

WORKING LIVES PROJECT: A ten-year comparative analysis of work benefit and skill trajectories of trade and bachelor graduates

OVERVIEW



In the rapidly changing workforce of the twenty-first century, the creation of entry and re-entry pathways to further qualifications or of opportunities to change qualifications is important.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

This small-scale exploratory study compared the work benefit and skill trajectories of a cohort of trade (vocational education) and bachelor (higher education) graduates of RMIT University, a dual-sector education institution, in the first ten years of their working lives. It involved three stages of data collection and analysis of 179 trade and higher education completers who graduated from RMIT University between 1994 and 1996.

Using a life-course methodology, the research team documented the many influences on the career decision-making considerations of these young men and women during this ten-year period. By identifying also reasons for job changes, the study aimed to understand why workers choose certain careers or move jobs, especially at a time of skill shortage and rapid change in technology.

FINDINGS

After ten years since initial course completion, a number of work-related themes common to both trade and bachelor graduates emerged.

For both trade and bachelor groups there were:

- high levels of satisfaction generally with work and life balance
- high levels of broad occupational stability and ongoing employment
- high working hours accompanied by low levels of satisfaction with free time
- high levels of importance attached to informal learning methods to further develop work-related skills.

Furthermore, the study found that job change was most likely to be associated with the desire of workers to satisfy self-concepts of skill and ability.

WORKING LIVES PROJECT: A TEN-YEAR COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF WORK BENEFIT AND SKILL TRAJECTORIES OF TRADE AND BACHELOR GRADUATES – OVERVIEW

However, trade graduates differed considerably from bachelor groups in that they:

- were more uncertain prior to starting their course about post-school study and work destinations, were more likely not to proceed directly to further studies after leaving school, and more likely to be influenced by family and friends to move into an apprenticeship
- experienced fewer job and occupational changes and had longer-term attachments to an employer
- were more likely to work for small-sized enterprises with fewer than 20 employees and work in the private sector on a full-time basis
- were more likely to attempt to run their own business and identify that 'being your own boss' was a deliberately sought-after benefit
- were less likely to engage in formal learning for additional qualifications, but more likely to use the skills acquired during their initial training and then undertake further training on the job.

Differences were also observed between male and female graduates, especially in issues relating to the suitability of particular occupations and patterns of work. These include the 'image' of trade versus bachelor degrees, permanent part-time work and security in job-sharing practices and the impact of career interruptions on career trajectories.

The study notes the strong influence of families and, in particular, parents on the first occupational choice of post-Year 12 students. Education and qualifications are also important in the early career decisions of both bachelor and trade graduates; however, perhaps surprisingly, financial or personal factors were far less important.

Later career decisions tended to be influenced more by other factors such as workplace conditions, including working hours, flexible workplace policies and practices, and changing technology.

Related to this is the issue of career planning. The research points to the importance of advice being given to young people about career possibilities and the range of occupations available to them and, furthermore, that this is an important responsibility of all educational institutions.

An interesting issue raised by many participants in the study was the perception of the long working hours required in the latter part of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. A number of participants were clearly influenced in their career changes by this issue as they considered long working hours detrimental to their personal wellbeing.

A further key finding is the view graduates hold of post-qualification further education. Both trade and bachelor graduates alike rated acquiring new skills through on-the-job or informal learning as more important than gaining a new qualification. Trade graduates considered that undertaking further formal learning leading to a qualification to be less important than degree graduates. However, they felt training courses provided by their employer to be more important.

Finally, the study raises the interesting question of how to measure 'benefit' to a working person's life. No longer is a simple monetary indicator a satisfactory estimate of a person's concept of occupational benefit.

FURTHER INFORMATION

More information is available in the main report at <www.rmit.edu.au>.

You are welcome to submit comments and queries to:

Associate Professor Heather Fehring

School of Education

RMIT University

Ph: +61 3 9925 7840

Email: Heather.Fehring@RMIT.edu.au

This overview is drawn from the stage 1, 2 and 3 reports of the *Working lives project: A ten-year comparative analysis of work benefit and skill trajectories of trade and bachelor graduates* by Heather Fehring and Jeff Malley and is available at <<http://www.RMIT.edu.au>>.