

Practices and policies for sustaining employability through work-life learning

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Work-life learning

Much is made of the importance of adults' learning across their life span, particularly for work-related purposes. This learning is now seen as being both important and urgent as the requirements for work constantly change and the need to be employable over a longer portion of adult life grows stronger. Often, addressing these learning needs is translated into provisions of lifelong education (i.e., courses, programs) that, indeed, play a significant role for many adults. However, the breadth of the heterogeneity of the working-age adult population in terms of their readiness, interest, ability to access education and work activities, and purposes for participating in working life and educational provisions means that supporting lifelong learning is, of necessity, likely to be varied and realised in diverse ways. Indeed, much if not most of the learning across adults' working life often occurs outside of intentional educational provisions (i.e., lifelong education) and through everyday work activities (OECD, 2013). However, these different kinds of educational experiences are likely to be particularly helpful when adults are making transitions to different kinds of work or workplaces and confronting significant work-life challenges. Therefore, it is important to understand how that learning arises and how it can be supported, guided, and augmented by educational provisions cast broadly and by other forms of support.

The project

This bulletin presents the research questions, provides an overview of the processes, and refers to some preliminary findings from the first phase of a project – *Practices and policies for sustaining employability through work-life learning* – funded by the Australian Research Council (DP 190101519). The project aims to generate evidence-based policies and informed practices supporting work-life learning arrangements to promote Australian workers' employability. These are urgent needs in the era of the corona virus.

Research questions

What kinds of learning are required to sustain employability across working life?

What kinds and combinations of workplace experiences and educational provisions can support and guide that learning?

What societal, workplace, educational, and personal practices will most likely secure that learning across working life?

Phases of project

Phase 1 – Identifying processes and outcomes of work-life learning

Thirty informants from diverse occupational classifications, from across gender and ages, each provided retrospective accounts of their work-life history of learning (Salling-Olesen, 2016) through two interviews, capturing over 200 instances of work-life transitions.

Phase 2 – Elaborating processes and outcomes of learning and learning support

This phase involves monitoring of 30 informants' work-life changes and learning through detailed progressive analyses of their current work and learning activities over a 14-month period, as well as a large-scale survey of working-age Australians.

Phase 3 – Advancing policy and practice implications

This phase consolidates findings and addresses procedural questions about enhancing their learning activities (i.e., improving practices in workplaces and tertiary education) and policy recommendations.

Presented and discussed in this bulletin are the initial findings from Phase 1.

PHASE 1: EARLY FINDINGS

Transitions in working life

Informants reported having negotiated a series of transitions across their adult lives; many were associated with work-life events. These transitions are held to be important as they require individuals to respond to change, to learn, and to develop new capacities. Two vignettes of individual work-life transitions are presented in Tables 1 and 2 as examples.

Table 1 Vignette: Salim

Salim was born into a Bahà'í family in Iran. After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, he experienced religious persecution that restricted his education/work-life options and he faced perilous conscription. He and his wife fled and came as refugees to Australia. His university education in engineering was not recognised in Australia. Over the next 35 years, he worked in a range of jobs (e.g., factory work, spare parts, driving buses and taxis) before gaining skills in and becoming certified as a builder. He worked in that field for some years before a work injury required him to seek alternatives. He secured a coffee shop franchise, sometimes returning to bus and taxi driving, before selling the franchise and becoming a project manager for a construction company.

Transitions

Salim has experienced many transitions across his adult life, each requiring significant learning to progress. These include (i) becoming a husband and parent when religious persecution limited his education and employment options, (ii) fleeing his country of birth to establish a life in Australia, (iii) needing to be competent in English to participate in education and work, (iv) negotiating paid employment of different kinds (e.g., factory work, spare parts sales), (v) working as a builder, (vi) becoming a coffee shop franchisee, and (vii) becoming a project manager for a construction company.



