

# Identity and Learning for Freelance Adult Educators in Singapore

Annie Karmel  
Dr Helen Bound  
Dr Peter Rushbrook

Centre for Work and Learning

Copyright © 2013 Institute for Adult Learning

Published by the Institute for Adult Learning (IAL), Singapore  
Research Division  
1 Kay Siang Road, Tower Block Level 6, Singapore 248922  
[www.ial.edu.sg](http://www.ial.edu.sg)

This publication remains the copyright of the Institute for Adult Learning, Singapore (IAL) and may not be reproduced without the permission of the Director of Research, IAL. For further information on this publication, please email: [researchpublications@ial.edu.sg](mailto:researchpublications@ial.edu.sg)

## Institute for Adult Learning, Singapore

The Institute for Adult Learning (IAL) aims to contribute to the competitiveness of Singapore by developing an effective, innovative and responsive Continuing Education and Training (CET) sector that is able to meet the needs of industries and the workforce. It achieves this by raising capabilities, catalysing innovation, and leading research in workforce learning.

## Centre for Work and Learning, IAL

The Centre for Work and Learning undertakes research that seeks to understand better the processes and practices of learning design, teaching, learning and assessment in and across different settings and the implications for practice and policy. The changing nature of work offers different kinds of opportunities for learning and development, thus our research includes the study of work and work environments and learning and development within these settings.

In brief, our research employs a range of methodologies designed to deepen understanding of the ways in which contexts enhance and limit learning and development opportunities. Our approach is to engage practitioners in the research process and thus develop a community of practitioner researchers.

# Contents

---

List of figures and tables .....	i
Executive summary .....	1
Introduction .....	3
Terminology.....	4
Background .....	5
Methods.....	8
Literature review.....	10
Identity.....	11
Learning .....	14
Summary .....	17
Findings.....	18
Participant profiles.....	18
Dispositions .....	22
Skills.....	26
Summary .....	40
Discussion & implications.....	41
Summary.....	45
Recommendations .....	47
Pedagogic Recommendations.....	47
Institutional Recommendations .....	47
Appendix 1: methods.....	48
Appendix 2: work arrangements.....	50
Bibliography .....	52

# List of figures and tables

---

Figure 1: Main categories of adult education.....	6
Figure 2: Market .....	18
Figure 3: Market area by motivation to become a freelance trainer .....	19
Figure 4: Number of trainers by market and sector .....	19
Figure 5 Individual daily rate ranges .....	21
Figure 6: The training market .....	22
Table 1: Dispositions of freelance adult educators.....	42
Table 2: Skills of freelance adult educators.....	43
Table 3: Selection Criteria .....	48
Table 4 Work Arrangements .....	50

# Executive summary

---

This report is concerned with the identity and learning of freelance adult educators in Singapore. In addressing the question, “What does a professional freelance adult educator need to be?”, this research unveils the dispositions and skills that can help them negotiate the challenges of isolation, unpredictability, diversity and competition that are inherent in their work. It also addresses the ways in which freelance adult educators learn these dispositions and skills, and how their learning may be supported and enhanced.

A qualitative methodology was adopted for this study in order to hear from the voices of freelance adult educators in Singapore. Thirty adult educators participated in semi-structured in-depth interviews which underwent thematic analysis. The participants were selected to cover both the WSQ (Workforce Skills Qualifications) and non-WSQ markets, and trainers across a range of subject areas with different degrees of experience and levels of income were chosen. All participants needed to conduct some face-to-face training in a non-permanent employment arrangement in order to be considered for this study. The preliminary findings were shared with a reference group of industry stakeholders who provided validation and feedback on how to refine the study further.

