

Rethinking pathways: comparing the career capital of knowledge workers in Australia and Singapore

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Abstract

This paper interrogates and rethinks the notion of pathways (a Conference theme). In a knowledge society, there is need to include many other types and directions of movement within and between educational sectors throughout lifetimes. Moreover, knowledge workers' careers are increasingly the responsibility of individuals rather than employers. Thus, individuals need to keep on reinventing themselves, engaging in 'career investment behaviour' (Greller 2006, p.544). This paper draws on data from two different research projects undertaken in Australia and Singapore. These projects involved individuals who had engaged in studies in two different educational sectors: the academic and the vocational. Australian respondents (N=190) had studied in both the VET and the Higher Education sectors; Singapore respondents (N=101) had graduated from both the formal tertiary education and the Workforce Skills Qualifications (WSQ) sectors. Their pathway experiences in moving between sectors are compared within the conceptual framework of career capital.

Introduction

In both Australia and Singapore, the notion of learner pathways assumes considerable policy significance. Both countries, as indeed in many other places such as the European Union, are continually debating the issue and pondering how to enhance seamlessness within their educational systems.

In Australia, the Bradley Review (2008) continues to stimulate a lot of debate; arguably, its most interesting proposal was for a 'more integrated tertiary education system'. The question arises as to what such a system might look like? If the sectors become marriage partners, we presumably would not want them to become so intimate that they risk losing their distinctiveness, nor so disenchanted that they separate or divorce. In Singapore, the introduction of the Workforce Skills Qualifications (WSQ) in the past five years has also stimulated considerable policy interest in the relationship between these qualifications and those from the more established universities and polytechnics, and how they might be brought closer together. At the heart of the debates in both countries lies the old chestnut of the value of, and the differences between, vocational and academic studies.

This paper rethinks pathways (a Conference theme), and claims its unique contribution in three intersecting ways: (i) in context: understanding the actual movements of two samples of lifelong learners in Australia and Singapore; (ii) in focus: investigating movement between educational sectors through life rather than transition immediately after school, and (iii) in conceptual framework: interpreting the above through the lens of accumulating career capital. The question for this paper, then, is how individuals in two different national contexts manage and leverage their career capital.

Background

Almost exclusively, discussion on pathways is consumed with the transition from school to work (or further education). However, in a knowledge society, there is need to include many other types and directions of movement within and between educational sectors throughout

lifetimes. Engagement in learning through access to different forms of post-school education is critical, and especially for older workers where previously this may have been considered wasteful because they had less time in their lives to repay the investment. But governments now exhort us to work longer. The careers of knowledge workers – employees who are responsible for their own contributions, have continuing innovation as part of their work and have continuous learning built into their job (Drucker 1999) – are no longer bounded within a single employment situation (Lamb & Sutherland 2010). Such careers have been defined as ‘boundaryless careers’ (DeFillippi & Arthur 1994, p.307; Arthur & Rousseau 1996). Furthermore, careers are increasingly the responsibility of individuals, rather than employers. Thus, individuals need to keep on reinventing themselves, engaging in what Greller (2006, p.544) calls ‘career investment behaviour’ and King (2004, p.112) refers to as ‘career self-management’, so they do not reduce their effectiveness in current work or jeopardise chances of gaining or changing work.

Certainly the growing complexity in relationships between the tertiary sectors and hence pathways is being progressively highlighted in research. So often, however, the pre-occupation lies with structural matters – articulation and curriculum issues between institutions, attempts at blurring boundaries between sectors, and accreditation arrangements. This paper contends that a quite different, and perhaps more fruitful, perspective on sectoral relationships and pathways can be gained by focusing on learners. What is actually happening in reality, and what do they think? However, this is a fraught area. Examining pathways presents a challenge when people engage in multiple learning and earning transitions throughout their lives, let alone the paucity of statistics. But any form of bringing the sectors more together implies optimum fluidity for learners between sectors, for equity and efficiency reasons. In a society committed to lifelong learning, and an economy requiring a knowledgeable, skilled and adaptable workforce, it is essential there is room to move, according to shifting interests and circumstances.