Table 2 Vignette: Shirley

Shirley is in her fifties and is currently a casual administrative worker. She was born with a learning disability (dyslexia). Living in an area of Australia where educational support was limited, she struggled through primary and secondary school and completed her schooling with limited literacy. Supported by her parents, she was found initial employment and then through vocational educational programs she learnt occupational skills. Later, as an adult, she completed her tertiary preparation and graduated with a teaching degree. Her teaching career was short, but she used her newly developed literacy skills to secure employment in local government. However, she faced struggles and difficulties in some demanding aspects of her work roles that led to her early retirement from full-time work.

Transitions

Shirley had a number of transitions across her work life and to the present, including becoming (i) a retail worker, (ii) a beauty therapist, (iii) a receptionist, (iv) a high school teacher, and (v) a clerical worker undertaking a range of roles in local government, before retiring early because of work-related ill-health and is now (vi) a casual administrative worker.

Changes that comprise these transitions

The changes these individuals encountered through these transitions are categorised into six kinds, albeit also with some sub-categories (making 10 kinds). These are:

- i. life stages,
- ii. employment status,
- iii. occupations,
- iv. relocations,
- v. health, and
- vi. personal preference or trajectories.

The changes can be seen as being a product of societal factors (i.e., institutional facts) or those arising through nature (i.e., brute facts) (Searle, 1995). Amongst these are those that arise through individuals' personal histories or ontogenies, referred to as personal facts (Billett, 2009).

1. Stages of life changes (i.e., maturation – brute fact)

Transitions can occur in response to different stages of life, which might include physiological maturity (i.e., brute fact) or societal roles and expectation (i.e., institutional fact). For instance, in early adulthood, finding a partner and commencing a family can initiate transitions in working life associated with needing to secure better paid or more stable employment. A woman who has been a 'stay-at-home mother', once completing her responsibilities as primary caregiver to her children might initiate a transition to seek employment through which her personal identity (i.e., subjectivity) can shift from being a caregiver to having a defined occupation. Adults at some point in their working lives may elect to identify a form of work or occupational pathway that is more interesting to them or that meets their physical capacities better than their current job. Hence, such a

transition can be defined as being precipitated by and pursued as a result of reaching a particular stage of adult life (personal fact, informed by brute reality); that is, enabled by financial security, fulfilling parental roles, or as a reappraisal of life goals, with each of these changes.

2. Change of employment status (i.e., socially derived – institutional facts)

Transitions might also be in response to or a product of a change in individuals' employment status (i.e., institutional fact). For instance, the shift from being an employee to a supervisor or self-employed or owner of a business will likely bring about transitions in what individuals know, can do, and value. These kinds of transitions are likely to require and/or bring about significant learning, requiring support through educational provisions of different kinds to address these changes. It is also likely that these changes play a very powerful role in individuals' sense of self and well-being at the beginning and throughout working life (e.g., formation of adult occupational identity; i.e., personal fact); progressions across working life in terms of how individuals themselves and others view and come to judge their development and success (i.e., achievement, relative success, societal standing of occupations); and also towards the end of working life when individuals move outside of paid employment and occupational identity (i.e., brute and personal facts). Hence, such transitions might be defined as those initiating, advancing, and reconciling employment status (i.e., interaction between institutional and personal facts).

3. Change in occupations (i.e., individually and socially derived – intersection between personal and institutional facts)

Many adults change their occupations across working life either voluntarily (e.g., to secure more personally appropriate occupations – personal fact) or involuntarily because of changes in demand for location of, or existence of, specific occupations or kinds of work, or perhaps prompted by the prospect of such changes (institutional facts). These changes require the development of new sets of occupational capacities that, by degree, may be similar to or distinct from those already possessed. This necessitates adapting what they already know (e.g., builder to building project manager) or generating an entirely new set of occupational-specific capacities (e.g., from builder to coffee shop owner). They may also constitute continuity of further development of what individuals know, can do, and value, but in an entirely different occupation. For instance, tradespersons who become trade teachers in a technical college build upon their occupational capacities and experiences yet need to develop new capacities associated with being teachers. In this way, occupational change might be defined as the further development of work-life capacities in the form of occupational-specific concepts, practices, and values. However, the imperatives to do so may be personal, institutional, or brute.