This study found four dispositions (passionate, anchored, resilient, and being a permanent learner) and five skills (planning, continual networking, positioning, shape shifting, and innovation) valuable to freelance adult educators for negotiating the challenges they face and making their occupation a viable and rewarding profession. These dispositions and skills are additional to the pedagogic and subject matter expertise that all adult educators need, and are learnt through interaction, experience and reflection. It was found that motivations, experience, and the systems (WSQ/non-WSQ) participants operate in influence learning opportunities and the development of these dispositions and skills. More established freelance adult educators in the private market, followed by those who straddle the WSQ and private markets, talked about possessing these dispositions and skills to a greater degree and with greater certainty compared to the less established freelancers in the private market, or those who operate solely in the WSQ market. This has implications for a freelance adult educator’s mobility and professionalism, and therefore the quality of adult learning provision at a systemic level. The apparent gap in dispositions and, more particularly, skills led to the following pedagogic and institutional recommendations:

- Disseminate more information on what it is like to freelance as an adult educator in the various markets to potential entrants before they invest their time and money in starting out.
- Provide support to help freelance adult educators create meaningful, goal-oriented and actionable professional development plans that emphasise learning through interaction, experience, and reflection.
- Support “stretch” (challenging learning) opportunities for adult educators to work with partners on collaborative projects across different settings.
- Encourage professional qualities by creating a system that values adult educators who can work creatively and autonomously within the WSQ System or the free market.
- Foster conducive and collaborative working cultures that include freelancers, and help them understand how to operate meaningfully. This includes understanding the challenges and demands freelancers face when they work with an organisation.
- Reduce the division of labour between design, delivery, and assessment roles to encourage deeper professional knowledge, wider and more marketable skill sets, and higher quality professional practice of adult educators.

# Introduction

---

The dominance of casual work arrangements for adult educators is prevalent in many developed economies, including Singapore, as the pressure to respond to unpredictable market demands makes a flexible pool of practitioners attractive (IAL, 2013; NCVER, 2004; Nuisl & Pehl, 2000; Robson et al., 2004; Simons, Harris, Pudney & Clayton, 2009). This report refers to workers in these casual arrangements as “freelance adult educators” or “freelance trainers”. A flexible pool of adult educators can help learning and development institutions become more responsive to market demands, and businesses with particular learning and development needs can also seek the relevant expertise when they need it. However, while this may seem ideal, there are a number of factors that can jeopardise the effective engagement of freelance adult educators. The inherent flexibility of such work arrangements limits the space for strong, shared and common experiences, structures or understandings that bond freelancers to an organisation which can affect the usefulness and applicability of learning interventions that freelance adult educators offer (Edwards & Usher, 1996; Farinelli, 2010; Guimarães, Sancho, & Oliveira, 2006a; Robson et al., 2004). Flexible employment arrangements also encompass competition and demand expertise from adult educators. Yet their access to professional development opportunities is impeded as the responsibility to “upgrade” falls on the individual and opportunity costs are high (IAL, 2013; Jacques 2012). By seeking insights into the individual freelance adult educator’s perspective, this research intends to identify the motivations, skills, and dispositions that freelance adult educators draw on to address the above mentioned challenges, and find out how they best learn these elements of being a freelance adult educator. By doing so, we hope this research will contribute to the effective engagement of freelance adult educators. It will highlight possible ways to support adult educators in gaining clients and assignments. At the same time, it will also help organisations identify ways to create environments to optimise the service of the freelance adult educators they engage. The main research questions addressed are:

1. What do freelance adult educators need to be in order to operate professionally?
2. How do freelance adult educators learn to be these things?
3. How can the learning of freelance adult educators be supported and enhanced?

Addressing these questions can help organisations understand their freelance workers and how to best support them to maximise their impact. We will also offer pedagogic recommendations to improve the current provision on learning and development opportunities for adult educators. This contributes to IAL’s mission to gather and use evidence-based intelligence on the changing skills demand for adult educators. These



issues are further explored in the literature review, findings and implications sections of the report. The next section briefly discusses the terminology used before providing some background on freelance adult educators in Singapore.

## Terminology

### *Freelance adult educator*

The term “freelance” seems to be most commonly used by people in Singapore operating in non-permanent work arrangements, and connotes being paid on an hourly or project basis and having one or multiple employers/ clients. “Adult educator” is a term coined by IAL to refer to people who develop curriculum, train and/ or assess adults.