For the purposes of clarification, some contextual information needs to be presented on WSQs and the concept of career capital.

The Workforce Skills Qualifications (WSQ) is ‘a national credentialing system that trains, develops, assesses and recognises adult workers for competencies to enhance their employability’ (DOS 2010, p.37). The sector is newly established – implemented from 2005. Its establishment was labelled a ‘bold step which challenged many of the existing assumptions and principles embedded in the formal system’ (Willmott 2006, p.1). WSQs cover six levels from certificates to graduate diplomas, within (currently) 25 industry-based frameworks. Program characteristics are quite different from those of the formal tertiary education sector, designed as they are to be competency-based, job-focused, vocational in nature, open access, industry-led and appropriate for adult learners (IAL 2009, pp.13-14). These qualifications are provided by a range of public and in-house training providers.

Inherently involved in career investment behaviour or career self-management is the accumulation of relevant career capital through one’s lifetime. The framework of career capital is an individualistic perspective that can contribute to our understanding of how individuals:

- identify their own career motivations, personal meaning and self-awareness (**knowing-why** capital),
- develop occupational skills, knowledge and understanding needed for good performance (**knowing-how** capital), and

- acquire career-relevant networks and contacts (**knowing-whom** capital).

In global times characterised by uncertainty and flexibility, individuals search for meaning in their continuously changing career trajectories. While the boundaryless career concept emphasises the shifting nature of job markets external to the individual, the concept of the protean career (Hall & Moss 1998) focuses more on the internal aspects where individuals strive to take charge of their careers, self-organise to learn and make sense of their environment without external guidance (Suutari & Makela 2007, p.630). Career capital is therefore concerned with these three key dimensions of knowing (DeFillippi & Arthur 1994; Cappellen & Janssens 2005; Suutari & Makela 2007).

Research process

This paper illuminates the concept of career capital by drawing on data from two research projects undertaken in Australia and Singapore. Both these projects involved individuals who, at various stages of their lives, had engaged in study in different educational sectors: the academic and the vocational. Thus, they were in a uniquely informed position to reflect on their experiences. The study used blended methods: both groups participated first in an online survey and then in an individual, reflective interview.

The survey: The Singapore respondents (N=101) had moved from formal tertiary education (in universities and polytechnics) into the WSQ sector; Australian respondents (N=190) had moved from university into the VET sector. The Singaporean sample was drawn from training providers within six of 25 industry frameworks selected for their diversity, and respondents were those willing to participate who were graduates within a specified time period. The Australian sample was drawn from TAFE institutes in South Australia, the respondents being those willing to participate who had university experience. The survey data on the two groups were tested for significance employing the Mann-Whitney Test.

The interviews: The interviewees were drawn from those who responded to the surveys and who agreed to be followed up. The sample interviewees numbered 30 in Singapore and 22 in Australia. Interviews were transcribed and the text entered in NUD.ist software for analysis.

Brief descriptions of the samples: There were more males in the Singaporean sample (79%) than in the Australian sample (44%). The Australian sample was younger, with 23% less than 25 years of age and 36% in the 35-54 age bracket, compared with 61% of the Singaporeans over 40 years of age. The two groups were similar in employment experience, with 59% of the Singaporeans and 55% of the Australians employed fulltime.

Limitations: The main limitation was the relatively low survey response numbers, largely resulting from difficulties encountered in identifying learners who had studied in both sectors. The surveys were restricted also by the necessity (time and cost) to narrow the focus to one State in the Australian study and to limited frameworks in the Singaporean study. A general limitation on all self-report studies is the reliance on participants' memories.

Findings and discussion

Individuals needing to keep on reinventing themselves engage in 'career investment behaviour' (Greller 2006, p.544). Four aspects of this behaviour are explored here.

Motivation for engaging in continuing education

Table 1 presents data on the reasons for enrolment reported by the two samples (in order of agreement on given items by Singaporean respondents).