3a Change in occupations or occupational focus

This subcategory of change is associated with individuals' change in the occupations in which they work or a variation of occupational practice.

3b Change in skills and capacities (i.e., personal facts)

This subcategory refers to changes within individuals' capacities to practice occupations or associated roles, that is, learning that allows individuals to engage in different kinds and forms of work of which previously they would not have been able. So, this change is about individuals' learning and appropriation of new knowledge and capacities to apply that knowledge (i.e., personal fact). So, Salim, in attending a course on building and construction, learnt new knowledge that adds to what he had acquired through an informal apprenticeship comprising observing, imitating, and practising building work as guided by others. Later, he undertook a course associated with managing a coffee franchise that allowed him to perform the role (i.e., enabled by institutional facts).

3c Change in employment through restructuring or changed economic circumstances (i.e., institutional facts)

There are also changes brought about by external factors such as economic restructuring that make specific forms of work and occupations either redundant or in very low supply. The last 40 years has seen significant economic restructuring in many countries. This restructuring is sometimes premised upon globalisation and shifts in goods produced and services provided in the kinds of services.

4. Change in location – geographical or societal (i.e., accommodating new language norms, forms, and practices – institutional facts)

Whilst previously most humans lived within walking distance of where they were born and remained in the community in which they grew up, this is no longer the case. Relocation, mainly through voluntary means (i.e., personal facts) although sometimes traumatically through involuntary acts enacted by others (i.e., institutional facts), constitutes significant transitions for adults. The shift from a community where the norms, forms, and practices are well known and understood, the language is possessed, and futures are visible and viable (i.e., institutional facts) to one in which all of these are unfamiliar and difficult to access and comprehend (i.e., institutional facts) represents significant challenges regardless of their initiation (voluntary/involuntary). The scope of what needs to be learnt to successfully relocate will vary by degree. For instance, Salim came to Australia and needed to learn much more English and find an occupation that would cater to his family's needs. So, it was a combination of institutional factors that caused him to flee from the country in which he understood the norms, forms, and practices and come to live and work in one in which some of those were quite different.

5. Change in physical and psychological health – well-being (i.e., maturation – brute fact; institutional facts such as societally derived pressures)

Maturation (i.e., brute fact) brings with it changes in physical capacities and dispositional well-being, both through biological progress and through the accumulation of lived experiences. Physical strength, ability, and acuity of the sensory system evolve and transform across individuals' lives, in different ways, and by degrees. This maturation has impacts upon individuals' choices about working life, and at different stages across that working life, as well as abilities to perform specific occupations.

5a Change in personal health and well-being (i.e., brute facts)

Factors associated with personal health and well-being can be the source of transitions within working life. For instance, not all work is age tolerant. That is, employment that is physically demanding may be impossible for adults to perform above a certain age to carry out that work. For instance, it is quite common in emergency service work and the military for workers to retire by 40 or 45 from frontline activities, as they do not have the strength and may be a risk to themselves and others (e.g., co-workers) because of that. Salim had to move away from building work (to own and manage a coffee shop) because of a back injury, and this was in part a consideration of concerns about being employed and continuing to make decisions, perhaps rather than being an employee.

5b Changes in family health and well-being (i.e. brute facts)

There are also circumstances where, like above, issues of family health and well-being require workers to change occupations or modes and forms of work. This can include the impact upon the families of workers who are absent from home for extended periods of time because of their work. It can also extend to workers engaged in shift work which causes destruction of family life, particularly when children need to be cared for and schooled. Then, there are circumstances in which it is necessary to care for family members, including ageing parents, prompting changes in location or workplaces that require a transition to a different form of work or workplace.