These workers, however, are often known by many other names depending on personal preference or institutions of employment. Other terms include: trainer, teacher, lecturer, educational manager, coach, craftsmen/women, coordinator, mentor, training practitioner or facilitator. These terms are sometimes used *in conjunction with*: adjunct, associate, casual, sessional, occasional or portfolio workers (Clayton, Meyers, Bateman, & Bluer, 2010; Evans, Dovaston, & Holland, 1990; T. J. Fenwick, 2004; Guimarães et al., 2006a; Jütte, Nicoll, & Olsen, 2011; NCVET, 2004). This wide terminology reflects the diverse nature of the field, and also illustrates the complexities of professional identity in this occupation. For deeper insight into the discourse on this terminology, please refer to the larger literature review for this project: *The Ephemeral Worker*.

### *Identity and learning*

Although the literature review discusses the concepts of identity and learning more deeply, it is important to address what we mean by identity and learning and why they are of interest (Fenwick 2011).

This study does not aim to define the freelance adult educator identity as such a coherent concept does not reflect reality. Rather, it explores what it means to *be* a freelance adult educator. In doing so, we focus on the challenges confronting these educators that permanent adult educators are unlikely to face. We postulate that freelance adult educators develop a way of *being* in negotiating these challenges to better their chances of getting work. Through developing a way of *being*, individuals can form mental and physical representations of themselves that feed into their motivations which are the ultimate source of self-regulation and help stabilise behaviour.

In this report, our discussion about learning to *be* a freelance adult educator involves how one learns what it is like to freelance as well as to educate. It includes learning about the inherent challenges involved and how people learn to overcome them.

Learning is conceptualised as dynamic, relational, and provisional, seeing the individual and their context or environment as inseparable.

Identity and learning are deeply intertwined. As discussed in the literature review, learning is identity-building work. Identity encapsulates the qualities a freelancer needs, and learning is the process of acquiring these qualities. In a sense, identity is the “what” and learning is the “how”. Learning to *be* a freelance adult educator has direct implications for quality of practice and the ability to get work. Those who cannot learn how to overcome challenges inherent in the job are unlikely to survive in the market.

**Identity = What I need to be to get work.**

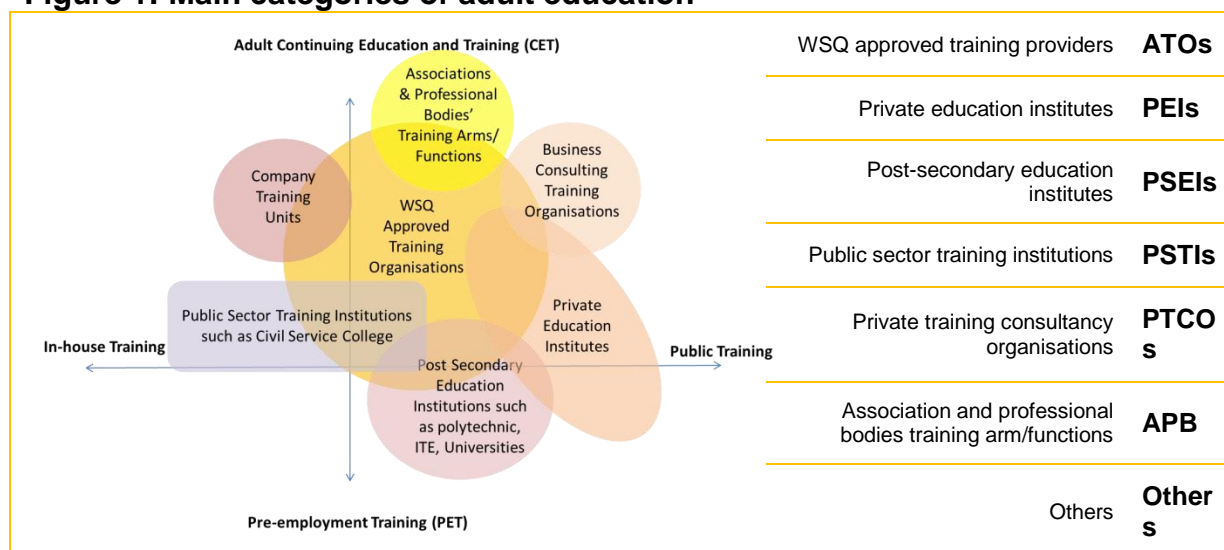
**Learning = How I can learn about and to be these things.**

## Background

Singapore’s adult educators face a large responsibility. As the TAE (Training and Adult Education) MSTC Stage 1 report on the current TAE situation states, adult educators (and the rest of the TAE community) need to “help deliver high productivity and increased competitiveness, and to secure Singapore’s sustainable growth in a global marketplace” (IAL, unpublished). This important role for adult educators stemmed from the transformation of Singapore’s Continuing Education and Training (CET) sector to support industry growth, bridge skills gaps, raise industry standards and enhance the employability of workers.

