Mature Age Workers" Experiences of Learning in Accredited Courses

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Mature Age Workers' Experiences of Learning in Accredited Courses

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Abstract: Understanding how mature age workers come to engage with training programs has become increasingly important in sustaining their employability across lengthening working lives. This paper reports the responses to an online survey of a sample of mostly white-collar mature-age workers (45+) about their experiences in undertaking accredited work-related training in Australia. It presents and discusses their motivations for undertaking further education and training and their perceptions of its relevance to their work and of the efficacy of the teaching and learning processes. The paper concludes by identifying the implications for educational institutions and training organisations.

Introduction

Many countries over the next four decades will have an increasing proportion of people aged 65 or more and at the same time face a decreasing number of young people entering the labour market (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008, OECD, 2006). If older people are to remain productive in the workforce it is important that they maintain their competence, and hence their employability, whatever their occupation. In these circumstances the role of education and training becomes a significant factor. In a review of ageing and the workforce, Jorgensen (2004, 10-11) suggested all employees regardless of age should participate in training and in new areas to cope with changing employment requirements across their careers. He said, 'Security of employment now resides in the capacity of individuals to build their employability.' Certainly, older workers are no exception in this regard.

Nevertheless, some literature proposes that older workers, in particular, are 'resistant' to training unless they can see immediate benefits (e.g. Smeaton and Vegeris, 2009, Noonan, 2007, Loretto and White, 2006). In addition, employers' views on employability and the need for training may be affected by their attitudes to older workers – McNair, Maltby and Nettleship (2007, 6) identified two ways older people in the workforce are considered by employers: i) one of a number of marginal groups of excluded people, in which training is intended to redress the balance, and ii) where the ageing of the workforce is part of a long-term transformation of the whole workforce.

In relation to the training itself, Thomson, Dawe, Anlezark and Bowman, (2005, 20) suggested that most of the literature about skill development for older workers focuses on the level of qualification acquired, with little detail provided about what works best and for which groups of mature-age workers. However, others, such as Chappell, Hawke, Rhodes, and Solomon (2003) proposed that vocational education and training for older workers needs to be customised to individuals' needs: 'Broad, generic programs are likely to be perceived as of less value or relevance.' Such principles are consistent with adult education research in recent decades (Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner, 2007), but there is always a question about the extent to which the findings of such research are reflected in institutional and pedagogic practice, as well as the extent to which older workers are 'resistant' to further training.

In contrast, a study by Taylor and Urwin (2001, cited in Phillipson and Smith, 2005, 48) found that the proportion of workers aged 50-64 who had funded their own training for work purposes was similar to that of workers aged 25-39 and 40-49 respectively. So, there are certain workers, of all ages, who are prepared to invest in their employability, a feature also identified among older workers by Armstrong-Stassen and Schlosser (2008, 431): 'Older workers who had a greater propensity to engage in development activities perceived that their job provided them with more development opportunities and, in turn, were more committed to their organization and intended to remain with their organization longer than those who were not inclined to pursue development activities and whose job did not provide them with opportunities for development.' These findings are consistent with Billett's (2004, 316) concept of 'co-participation' – that workplace learning is 'shaped by what is afforded by the workplace, and how individuals elect to engage with what is afforded'. That is, there need to be both workplace-based motivations and support, as well as those of the individual, for such interdependence to thrive.

Yet, workplace context and individual agency are not the only factors that need to be considered. There are also issues related to the content and process of learning. Indeed, the significance of the link between the nature of educational offerings and mature-age workers' needs and motivations is a persistent theme in the literature. For example, Chappell et al (2003, 53) conclude from a review of literature that vocational education and training provision for older workers needs to be customised to individual needs because 'broad, generic programs are likely to be perceived as of less value or relevance.' They advocate (2003, 52-3) a safe, non-threatening learning environment, work-relevant tasks, building new skills on existing knowledge, using self-paced methods and varying the amount of time allocated to tasks in order to accommodate individual needs.