6. Change in personal lifestyle (personal facts – individual choice/agency)

This kind of change is brought about by personal factors such as existing or emerging beliefs that would be religious, political, or ethical. So, such changes in individuals' personal beliefs and approaches to lifestyle (e.g., being a vegetarian, environmentally active, commercially disengaged; i.e., personal facts) bring about transitions that are caused by either a prosecution of those beliefs or changes in occupational workplace practices that precipitate the need to transition away from that occupation, form of work, or workplace (i.e., institutional facts).



6a Change in personal preferences and values (i.e., personal facts)

This subcategory refers to specific kinds of changes in individuals' values that lead to how they conduct themselves now and in the future (i.e., personal facts). For instance, across his working life, Salim wanted to find work that was fulfilling for him (i.e., personal facts).

6b Change in subjectivity (i.e., personal facts)

This subcategory refers to changes in how individuals come to see themselves and is evident in many of the interviews, indicating their sense of self or subjectivity (i.e., personal facts). For example, Salim went from being a Bahà'í and an Iranian citizen to a refugee migrant, to intentionally gaining Australian citizenship, and also to forming the occupational subjectivity of a builder.

The six kinds of changes associated with transitions identified from the 30 informants' work-life histories are shown in Table 3. Across the over 200 transitions reported by these informants, it was possible to identify and quantify the different kinds that were being reported. Table 3 indicates the frequencies of the qualitative changes captured in the informants' interview transcripts.

Table 3 Analysis of changes that initiate, shape, and represent work-life challenges

Variable	Value	N	%
Changes that initiate, shape, and represent work-life challenges	Personal/lifestyle	193	94.1
	Occupational	188	91.7
	Employment status	123	60.0
	Stages of life	45	22.0
	Location	38	18.5
	Physical and psychological health	15	7.3

Here, personal/lifestyle and occupational changes are most frequently reported. So, issues of self are emphasised in this patterning.

Kinds of learning

It was also found that each of these changes comprised specific kinds of learning required for developing the capacities to successfully negotiate these transitions. Learning was categorised as being of five kinds and about:

- Language and literacy** – language skills and capacities, both spoken and written, were evident in trajectories of the informants, albeit in quite different ways.

- Cultural practices** – the norms, forms, and practices associated with a nation's political, social, or educational systems, institutional mores, occupational requirements, and those associated with the individuals (e.g., family tradition, faith).
- World of work** – involving awareness of requirements for paid employment, including being productive, punctual, reliable, solving problems, and responsive to those who employ and whose needs are served. Extends to understanding of different occupations and career pathways.
- Occupational skills** – associated with the occupations in which individuals are employed or seeking to be employed.
- Work-life engagement** – Learning about work-life involves individuals' responses to and engagement in work as their circumstances change or are changed. Requires adults to fit their working life in with other priorities.

The extent of this learning required by each informant was, by degree, person dependent. For instance, for Salim – who moved from a country in which Farsi is spoken and where very few people would be competent in English – English competence was required to live and work in Australia. Salim was also initially frustrated in his efforts to secure a university qualification based on his earlier studies because he had no evidence of their completion, which meant he could not get credit through the university for his studies. But, much later, he learned about the recognition of prior learning (RPL) system in which he was able to secure credit for some of his existing skills in construction work such as fencing, landscaping, carpentry, and building.

Yet, for others, even those from English-speaking backgrounds, becoming and being literate took different forms. For instance, Shirley had difficulties with her literacy skills (i.e., a form of dyslexia) that inhibited her employment options, and which she worked to overcome through returning to school as a young adult, completing, firstly, her high schooling and then going on to tertiary education. Across these transitions, the development of Shirley's occupational skills was often associated with access to relevant educational provisions, such as undertaking a beauty therapy course to become a beauty therapist, a secretarial course to become a receptionist, and an education degree to become a teacher, which were then followed by working in that occupation.