The demand for flexibility has seen short-term project work become the norm for the majority of adult educators who conduct face-to-face or other types of workforce learning and development activities. Such work arrangements are often used to cover peak training periods, for teaching whole units over a period of time or for guest lecturing. There are seven main categories that adult educators can work in as represented in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Main categories of adult education**



Source: IAL. Unpublished. Part 1: Strategic Intelligence TAE Landscape & The Changing Demand.

A freelance adult educator may offer services to learners by working as non-permanent staff with private education institutes (with 72% of private education institute teachers in non-permanent employment (CPE annual report 2012/2013)<sup>1</sup>); WSQ-approved training organisations (institutions such as IAL<sup>2</sup> have over 70% adjunct staff); public sector training institutions (Civil Service College reported the amplification of adjunct or associate training staff at the Capability Development Forum 2013<sup>3</sup>); post-Secondary education institutions and private training consultancy organisations (PTCOs). They may also be a PTCO themselves and provide services directly to businesses seeking their expertise (thus cutting out the services of a middleman). A freelance adult educator may have work with one or many of these types of learning institutions, and may have learning and development expertise in one or more area. The type of organisation with which freelance adult educators work and the relationship they foster can determine whether new skills/ approaches and innovative delivery methods can be effectively applied as well as the willingness of freelancers to provide feedback for improving courseware design. Sole proprietors who seek work with businesses, for example, are

<sup>1</sup> This figure includes institutions that are not in the adult education sector and does not include providers that are not under the Council for Private Education’s domain, but it is indicative of general adult education staffing patterns.

<sup>2</sup> IAL currently has 68 adjunct adult educators to 9 full time adult educators.

<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to note that at the Capability Development Forum 2013, Singapore Airlines stated they are not seeing the amplification of freelance trainers in their organisation as “they can’t afford people to be part-time because they need people who know what they are talking about”. This indicates the importance of SIA’s trainers being deeply immersed in the organisational culture in ways that are not possible for freelancers.

likely to have more scope for creativity and innovation than freelance adult educators who work for WSQ approved training organisations (ATOs) concerned with their guidelines.

Like other countries, the profile of Singapore's adult educators is characterised by diversity. These adult educators come from diverse occupational backgrounds and interact with learners from a multitude of industries. The different types of freelance adult educators include: industry experts who hold a main job in their industry and occasionally conduct training (such experts often have weaker pedagogic practices); people with caring responsibilities; retirees with previous careers; people with study responsibilities and people, often sole proprietors, who offer customised training solutions for corporate clients (Shorne 2008 in Jacques 2012).

Their jobs, in and of themselves, also vary as indicated by the development of the TAE framework in 2005 by the Workforce Development Agency (WDA). In the last eight years, the TAE expanded from offering the Advanced Certificate in Training and Assessment (ACTA) to including the Workplace Trainer Programme, the WSQ Diploma in Adult and Continuing Education and two hosted masters' programmes. Each level of certification was a response to the varying industry needs for industry practitioners who might conduct a small amount of training to educators well versed in adult education theory, with the expertise to develop curriculum. The Council for Private Education and Republic Polytechnic also developed the Specialist Diploma in Applied Learning and Teaching (SDALT) in 2011 as a complimentary option for educators seeking an alternative to the competency-based programmes of the WSQ TAE framework (CPE annual report 2012/2013). The development of the TAE framework and the SDALT reflects not only the diverse demands on different types of adult educators, but also their ad-hoc nature prior to the development of nationally accredited qualifications<sup>4</sup> (Willmott 2011).