The features of good practice identified by Chappell et al (2003) for training older learners echo the so-called principles of adult education, based to a great extent on Knowles' (1990, 57-61) concept of 'andragogy', which he regarded as 'the art and science of helping adults learn'. Knowles' assumptions about adults included that they need to know why they need to learn something before undertaking to learn it, they have a self-concept of being responsible for their own lives and hence their own decisions, they bring to any learning a greater volume and quality of life, work and social experience, they become ready to learn those things they need to know and to be able to do to cope with real-life situations, and consequently that they have a task-centred or problem-centred orientation to learning. While Knowles' assumptions have been criticised and modified over the years, the notion of building on adult learners' experience, and the concept of self-directed learning, have become pervasive in the research literature (Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner, 2007), and have found their way into discussions of workplace learning. For example, Illeris and Associates (2004, 219) say that 'it is first and foremost important' that workplace learning activities should focus on learning that makes sense to the workers and has a clear purpose related to their work and life. Along similar lines, Merriam (2008, 97), in a review of advances in adult learning theory, says that one longstanding strategy common to much of the research is the need to connect new learning with learners' previous experience.

The literature reviewed above shows that generalisations about older workers are gradually being modified by research findings that demonstrate a need for greater differentiation, based on such factors as the size and nature of the industry and of the employing organisations, individual

employer attitudes, and the motivations, needs and preferences of the individual workers as learners.

As part of that move towards differentiation, the study reported here draws on a particular sample of mature-age workers – those mainly in managerial, professional and administrative roles, often described as 'white-collar' workers – and analyses their experiences of their engagement with education and training provision.The paper argues that the nature of those experiences is due to the interdependence of the affordances provided by employers and educational institutions, and engagement by the workers as learners. Furthermore, it argues that the level of engagement is influenced by the nature of their employment, where continuing education is often an expectation and at times supported by the employer.

Methodology and sample

To understand further the effectiveness of training in maintaining the competence of mature-age employees, and to consider implications for education policy and practice, an online survey was undertaken. This method was chosen because it enabled immediate access to potentially large numbers of employees through two professional organisations and a government agency, using a neutral central online platform to guarantee anonymity. Questions mostly used a five-point Likert scale ('strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'), with some provision for additional information where required. The definition of 'mature age' is that used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics: workers aged 45 or more. For the purposes of the study, the questions related only to accredited work-related training, i.e. where the learner received formal recognition of the outcome of their studies, which in Australia means these provisions are offered through government mandated or approved programs. There were 268 respondents, of whom 163 (61%) indicated they had undertaken accredited education and training since the age of 45. It is the responses from this cohort of 163 that are reported and discussed here, based on an analysis using frequency tables and cross-tabulations generated through the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

The sample of 163 comprises 108 women and 55 men, with roughly half aged 45-54, one quarter 55-59, and one fifth 60-64. Two respondents were aged 65 or more, and two were 70 or more. Over 75% were professionals or managers, 13% were in administrative or clerical positions, and the rest were spread across a number of other occupational areas. More than 50% had university qualifications, including 33% at postgraduate level, another third had vocational qualifications, a strong majority of them at diploma level. Only 6% had not undertaken formal study beyond high school until the age of 45 or more. Half the cohort were employed in large organisations (250+ employees), over one fifth in medium-sized enterprises (50-249), and the rest were almost equally divided between small (11-50) and micro (1-10) businesses, using Australian definitions. Around 75% had permanent employment, mostly full-time. Some 9% were self-employed, with about half that percentage working on a casual basis. In other words, this sample was comprised of predominantly white collar workers with strong educational qualifications, about two-thirds of whom were employed in large or medium organisations, and the majority were in permanent positions.

These attributes of the sample have implications for both affordances and engagement: affordances because the literature shows that workers in professional and management roles are more likely to be offered training than those in trades and semi-skilled jobs (Noonan, 2007); engagement because the cohort is already relatively well-educated and many are in positions where ongoing learning and professional development is likely to be the norm.