Table 1: University respondents' reasons for choosing to enrol in their vocational course

Question: <i>We are interested in your reasons for enrolling in this course. Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following reasons.</i>	Singapore study: University/Polytechnic graduates enrolling in WSQ (N=101)			Australian study: Learners with University experience enrolling in VET (N=190)			Level of signif- icance * = <.05 ** = <.01
	Agree (%)	Neut- ral (%)	Dis- agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neut- ral (%)	Dis- agree (%)	
• for personal interest, development or recreation	90.8	6.1	3.1	70.1	11.4	18.5	**
• to gain or improve my practical skills	84	13.8	2.1	78.9	12.2	8.9	
• to improve my employment prospects	82.8	3.2	14	80.7	9.1	10.2	
• to get a vocationally specialised education	82.1	13.7	4.2	65.1	19.8	15.1	**
• to improve my career prospects in my current field	80.2	15.4	4.4	65.2	13.4	21.3	*
• to retrain for a different career	71.4	17.6	11.0	41.4	18.5	40.1	**
• to get a broad education	67.0	24.2	8.8	37.9	30.2	32.0	**
• to update my previous qualification	66.7	9.0	24.4	29.6	18.3	52.1	**
• to refresh my study skills after a period out of education	58.0	24.7	17.3	32.2	14.6	53.0	*
• to get a prestigious qualification	51.1	40.2	8.7	28.2	23.3	48.5	
• to fill time, meet people or be with friends	34.9	31.3	33.7	7.4	11.5	81.1	
• to improve my English language skills	30.9	35.3	33.8	7.8	7.8	84.4	
• because I was advised to by someone I respected	26.7	28	45.3	17.7	10.9	71.4	
• to qualify for workforce re-entry after a period out of the workforce	25.7	35.7	38.6	17.2	8.2	74.6	*
• because it was required by my employer	24.0	33.3	42.7	25.0	16.7	58.3	
• to be eligible for financial assistance	11.1	0.0	88.9	8.3	4.6	87.2	
• to please my family	2.8	28.2	69.0	2.7	8.2	89.0	**

The data reveal both interesting differences and similarities, and the sequencing for both samples is approximately the same. On nine of the 17 reasons there were statistically significant differences between Singaporeans and Australians. Intriguingly, 'personal interest and development' was top on the Singaporean list (91%) and third on the Australian list (70%) – even though all learners were moving to vocational qualifications. This reason is evidently a very strong motivator for those deciding to undertake continuing education. In every case (except for employer requirement), more Singaporeans agreed with the given reasons than Australians, perhaps a reflection of cultural difference.

The predominance, not unexpected, in both samples of vocationally oriented reasons rating highly is clear. Apart from the interest reason at the top of the Singaporean list, the next five reasons were all concerned with skills and career moves, anticipated in a small, economically focused society such as Singapore. The Australians differed significantly on three of these career reasons, with far higher numbers disagreeing that they were reasons for moving.

Perception of difficulty in moving across sectors

Table 2 shows the degree to which both groups perceive moving across sectors to undertake continuing education to be easy or difficult. Again, in the majority of the items, more of the Singaporean respondents reported their ease in moving sectors than the Australian respondents. However, neither group found the transition particularly difficult. Hardest for the Singaporean group were getting adequate information (26%) and making necessary changes to be able to study (22%), while for the Australian learners it was making changes (53%) and financial matters (37% and 30%). The two groups differed significantly on six of the 13 items, where the Australian learners reported more difficulty with making changes, paying fees, having sufficient income, obtaining careers guidance, confidence to study, and entry requirements. Finance and course entry are not important issues in Singapore for WSQ

learners as they are subsidised for 90% of their fees and an open access principle underpins the WSQ system.