The benefits of engaging freelance adult educators for organisations are many. Engaging freelance adult educators allows organisations to respond quickly to changing industry training requirements (either as an adult education provider or as an organisation seeking learning and development for employees); reduce workforce costs by increasing and decreasing freelancers instead of permanent employees and develop leanness and efficiency for businesses that need to maximise their bottom line. Specialised freelance adult educators also offer expertise that are not available internally, which can meet the high demand for specific industry and occupational skills learning and development initiatives (IAL, unpublished).

---

<sup>4</sup> Before the development of nationally accredited qualifications there were a number of "Train-the-Trainer" courses in the Singapore market (see Willmott & Karmel 2011).

On the other hand, heavy dependence on freelance adult educators can have implications for quality pedagogies and professional cultures, the workload of permanent staff and the freelancers themselves. Freelancers are often unable to participate in an organisational culture, and are forgotten in discussions and decisions of policy and institutional strategies. They may also take time to learn how to work with an organisation, and furthermore, take their expertise with them when their contract is completed. They lack access to support facilities and also face arbitrary fluctuations in employment (Jacques 2012). The onus of investing in professional development is also solely on the individual freelancer who must evaluate the opportunity costs involved. This is said to deter the take up of continuous professional development and impede the professional growth of adult educators (IAL, unpublished).

While the discourse of casualisation and its link to the erosion of quality education is very strong in many Australian reports, there is little such discourse evident in Singapore. In general, publications on Singapore's workforce development largely focus on economic drivers and government initiatives. These aspects are important for understanding the context of workforce development today, but missing from these accounts is commentary on those who conduct training for the workforce. While little is formally known about the demands on and for freelance versus permanent adult educators, or how their employment status shapes their learning and occupational identification, more attention is being given to the professionalisation of adult educators in Singapore and who these workers are. While this report is the first to draw on empirical data specifically on *freelance* adult educators in Singapore, the need for more information on adult educators has been recognised. The Training and Adult Education Manpower Skills and Training Council have recently completed a report entitled *Training and Adult Education Landscape and Changing Demand*, and empirical research in this area can be found in *Tools for Learning and Design* (Stack & Bound 2012); *Professionalising Adult Educators: What Practitioners Make of It* (Brown, Karmel & Ye 2013) and *The Adult Educator Typology* conducted by Freebody & Lin (2013) at the IAL, Singapore. This is significant as Singapore's adult educators are the link between policy and practice for national workforce development strategies.

## Methods

This study involved semi-structured, in-depth, qualitative interviews with 30 adult educators and one marketing agent in Singapore. Through purposive sampling, adult educators with varying years of experience and from a range of industries, operating in both the WSQ and private markets, were invited.

Participants were identified through industry contacts, the Adult Education Network database, IAL's ACTA graduate database, the Centre for Workplace Literacy's Trainer Database, and personal contacts of the research team.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed before being imported into NVIVO. Themes were developed through reading the data, referring back to the literature and multiple coding by various members of the research team. Each transcript was then coded by the established themes before being further analysed into sub-themes.

After the initial analysis, a reference group met to validate and provide feedback on the report. Many members of the reference group felt that the report captured what it is like as a freelance adult educator. Their suggestions included providing more differentiation between the different types of freelance adult educators so that a more nuanced understanding of the different systems could be gained and recommendations could become more targeted. Their other comments and recommendations also influenced the shape of this final report.

# Literature review

---

This review is concerned with the professional identity and learning of *freelance* adult educators, and is presented in two main sections. Professional identity is conceptualised as “what” freelance adult educators need to “be” in order to remain employable in the market. In this section, we raise a number of challenges which need to be addressed, and in doing so, identify crucial dispositions and skills that freelance adult educators need to acquire. A strong, coherent, deeply entrenched identity that places clear boundaries around a way of being, and that can anticipate potential challenges, will provide strong stability to this way of being and also offers powerful predictive measures of behaviour (Albert, Ashforth, & Dutton, 2000 in Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). The second section concentrates on the learning processes that help freelance adult educators learn about these challenges and overcome them in their practice. This is the “how” aspect of becoming an employable freelance adult educator. The use of challenges as identity and learning prompts derives from the idea that conflicts or disturbances are one of the key factors that causes a need to learn (Fenwick 2010). Learning as identity building is one idea on how professional identities are developed, and often the lines between what is learned and how things are learned are blurred. For this reason, a clarification of what this review means by learning and its relationship with identity is needed before moving onto the main sections.