Overall, there was a complex of societal, personal, educational, and workplace factors that support and sustain the learning required for employability across the participants' working lives. These factors are both person-particular and relational. From the transcripts, it is also possible to identify factors that initiate key transitions in these adult informants' lives, the kinds and scope of changes they encounter, domains of knowledge to be learnt, how they learn to attempt to accomplish the outcomes they want through negotiating those changes, and the support they access in doing so.



The process of transition

Through these early findings, it has been possible to depict, tentatively, the process that comprises these transitions and how they might be supported. That depiction suggests that there are:

- i. factors initiating those transitions;
- ii. different kinds of changes for adults;
- iii. distinct ways in how they are able to progress with those transitions through their learning;
- iv. different kinds of support achieved to support that learning; and
- v. distinct outcomes of those transitions.

Figure 1 captures those transitions. It indicates those factors that initiate transitions (i.e., responses to societal and brute facts, personal agency); the kinds of changes they comprise (i.e., stage of life, employment status, occupations, location, health/well-being, personal lifestyle); the kinds of learning undertaken (i.e., language and literacy, cultural practices, world of work, work-life engagement, occupational skills); and means by which that learning was supported (work-based in educational institutions or in the community) and statements about outcomes (positive/negative).

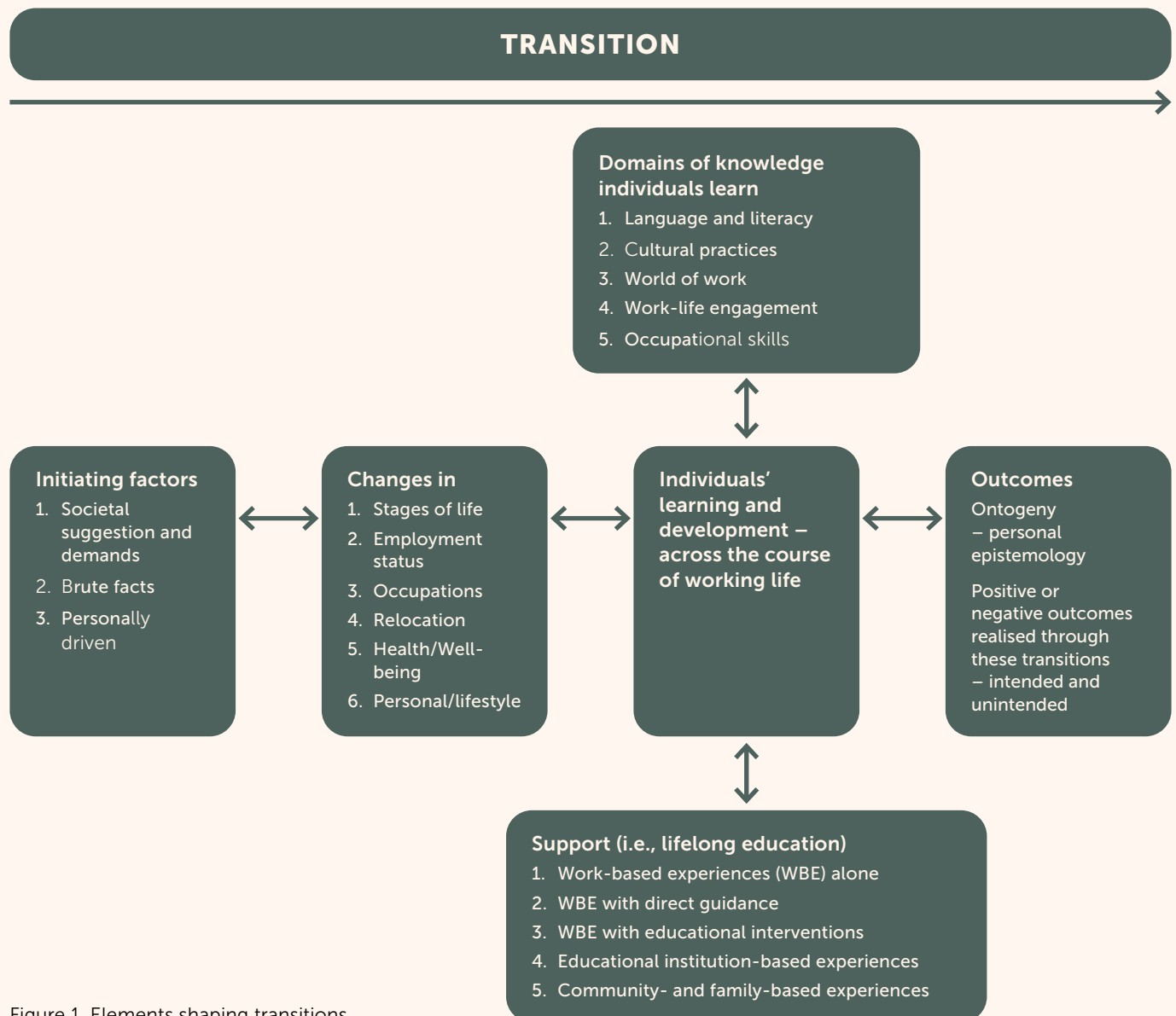


Figure 1. Elements shaping transitions



Lifelong learning and lifelong education

Much incremental learning arises through the daily enactment of personal agency and engagement and when external support is minimal or unnecessary (i.e., through mimetic learning; Billett, 2014; OECD, 2013). Yet, learning knowledge not able to be secured through 'discovery' alone often requires (a) access to and guidance in a domain of socially generated knowledge (e.g., language, occupation); (b) effortful engagement; and (c) support from outside the person (i.e., educational institutions, family, co-workers). Also, intentionality for learning across working life is not always singularly focused, long-term strategic, and coherent, but usually goal directed (i.e., purposeful). Individuals' 'education' across working life is a personally shaped, enacted, and mediated process, whose outcomes can only be judged individually. So, there is the need to account for continuities across transitions and working life and for discontinuities in and through that life, including failures and 'lack of success', from the informants' perspectives.