Table 2: Respondents' judgements on the ease or difficulty in moving from the academic sector to the vocational sector

Question: <i>How easy or difficult did you find each of the following issues in moving from your University [and Polytechnic] course to your vocational course?</i>	Singapore study: WSQ learners with University/Polytechnic qualifications (N=101)			Australian study: VET learners with University experience (N=190)			Level of signif- icance * = <.05 ** = <.01
	Easy (%)	Neut- ral (%)	Diff- icult (%)	Easy (%)	Neut- ral (%)	Diff- icult (%)	
• meeting the entry requirements for the course?	87.0	13.0	0.0	91.8	5.3	2.9	**
• going through the application process?	86.5	10.4	3.1	78.9	11.1	9.9	
• having the confidence to undertake further study?	80.0	17.9	2.1	77.7	12.0	10.3	*
• getting adequate information about this course?	73.5	16.3	10.2	72.2	13.3	14.4	
• getting your family's agreement to you undertaking this course?	70.9	22.8	6.3	72.4	17.1	10.6	
• getting your prior qualifications recognised?	60.3	34.6	5.1	52.8	29.2	17.9	
• getting advice from staff at the current institution	58.5	27.7	13.8	72.5	17.4	10.2	
• paying HECS and other fees?	55.1	33.7	11.2	50.3	19.6	30.1	**
• making changes in your life so that you had enough time to study?	52.2	26.1	21.7	32.6	14.7	52.7	**
• getting careers guidance to help you decide?	51.8	42.2	6.0	48.1	33.1	18.8	*
• getting your employer's support to study?	48.1	35.1	16.9	67.7	16.9	15.3	
• having sufficient income to study?	47.2	41.6	11.2	45.3	18.2	36.5	**
• getting adequate information about the employment prospects of this course?	45.3	28.4	26.3	45.9	34.1	20.0	

Generally, the data reinforce that the decision to undertake further study to accumulate career capital requires not only exploration of personal issues connected with such a move but, importantly, acquisition of essential information and, where employment issues are relevant, employment prospects and employer support.

Perception of difference between the academic and vocational sectors

Perceived differences between the academic and vocational sectors are important in career investment behaviour because these aspects can be barriers to continuing education. Respondents' judgements on the similarity or difference of various institutional and program aspects are outlined in Table 3. There were no significant differences between the groups.

Table 3: Respondents' judgements on how similar or different aspects of their vocational course were from those in the academic sector

Question: <i>How similar or different did you find your vocational course compared with your University [and Polytechnic] course in respect to ...</i>	Singapore study: WSQ learners with University/Polytechnic qualifications (N=101)		Australian study: VET learners with University experience (N=190)	
	Similar (%)	Different (%)	Similar (%)	Different (%)
• assessment processes	18.6	81.4	18.2	81.8
• cost of studying	19.4	80.6	18.5	81.5
• teaching style	28.1	71.9	20.5	79.5
• structure of course	28.7	71.3	18.3	81.7
• practical content	31.6	68.4	24.3	75.7
• level of work in course	33.7	66.3	29.0	71.0
• amount of work in course	35.5	64.5	29.9	70.1
• institutional climate	36.8	63.2	25.5	74.5
• theoretical content	38.5	61.5	28.5	71.5
• class size	49.5	50.5	37.7	62.3
• provision of support services and facilities	58.9	41.1	46.8	53.2

While the respondents did not necessarily find moving between sectors difficult, they did find it different, as transition necessarily involves adjustments to different systems. The striking

feature is the high proportion in both samples reporting difference – between six and eight out of every ten respondents. As in the case of difficulties (Table 2), these data on differences (Table 3) highlight particular areas that are most likely to be stumbling blocks for individuals who have not – unlike these select learners – taken up a vocational qualification. The second feature to note is the similarity in the figures for the two groups (no significant differences). Not only are the various items in a similar sequence (assessment processes, study cost and teaching style are at the top and support services and class size are at the bottom), but the proportions of students from each sector tend also to be similar on each item. That the top area in each case is assessment is hardly surprising, given that both vocational systems are competency-based, in contrast to their academic study having been traditionally norm-referenced – a critical and marked difference in educational philosophy.

