



# A WELL-SKILLED FUTURE

Tailoring VET to the emerging labour market

## Skill acquisition and use across the life course: Current trends, future prospects by Bill Martin

People's life course pathways have become less 'traditional' and increasingly more difficult to predict—with obvious and often substantial implications for skills acquisition and employment. This research examines the increased diversity of contemporary life course pathways and its inevitable influence on the VET sector.

### Introduction

Many social commentators believe that people's paths through the major events of life are no longer as predictable as they once were. Certainly, fewer people will make an ordered transition from school to work, possibly via a technical and further education (TAFE) institute or university, and then on to living independently, marrying, having children and so on. Instead, many people will combine a variety of roles and contexts to produce mixtures of transitions that were once rare, even unimaginable.

This increased diversity in 'life course' pathways will have significant implications for the vocational education and training (VET) sector. Fewer and fewer students will fit the 'conventional' mould of school leavers wanting to gain qualifications for their first entry to full-time career jobs. Instead, they might be people in their 40s wanting a career change to a more attractive job, or single parents in their early 30s wanting to gain qualifications to improve their job prospects. The goals of the students themselves will become more diverse, as will their backgrounds and motivations.

This project uses Australian census data for the period 1981–2001 to examine recent changes in the life course patterns of Australians and whether these patterns have indeed become more diverse and unpredictable. The project identifies the effects of increased diversity and unpredictability, when in their lives people acquire formal qualifications, and how they use their skills through their

lives, and examines the wider changes in life that set the scene for patterns of skill acquisition and use. The project also considers the implications of life course change for the VET sector:

### Changes in life course patterns

The project found evidence of substantial life course changes between 1981 and 2001. There was strong evidence that the conventional life course patterns of the second half of the 20th century have undergone significant change, with Australians delaying entry into 'full' adulthood, particularly as a result of later partnering and parenthood. They have changed their patterns of paid work and obtaining qualifications.

Life course patterns have also become more diverse and unpredictable, with more people living 'unconventional' lives. The most important unconventional pathways were: more people were single parents; more were men without full-time jobs at prime ages (25–49); more began post-secondary education after age 29; and more lived in groups with other adults after age 29.

Despite the obvious changes in life course patterns, a substantial majority of people continued to follow fairly conventional life pathways.

### Consequences of life course changes for VET

Changing life course patterns have had far more significant effects on the VET sector than on the other major provider of post-secondary education, universities. By 2001, just over half of VET part-time students were not

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The nature of the labour supply

The research consortium, *A well-skilled future: Tailoring vocational education and training to the emerging labour market*, comprises researchers from the National Institute of Labour Studies and the Centre for Post-compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning. Managed by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), it aims to investigate future work skill needs and work organisation arrangements, and their implications for VET.

*A well-skilled future: Tailoring vocational education and training to the emerging labour market*

CONSORTIUM RESEARCH PROGRAM



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conforming to conventional life course patterns. The result was an increasingly diverse VET student body between 1981 and 2001. Increasing proportions of VET part-time students were:

- over the age of 29 and beginning first post-school qualifications
- single parents (almost all women)
- prime-age men without full-time jobs.

In contrast, the proportions of unconventional university students hardly changed during this period.

### Skill utilisation across the life course

This research demonstrated that life course changes are clearly affecting when and under what conditions people obtain skills, particularly those available through VET. But an important question is whether people are changing the way they use their skills through their lives. If they do, the VET sector can expect to experience new pressures, not just from our unconventional students, but also from employers affected by workers moving in and out of jobs, consistent with the new patterns of employment.

The project investigated changes in skill utilisation by assessing net movement in and out of major occupational groups between 1986 and 1991, and between 1996 and 2001 with the following findings.

- People in trades occupations display a distinctive pattern, whereby they obtain training and enter the occupations by their mid-20s, and then steadily exit the occupations over their working lives, beginning soon after they qualify.
- Other occupations present a stark contrast. For example, people in professional occupations are trained and enter these occupations by their late 20s, but do not leave the occupations in substantial numbers until retirement
- There is no consistent evidence that lifetime employment patterns are changing, despite change in other life course patterns.

### Implications for VET

The VET sector needs the capacity to accommodate *both* change and stability in life course patterns. In this context the following issues are highlighted.

- Training young school leavers will continue to be an important role for VET institutions, as will upgrading the qualifications of those who obtained their initial post-secondary education through a conventional training pathway.
- The proportion of VET students, particularly part-timers, who are unconventional is likely to continue to rise, making the VET student body increasingly diverse. Many of these students are disadvantaged and their labour market prospects will be substantially improved if they obtain VET qualifications.
- There is an opportunity for the VET sector to take a lead in training workers who, at unconventional points in their lives, will supply skills in short supply. These may include men entering trades occupations late and women with upgraded skills in elementary and intermediate clerical, sales and service occupations.

This overview is based on the research report, *Skills acquisition and use across the life course: Current trends, future prospects*. Visit <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1721.html> for more information.

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