All of this suggests that it is not possible to explain the processes of learning that support sustained employability in times of change and uncertainty without accounting for the complex of factors that comprise what is suggested by the social world (i.e., the social suggestion - e.g., opportunities, barriers, invitations, engagements, projections, participation, close-distance support, et cetera) and how these are engaged with by individuals and shaped by their subjectivities (i.e., sense of self, relations to others), capacities (i.e., what they know, can do, and value), and personal epistemologies (i.e., how they make sense of the world and respond to it, drawing upon their subjectivities and capacities). They, in turn, are also shaped by the brute fact of maturation (e.g., ageing, physical strength, and health).

Some tentative conclusions

From these data, individuals' lifelong learning and lifelong education are personally defined, societally shaped, and framed by brute facts of maturity (e.g., ageing). These working-age adults report encountering and attempting to negotiate changes and transitions of different kinds, scope, and frequency across working lives. Their learning and development are mediated by personal agency and intentionality, interdependently with what is afforded by educational provisions and 'community'.

Lifelong educational provisions need to be cast broadly (i.e., beyond provisions of educational programs, e.g., CET, Adult Education), to include the range of experiences that are inherently educational (e.g., in and through work practices, 'apprenticeships', support and advice from others). Beyond individual agency and intentionality and educational provisions, what is afforded by communities in which adults engage variously sanctions, supports, provides access to opportunities, and augments adults' learning and development.

All of this seems salient as working-age Australians, governments, workplaces, and tertiary education systems face the challenges of securing individual employability, workplace viability, and an adaptable national workforce in an era of continuous change and disruption.

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