An understanding of learning as an often invisible and constant process involving abstract and tacit knowledge moves away from the “competence theoretical approach” which views learning as transmitting the competences of adult educators largely through formal training (Maier-Gutheil & Hof, 2011; Robson et al., 2004; Gee et al., 1996). While formal qualifications often play an important part in providing a language to talk and think about one’s profession, the critique warns against removing “competences” from their contexts and practice. Thinking and doing cannot be separated, and individuals cannot be held distinct from the environments in which they operate (Engestrom, 1999; Sawchuk, 2003; Gherardi & Nicolini, 2000; Wenger, 1998; Fenwick, 2004). In this approach, learning and identity are relational, dynamic and provisional; practice-based rather than acquisitional (T. J. Fenwick, 2004; T. Fenwick, 2000). It is through various modes of learning (experience, interaction, reflection) that individuals can absorb and react to norms and behaviours, informing their “ways of knowing, doing, and feeling”, or in other words, “a way of being” (Edwards & Usher, 1996). It should be noted that some commentators feel that freelance or portfolio work is under-researched, and the ways in which these workers learn and identify with their work even more so (T. Fenwick, 2000, 2008).

## Identity

The following are challenges raised in the literature that influence the way freelance adult educators identify with their work and develop a way of being. These do not create a comprehensive image of the identity of contingent adult educators as it is questionable whether such a thing can exist. They do, however, cover the key areas that shape a way of being for freelance adult educators. Many of these challenges are full of contradictions and often require the wearing of multiple hats (Edwards & Usher, 1996; T. J. Fenwick, 2006). Foucault's (1998) concept of 'technologies of the self', which refers to the self-governing processes that shape one's capabilities and life directions, may be a useful concept to refer to the dispositions and skills (technologies) that successful freelance adult educators may need to develop in order to negotiate the following challenges. The main challenges that the literature raises are: motivational conflicts, diversity, unpredictability and competition. Each challenge is coupled with a reaction or way of being raised in the literature which may help freelance adult educators overcome the challenge in their practice.

### *Motivational conflicts and reconciling*

The conflict between theory and practice can be considered an essential part of learning to be a professional in many fields (Guimarães, Sancho, & Oliveira, 2006b; Lehman, 2003; Schön, 1987). Besides a disjuncture between formally-learned concepts and real practice, freelance adult educators may also need to reconcile their personal motivations with reality. Adult educators often talk of finding greater meaning, freedom and autonomy as reasons why they take non-permanent work. In reality, however, having greater professional autonomy is always negotiated as it is often restricted by external mandates (Lehman, 2003; Robson et al., 2004). The notion of an exploitative market compared to altruistic, intrinsic and "free" motivations is echoed in the work of Smeaton (2003) who suggests there are two opposing models of "portfolio" workers: liberation or marginalisation. This dichotomy may be a reflection of the emancipatory legacies of adult education clashing with the more recent emphasis on the labour market (Edwards & Usher, 1996).

Fenwick's research further complicates this notion, stating that freelance adult educators can be full of contradictions between desiring both flexibility and stability as well as wanting to find greater meaning in life and operating in a system of accountability, business, and measurable outcomes (T. J. Fenwick, 2006; T. Fenwick, 2000). This suggests that proposing two distinct camps (liberating OR marginalising) could be too simplistic as freelance adult educators may need to learn to reconcile, not only theory and practice and their internal motivations with external mandates, but also their internal motivations with each other. How these contradictions are negotiated



internally can help determine the types of work contingent adult educators are interested in pursuing, or whether they remain freelancing adult educators at all.

Key ideas: Difference between theory and practice; tension between different motivations; reconciling motivations and realities.

### *Diversity and shape shifting*

Diversity is a key challenge for freelance adult educators as they often operate across more than one work environment, and each job is likely to encompass different tasks or knowledge sets. This can create a juggling act of competing contracts, demands and expectations across a variety of contexts, and requires shifting between different roles, clients and languages. This challenge makes understanding the norms of various environments crucial for enabling shape shifting so that individuals can seamlessly operate despite the diversity they face.