Confidence that expectations for study have been met

Both groups were generally satisfied that their expectations in enrolling in their vocational courses had been met. The Singaporean respondents (84% confident) were more confident than their Australian counterparts (73% confident). The decision-making processes undertaken by these learners in choosing the course seem to have been sound, and as a result the majority were satisfied.

Having explored various aspects of the surveyed respondents' career investment behaviour, the paper now focuses more specifically on the notion of career capital. Through engaging in this behaviour, what types of career capital were being accumulated by these learners? The data for addressing this question derive mainly from the interviews.

Knowing-why

Knowing-why refers to career motivations, personal meaning and self-awareness. The data on all of the reasons for undertaking continuing education given in Table 1 are relevant to this type of career capital; however, five are especially pertinent. The prime reason why Singaporean learners studied their vocational course was for 'personal interest, development or recreation' (agreement: 91%), while for the Australians, it was the third most important motivation (70%). They also reported that they studied the course to obtain 'a broad education' (67%, cf. 38%) and 'a prestigious qualification' (51%, cf. 28%). Specifically with respect to their career, they enrolled in order to 'improve their career prospects in their current field' (80%, cf. 65%) or to 'retrain for a different career' (71%, cf. 41%). The Singaporeans' higher respect for the WSQs, in comparison with the Australians' views on VET qualifications, is noteworthy. The reason for this may be the preponderance in the Singaporean interview sample of individuals taking the Training Framework qualification (Advanced Certificate in Training and Assessment), and the career possibilities given its relatively recent introduction for either immediate employment as a qualified trainer or as a back-up career in what many recognised as a small, potentially vulnerable economy.

Among the Singaporean learners, three interviewees mentioned that the reason for taking up vocational study was to be in a 'niche industry' (#111, Aerospace, male), or simply because of the demand from the industry (#87, Security, male), or 'the need to start up a training academy in our company, so they needed someone to be familiar with the WSQ' (#77, Training, male). Another knowing-why career capital that was mentioned was to pursue personal interest while not in unemployment. One even said that the WSQ course was such a good experience because it helped him to be a better person.

The Australian interviewees acknowledged that all learning experiences had value. This sentiment was neatly summarised in one response: ‘I have gained something from everything – everything is always an advantage’. Another spoke of having ‘strings’ to one’s ‘bow’:

I don’t think there is any real disadvantage to learning – strings to your bow – [you] encounter different situations and you are able to deal with them a little better than had you not had those previous experiences. (#3151, Workplace Training & Assessment, female)

Many of the gains were more personal, such as ‘better interpersonal skills’, ‘understanding myself – I have gained more with each move’ and growth in self-belief:

The biggest gain right through has been confidence – to keep on going. To begin with, I had a lot of doubts as to my ability ... Not intellectually, just being able to cope with a completely different environment, but I have found it to be an enlightening experience in many ways. (#72, Resource Management, male)

Knowing-how

The second type of career capital refers to developing occupational skills, knowledge and understanding. The learners clearly highlighted that they were enrolling in the vocational sector to build their knowledge and skills in order to improve their position in current employment or search for further career opportunities. For example, through their studies they explicitly aimed (Table 1) to gain or improve their practical skills (agreement: Singapore 84% and Australia 79%), obtain a vocationally specialised education (82% and 65%) and improve their English language skills (31% and 8%). The latter reason is obviously of less relevance for Australian than for Singaporean learners. At a more general level, they also enrolled with the intention of improving their employment prospects (83% and 81%), or qualifying for workforce re-entry after a period out of the workforce (26% and 17%). The fact that a quarter of the learners in each country reported that their employer had required them to study is also strongly suggestive of the need to upgrade their occupational know-how. Moreover, most did not find it difficult to obtain employer support for studying (difficult: 17% and 15%) or to get adequate information about the employment prospects of their vocational courses (difficult: 26% and 20%). The strength of their motivation to accumulate know-how capital is apparent for both groups of learners.