As shown in Table 1, since the age of 45, more than half of the 163 respondents who took part in accredited training had undertaken or were undertaking a vocational certificate or diploma. Within the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), occupations typically requiring a vocational certificate include Assistant in Nursing (Certificate III), trades apprenticeship (Certificate III), and industry trainer (Certificate IV); a diploma or advanced diploma is common in such occupational areas as accounting, management, and engineering technology. Usually certificates and diplomas are offered through registered training organisations (RTOs), including State-run institutes of technical and further education (TAFE), although some universities also offer diploma level qualifications. Almost 30% of the respondents possessed or were undertaking an undergraduate or postgraduate qualification since the age of 45.

Table 1: Types of course undertaken since age 45

Level	No.	%
Vocational certificate	60	36.8
Vocational diploma/Advanced diploma	27	16.6
Bachelor degree	17	10.4
Postgraduate qualification	31	19.0
Other	12	7.4
Not shown	16	9.8
Total	163	100

Findings

Those who indicated they had undertaken accredited courses since the age of 45 were asked eleven follow-up questions – about their reasons for undertaking the course, its relevance to their work, the mode of delivery, opportunities to learn from their peers, and the approaches of the teachers and trainers in regard to flexibility with assignment deadlines, pedagogy, and valuing the students as adults. For the purposes of this report, responses of 'strongly agree' and 'agree', and of 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree', respectively, have been aggregated as indicative of the respondents' perceptions. The term 'course' is used as a generic descriptor of the accredited learning activities undertaken. Data about the length of courses was not gathered.

Before presenting the responses to those eleven questions, it is important to consider this particular sub-group's responses to a set of seven items presented to the wider sample, about workplace support for learning and respondents' attitudes towards their own learning. The responses of the 163 workers to those seven items earlier in the survey provide a more complete and balanced picture of the sub-sample and particularly inform understanding of the level of employee engagement in the accredited learning that is the focus of this paper.

In response to the first of those seven items, almost 80% said their workplace encouraged and supported their learning. In other words, they perceived positive affordances in the form of support for their work-related learning. On the other hand, just over 10% said they lacked such support. In regard to individuals engaging with what was on offer, almost unanimously the respondents claimed they were open and adaptable to learning new things, and some 90% believed they were competent with technology, the latter likely a reflection of their predominantly white collar roles. Nevertheless, despite this apparent penchant for learning, around 12% said they were anxious about learning new things. In the set of seven questions, the

most diverse responses were to the statement, 'I need training to do my current job better', where 44% agreed, just over a third disagreed, and around 20% were not sure. Less than a quarter wanted to train for another job with the same employer, but almost one-third of the 163 respondents reported they would like to train for a job with another employer or for their own business.

The responses to the seven questions discussed above present a picture of a cohort of mature-age workers who generally believed their employing organisation supported their learning endeavours, and who regarded themselves as very competent with technology, open to change, and for the most part not anxious about new learning. Most did not want to train for another job in their own organisation, but a considerable number would contemplate training for a job elsewhere. Overall, this sub-group of the total sample appear flexible, open and supportive of learning, an attitude that might be expected of white-collar workers who undertook formal education or training on or after the age of 45.

In the set of questions aimed specifically at this cohort, over 90 per cent indicated that professional development was a major reason for undertaking the courses they chose, reflecting the nature of the occupations in which they were employed. Just over half said that another strong reason for doing the course was to ensure continuity of employment until they retire, an indication of the mature age of the respondents, as well as possibly some underlying anxiety about their potential vulnerability as 'older workers', an issue discussed in the literature on age discrimination (e.g. Gringart, Helmes and Speelman, 2005; Australian Human Rights Commission, 2010). So, motivations associated with employability play out strongly here, albeit for maintaining current levels of employment, responding to changes and resisting early cessation from paid employment.

The mode of delivery varied, with just over half participating in face-to-face classes. There was no provision for the other respondents to indicate the mode of delivery, but it is assumed that the majority of those would have studied as distance education students, including online, given the kinds of courses in which they reported participating. Regardless of the mode, more than 80% of the respondents indicated it suited their work and life requirements, suggesting that at this time of their lives, many had some say over the manner and time of delivery, to fit with their lifestyles. Such choices are often not available to those undertaking entry-level training.