The processes entailed involve a series of knowledge recontextualisations (see Evans, Guile & Harris 2009; Evans et al., 2010; Evans and Guile, 2012). Processes of knowledge recontextualisation lie at the heart of workplace learning as knowledge is put to work in different environments. This approach to recontextualisation draws on van Oers' (1998) idea that concepts integral to practice change as practice varies from one workplace to another. These notions have been substantially expanded to embrace the ways in which workers themselves change as they recontextualise concepts and practices. This is integral to the ways in which people think and feel their way into occupational and professional identities or think and feel their way beyond them.

In line with this, then, the frequent opportunities for freelancers to use knowledge from one work experience in another may be a valuable process for professional development. This, however, can largely be shaped by the supportiveness of organisations and their employees. The element of diversity, though, is rarely acknowledged by clients who focus solely on the work they engage the freelancers for. While posing challenges for recontextualisation, this also makes it pertinent that adult educators continuously clarify expectations, project purposes, scope, limits of activity and administrative support to control the amount of work that is expected, and which may go unpaid (T. J. Fenwick, 2006; T. Fenwick, 2008).

Shape shifting is “behind-the-scenes” work freelancers need to be do while appearing fit to adapt to each client’s needs and be able to offer knowledge only in contexts where it is valued (T. Fenwick, 2008). At a theoretical level, Bauman (2005) shows how individuals are being increasingly positioned to lead a “liquid life” where workers develop multiple identities according to their positioning and contribution to different work teams. In the liquid life, success can arise from the development of capabilities to make multiple transitions and to navigate the diverse worlds they operate in.

In this sense, one needs to *be* a shape shifter and skilled time manager, while *presenting* a coherent brand for the particular client at hand. Retaining some type of visible identity marker to avoid a sense of fragmentation can be very difficult in this situation, but is important for psychological and pragmatic reasons (Edwards & Usher, 1996).

Key ideas: diversity of work environments and arrangements; importance of understanding norms; shape shifting to suit context at hand; presenting a coherent brand; recontextualising from one place to another; importance of clients.

### *Unpredictability and permanently learning*

Unpredictability is an interesting challenge for freelance adult educators. On the one hand, the unpredictability of the job market may be a reason why some permanent employees decide to take their fate into their own hands and freelance. On the other, the consistency of assignments can be very unpredictable. Here, building a good reputation is crucial as every job becomes an interview. This means that the job of a freelance adult educator comes with the pressure to perform, appear cutting edge and prove their knowledge in a market of impressions (T. Fenwick, 2008). In today's market, it has also become crucial that adult educators have more to offer than the internet; they are also expected to be masters of new media skills (IAL, 2013).

In reaction to this, the literature suggests that many freelance adult educators encompass an ethos of learning. They say they enjoy the constant need to change, learn and improve -- Cornelia et al. (2011) call a freelancer "the Permanent Learner". Being a permanent learner means that unpredictability is not a threat as needing to constantly adapt and update is embodied by the freelancer (Maier-Gutheil & Hof, 2011). With this mentality, every experience can be viewed as a learning opportunity, and the individual can embrace change as an aspect of professional practice which challenges and minimises routine boredom in what can be a flat career (Taylor et al., 2009).

Key ideas: unpredictable market; pressure to be up to date; importance of building expertise and reputation; everything is a learning opportunity.

### *Competition and innovation*

Inherent in freelancing is competition. Moving between clients in an unpredictable market makes it crucial for freelance adult educators to have something that their competitors do not (Edwards & Usher, 1996; T. J. Fenwick, 2004; T. Fenwick, 2008). Fenwick argues that freelance adult educators, particularly those with multiple employers, need to embody the ability to make new processes and structures of work, constantly bring something new to clients and capitalise on their uniqueness. This will convince clients they have something special to offer. Interestingly, a study on metaphors adopted by adult educators found that almost all of them used images of a

guide (tour guide, adventure guide, etc.) with a bag of tricks and tools to deal with any situation, and hardly any of them saw themselves as creators or innovators (T. Fenwick, 2000). This raises a question over the degree to which freelance adult educators themselves are acknowledging, valuing and being equipped with the language for the identity of an “innovator”.

