of the structure and operation of markets in FET is likely to produce a more sophisticated framework for investigating the nature, process and outcomes of choice. The series of national surveys of adult participation in education and learning in the UK also highlights the potential value of longitudinal research. Sargant and Aldridge (2002), for instance, note that this has allowed benchmarks to be set for measuring changes in the use of new information and communications technologies change over time. The study by Miller, Kellie and Acutt (2001) suggests that comparative research is also likely to yield worthwhile insights, provided that adequate account is taken of variations in national contexts.

A number of more specific questions and issues have been overlooked or under-researched so far. Some of these gaps have been acknowledged in the studies reviewed above. For instance, both Maxwell, Cooper and Biggs (2000) and Miller, Kellie and Acutt (2001) identify a need for further research into the study-related motivations, perceptions, choice processes and experiences of individuals already in employment or attempting to re-enter the labour market, and after initial participation in FET. Miller, Kellie and Acutt (2001) emphasise the need for future research to ascertain the influence of gender and age on decisions to undertake further study towards different types of qualifications.

Existing research leaves unclear the extent to which adult learners engage actively in the processes of information gathering and choosing, and the degree to which this is a self-consciously planned and systematic process. In other words, to what extent are individuals adopting overtly consumerist behaviours in FET markets? Do such patterns of behaviour, if revealed, change with age and experience of choice in education, training and labour markets? Foskett and Hesketh (1997) and Maxwell, Cooper and Biggs (2000) touch on such questions, but do not examine them in any depth. Research on adult consumerism in FET would need to address other questions raised by Maxwell, Cooper and Biggs (2000). For instance, how accessible and comprehensive is course and provider information to prospective students? To what extent is provider reputation a formal choice factor that reflects objective market indicators of quality outcomes? Or is it in reality an informal factor derived from subjective perceptions reproduced in oral tradition and popular memory, much of

which pre-dates marketisation? Answers to such questions will help to reveal whether adult choice conforms to the assumptions and model of rational choice-making that underlie current policy.

Foskett and Hesketh (1997) identify the need to further examine the impact of market ideology in FET on the choice processes of young school leavers. Although a complex undertaking, such research should also include adult learners and attempt to gauge the extent to which consumer behaviour has changed, if at all, since the creation of competitive markets for FET. As Foskett and Hesketh (1997) also contend, the apparent tendency towards more active choice-making and consumerist behaviour suggests the need to put the spotlight on the supply-side of FET markets. Specifically, there is a need to examine the nature and influence of provider marketing and promotion from both a theoretical and ethical perspective, especially given the potentially adverse implications for individuals of making ill-informed choices and decisions on the basis of misleading or inaccurate information.

An important question overlooked almost totally by researchers to date concerns the relative significance that adult learners attach to different types of choice. As noted in the introduction, official FET policy assumes that the learning 'product' will reflect consumer needs and preferences, provided that competition prevails in FET markets. Accordingly, governments have established and diversified the supply side of markets in FET to enable adult learners to exercise their power of choice by 'shopping around' for courses and providers. This of course assumes that they are actually able to shop around for, and switch between, alternative providers effectively, and that choice of course and provider are most highly valued by adult learners. The validity of the latter assumption needs to be tested by determining the extent to which adult learners value the opportunity to exercise not only pre-enrolment choices of course and provider, but also post-enrolment or intra-course choices - for instance, choice of subjects, units and modules, and of delivery, attendance and assessment modes. Connelly and Halliday (2001) report from their small-scale survey that FE students in Scotland expressed little desire to choose the content or competencies that comprised their courses, and were content to influence the 'broad thrust' of their learning experience. Such questions must be explored more widely, rigorously and systematically in a range of FET markets and institutional contexts.

The quality and accessibility of information about courses/qualifications and providers in FET was examined only by Maxwell, Cooper and Biggs (2000). In the light of their survey results, they concluded that individuals were making choices on the basis of inadequate information about the range of possible VET options and how these related to employment outcomes and career paths. However, their survey was conducted at an early stage of course participation, which meant that respondents were unable to reflect on the extent to which they had made well-informed and effective choices. Follow-up surveys at course completion and after graduation are required if the quality of information and effectiveness of choices in FET markets are to be evaluated adequately.

Maxwell, Cooper and Biggs (2000) also suggest, on the basis of their findings, that information in its own right is insufficient to ensure effective choices over the longer term. Individuals also require high-level decision-making skills and the capacity to envisage vocational futures in order to construct meaningful pathways from the diverse array of education, training and employment opportunities available to them over their lifetime. These claims warrant further investigation as their potential implications for policy and practice are significant.

# Conclusion

The rhetoric of choice has been accorded unprecedented significance in FET policy over the past two decades. Progressively recast as consumers in FET markets and lifelong navigators of work and learning pathways, adult learners have been granted the power of choice by governments that are intent on pursuing market-driven efficiency and economic competitiveness. Portrayed as an individual right and necessity in the face of globalisation and rapid social and economic change, choice is the mechanism by which learner-consumers have been assigned responsibility for shaping their own destinies and, in doing so, realising the policy objectives of government. Such an approach assumes that once granted, the power of choice will be exercised rationally and effectively, as envisaged in economic theory, thus producing the desired effects and intended outcomes. Yet as the foregoing review shows, our knowledge of the process and outcomes of adult choice in FET is relatively weak and in need of fortification. While extant studies have begun to assemble the jigsaw of adult choice in FET, the pieces do not always fit readily into place and many are still missing. Moreover, the overall form and character of the jigsaw remain sketchy and ill-defined. The challenge is to develop a more complete picture so that the grand designs of governments can be evaluated against the realities of adult choice in learning markets.

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