With the Singaporean interviewees, twelve responses related to practical knowledge as the main gain in completing a WSQ course. A typical answer was:

You gain knowledge on the practical side... sometimes we studied logistics, sometimes warehouse operations, sometimes, store control... so you have practical knowledge on such operations... also the company may give you more responsibility in the future... (#49, Generic Manufacturing, male).

Nine hoped that the WSQ and the practical knowledge gained from it would open up opportunities for them. In fact, two interviewees specifically acknowledged that, because of WSQ completion, they received monetary gain – one a salary increase, and the other, promotion. Another nine thought that the practical knowledge and skills that they gained would also boost their confidence at work and result in better performance. Typical responses from a diversity of industries included:

‘the course taught me about the basic fundamental social service sector, from this course I know things that I never learned before’ (#46, Social Services, male);

‘it gives you a head-start in aviation... and know all the practical work so that you know the job’ (#56, Aerospace, male); and

‘[I] had the opportunity to go to the kitchen and see how they organised everything there and got more information from the suppliers’ (#50, Food & Beverage, female).

Another nine mentioned that their motivation was to upgrade their qualification (i.e. upgrade skills and knowledge). Their responses included:

‘I wanted to increase my standard... I don’t wanna be working as a technician for my whole life’ (#47, Aerospace, male);
‘... the intention is actually to build, enhance my foundations’ (#83, Training, male); and
‘Purely it is a career progression... to further my career in training’ (#69, Training, male).

As the WSQ courses equip participants with certain occupational skills, the other reason for undertaking continuing education – to have more options or other career opportunities – is also intertwined with knowing-how career capital. Some replies strongly reflected this:

‘...to have more options... so you have more doors that you can open and get employed or move from one field to another’ (#88, Security, male);
‘I wanted to explore what else is available for me... I wanted to explore training as an alternate career switch’ (#13, Training, male);
‘I found that my engineering career is coming to a stagnant stage where I could not extend or explore further; so I decided... another field that I am interested as well... where I can be... my own boss’ (#72, Food & Beverage, male);
‘... this is a contingency plan for me, a back up career’ (#54, Training, male);
‘Just to have experience of how do things work in the kitchen... hopefully, I can have my own business’ (#50, Food & Beverage, female);
‘I thought maybe this would help me to kind of decide where my career would go’ (#75, Training, female); and
‘If you ask me what is the motivation now for ACTA [Advanced Certificate in Training and Assessment] ... number one is survival... because employment in Singapore has also changed... this potentially gives me a chance for a second career in case I get retrenched’ (#52, Training, male).

Broadening their career opportunities was therefore particularly significant for those undertaking the Training WSQ.

For graduates in the Security framework, the interlinking of the knowing-how with knowing-why career capital tended to be most clearly apparent, as participants had a secure job waiting for them after finishing the course. Thus, the Security course addressed simultaneously the participants’ reasons of getting employment after retrenchment (#85, Security, male) and staying employed: ‘You see, Security is job-proof... even if other industry is not hiring, the security industry will still be hiring employees’ (#73, Security, male).

In the case of the Australian learners, many of the specific gains mentioned by interviewees related to completion of qualifications ‘which enabled me to gain employment’ or ‘got me a trade’. Other gains referred more to the benefits they derived from their studies along the journey, such as the refreshing of skills, ‘information ... that helped at the time’, ‘a lot of knowledge’, ‘more knowledge in the areas I was interested in’ and ‘some experience in industry’.

Knowing-whom

The third career capital relates to acquisition of career-relevant networks and contacts. This dimension, though not so frequently mentioned in learners’ responses, was nevertheless also an important part of their career investment behaviour, particularly in the case of the Singaporean respondents. Over one-third (35%) of the surveyed Singaporeans agreed that they enrolled in vocational courses to meet people and be with friends (cf. Australians 7%).