Over 90% found the content of the courses undertaken was relevant to their work, once again indicating some choice in the selection of the courses either by the workers or their employers, or both. However, a quarter of the respondents reported the assessment tasks were not closely work related, and around a third did not accept or were unsure that there was flexibility from lecturers/trainers towards assignment deadlines. The latter set of responses implies a lack of recognition by a proportion of lecturers/trainers of the workers' other commitments at that stage of their work and family lives, which is reinforced by the finding that 20 % of the worker-students were not sure if their experiences as a mature-age person were valued by the lecturer/trainer. On the other hand, approximately the same per cent 'strongly agreed' such experiences were valued.

Attitudes towards assignment deadlines and the students as mature-age learners are arguably also reflected in the pedagogy adopted. In contrast to the other items in regard to further education, the direct question about pedagogy was phrased in the negative ('The way the course was taught was not particularly helpful'), with the intention of stimulating thoughtful responses. Almost 80 per cent of the respondents disagreed with this statement, with 16 per cent agreeing,

and 12 per cent unsure. The other direct question about the pedagogical process was in relation to opportunities in the course for peer learning. Two-thirds thought there were good opportunities to interact, but almost a quarter disagreed with this assessment.

Discussion and conclusion

It is perhaps not surprising the study reveals a high degree of personal agency in further education efforts, with 60% of the participants having undertaken accredited programs since the age of 45. As workers who are better educated and engaged in professional or para-professional work, where such development is expected and often required, they report the main reason for their involvement is mainly for professional development and maintaining employability. There may also be an 'affordance' element in the high uptake of accredited training, in line with the conclusion from Armstrong-Stassen and Schlosser (2008, 431) that 'older workers who had a greater propensity to engage in development activities perceived that their job provided them with more development opportunities and, in turn, were more committed to their organization and intended to remain with their organization.'

There was little evidence in this cohort of the 'resistance' by older workers to participate in these programs, although there were instances of semi-skilled workers believing no further education was necessary for them to perform their jobs more effectively. Consistent with the sorts of attributes one might expect of workers in this particular sample, they are generally confident of their ability to participate in courses of study, and their earlier experiences are a likely indicator of their participation in further educational programs

Those who had undertaken accredited training as mature-age learners typically reported engaging with this approach to learning because of the affordances provided, initially by the employer and then by the educational provider, e.g. convenient delivery modes and relevant content, and assessment tasks linked to the students' employment roles. The data suggest the providers of these programs also generally acknowledged the learners as adults, although there was some concern about the rigidity of assignment practices. These findings support the conclusion that programs should be customised to an individual's needs, but this study also shows that even in broad, generic programs, the content and process can be tailored to meet the individual needs of students who are highly experienced, (and often already well-educated) workers with targeted vocational learning requirements..

These findings, from these particular informants, indicate a much more positive view of learning for older workers than is usually reported in the literature (e.g. Stoney & Roberts, 2003; Thomson et al, 2005). Yet, findings here are consistent with those reported in that same literature, claiming that it is older *contingent* workers and those in *unskilled* occupations who are most disadvantaged when it comes to training opportunities. That is, those whose bases for engagement and whose workplace affordances are probably of quite a different quality from those reported here. Yet, at the same time, these differences raise the issue of the degree by which factors associated with workers' participation in continuing education are aligned less with age per se, and more with levels of educational achievement and forms of employment.

For education and training institutions, there are clear indications that older adults expect to have their experience and expertise acknowledged and engaged with as part of the pedagogic practices within the course. In addition, the course content needs to be relevant and in most cases immediately applicable to their work life, and the process should account not only for their adult status but also their status as workers with other commitments.

Overall, the lesson seems to be that as the population ages, those who wish to extend their working lives need to be prepared to undertake learning in a variety of ways, in order to keep up to date and sometimes for accreditation purposes, and employers and education and training organisations need to consider how they can best support older workers in their learning endeavours in and out of the workplace. Yet, in all, it will depend to a considerable degree on an alignment between what is afforded individuals in terms of opportunities, access to programs and advice and support, on the one hand, and the bases by which individuals take up the offer of what is afforded them.

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