Six Singaporean interviewees specifically referred, as a key gain in completing a WSQ course, to the networking opportunities that they found enriching as they learnt a lot in sharing sessions, as well as meeting people who turned out to be good friends. For example:

‘I have definitely learned a lot more... not just from the trainer, but from the different learners’ (#76, Training, male);
‘I find the networking very enriching’ (#60, Training, male); and

‘... where we can get to know more of our friends now’ (#85, Security, male).

One even related the knowing-whom dimension to the knowing-why: ‘Part of my goal was really to get to know more people in the training field, and I think I got that’ (#76, Training, male).

The Australian learners interestingly highlighted the close relationships built with staff in provider organisations: one interviewee emphasised that an important advantage of further study had been the ‘closeness and connectedness with our lecturers and our classmates because there were only ten of us... so we did have that connectedness [and] we have been able to use that in the future’. Another recognised that it had not been ‘a totally negative experience – I mean, on a personal level, I have got friends that I made through that course’.

Conclusions

The heaviest emphasis in the accumulating of career capital, as reflected in both the frequency and the diversity of respondent responses, was on knowing-how. This is not altogether unsurprising given the economic imperatives driving their career investment behaviour. However, it is also apparent from closer analysis of their qualitative explanations that there are intimate connections between the three types of career capital, and it is often difficult to isolate them. Knowing-why indicates an ‘anterior’ disposition or motivation, and so this paper has considered the responses on their motivations affecting their decision to undertake continuing education in the vocational sector; while for knowing-how and knowing-whom, as they indicate ‘posterior’ perceptions, the focus has been more on their judgements on the gains from pursuing vocational studies.

These knowing-why and knowing-how capitals are mostly shaped by current economic needs (getting employment, having a contingency plan in case of retrenchment, demand from the industry, upgrading their qualification to obtain employment or promotion), and not so much on personal values or meaning or identity as was discussed in the works of Suutari et al. (2007) and Defillippi et al. (1994). The explanation no doubt lies in the differences in samples: their respondents were people who already had a sound career in organisations and were therefore not so concerned with the basic needs of keeping or obtaining employment as tended to be the case in this study.

Notwithstanding systemic factors, the data from these exploratory studies demonstrate that the wherewithal of the individual is critical as to whether career capital is effectively built and career opportunities grasped. Within a lifelong learning context, it is pivotal for the individual to become ‘the builder and architect of his or her own learning and self-development’ (ILO 2002), particularly as services provided by the state are reduced and labour markets become increasingly flexible. In fact, a characteristic of the modern career is that people are adopting the individualistic orientations as a response to the challenges of globalisation and a constantly changing work environment, in order to achieve expectations of work-life balance (Anderson 2003). The ability to take more responsibility for one’s own decisions is particularly important if stresses caused by conflicting priorities are to be minimised (Robotham & Julian 2006) and satisfactory work/life/study balances maintained (Lowe & Gayle 2007). While these learners demonstrated considerable openness to the opportunity to undertake continuing education, this was within a framework of vocational interest and a willingness to adapt or shift focus depending on their experiences and available opportunities.

Thus, within a framework of lifelong learning, while pathways may not always be seamless, the freedom to move, even across sectors, plays a pivotal role in allowing learners to continue learning at different ages and stages of their private and professional lives in order to accumulate career capital. As the studies of these Singaporean and Australian learners have shown, moving between academic and vocational sectors was not an insurmountable issue – it may have been different, but not difficult. While there remain public perceptions in both countries about the differential status of these two sectors, these may not be as entrenched as they once were, though some institutional and programmatic barriers still remain. Moreover, the popularising of lifelong education philosophy has contributed to increasing social acceptability of moving between sectors and programs. While there may well be important differences between Singapore and Australia in terms of the tightness of the relationship between education and the labour market, such movement is indeed vital, and both countries are indeed exhibiting considerable policy interest in pathways and the degree of seamlessness between their academic and vocational sectors. Within this context, then, opportunities for undertaking continuing education, moving between sectors and accumulating career capital act as essential escalators in the pathways of adult learners.

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