Key ideas: competitive labour market; need to offer something new for clients; capitalise on uniqueness.

## Learning

The nature of freelance work as an adult educator is posited to be individualistic and disconnected from organisational culture and practices; yet much workplace learning literature emphasises the role of one’s work environment and fellow employees as key factors for learning to do a job. When an individual operates in one or more work environments *from a distance* and engages with the employees of those environments on an ad hoc basis, how then does the individual learn?

As learning is conceptualised as an often invisible and constant process involving abstract and tacit knowledge, this section focuses on experience, interaction, and reflection as key modes of learning for freelance adult educators. These are not mutually exclusive, involving an interplay between them all, and may exist across informal, non-formal and formal professional development activities.

### *Experience*

Experience has always been a key signifier for adult educators. It includes past work experiences in other industries as well as the ability to continue learning from the day-to-day experiences as an adult educator. Many enter without specific training to become an adult educator, depending solely on their industry experience which they adapt and reapply for their training to give them the credibility to pass their knowledge on to others (Buiscool, Broek, Lakerveld, Zarifis, & Osborne, 2010; Robson et al., 2004). Equally important to past industry experience, however, is gaining practice as an adult educator.

Experience provides learning that is “open, indeterminate, flexible, and not necessarily an organised process that favours rapid adjustments to changes” (Guimarães et al., 2006b). For freelancers, trying to get work can be a learning experience that may help them understand what some of the challenges are and how to overcome these. Developing their pedagogic practice, however, is dependent on getting regular assignments (Fenwick 2000). Actual worksites have their own norms, and it is only through experiencing them that one can be “socialised” and new ways of acting can be created and recreated (Guimarães et al., 2006b). This scenario has practical implications for the learning and professional identities of freelance adult educators as

the literature largely agrees that learning by doing the work alongside ad hoc formal training are crucial for the development of quality practitioners.

The significance of prior knowledge and skills is widely acknowledged, as is the evidence that moving into and between new workplaces involves much more than the simple transfer of prior skills and knowledge. Lobato (2003), for example, has shown the importance of the actor's/learner's perspective; the influence of prior activity on current activity and the different ways in which actors may construe situations as being "similar"; that what experts consider to be only a "surface feature" of a work task or problem may be structurally important for a participant; that multiple processes involved include attunement to affordances and constraints in the work environment and that "transfer" is distributed across mental, material, social and cultural planes. Skills and knowledge have to be developed and changed as they are operationalised in the culture of new workplaces. Furthermore, it is not the skills and knowledge that develop but the whole person, as the individual adjusts with greater or less success to working in a new environment, as Hager and Hodkinson (2010) have argued. That adjustment depends as much upon the receptive or expansive nature of the new workplace as upon the prior experiences that workers bring to it.

Key ideas: past experience is used for credibility; past experience helps an individual make sense of current experience; gaining current experience is important for refining practice; experience leads to better understanding of freelancing challenges; work contexts shape experiences.

### *Interaction*

There are various concepts of learning through interaction. Some of these emphasise the individual or a group (for example, communities of practice), while a body of work on co-participation and emergence enmeshes individual and social processes. Learning interactions may occur with peers, mentors, learners, clients and administrative personnel, and can involve questioning, listening, observing, discussing, writing and reading among other actions. Interaction can also occur with texts, and may be mediated by artefacts. It is through interaction that knowledge is shared and created. This section will expand slightly on communities of practice, learning from learners and learning through interacting with material objects.

The communities of practice (COP) literature refers to practitioners with common identities, tasks and/or environments who share information about doing their work. Such interaction and sharing is affected by trust, variety (new ideas, risk) and group structure (networks, competence) (Bogenrieder & Nooteboom, 2004). The COP concept is largely criticised for rarely theorising the relation between individual learning processes and collective processes, where individual disposition, perspective, position,

social/cultural capital and forms of participation are unaccounted for (Fenwick 2010, p83).

It is often through interacting with learners that adult educators learn about their pedagogic knowledge as well as the appropriate languages to use with different learners. Interaction with learners can be the space where adult educators learn to negotiate their personal motivations by addressing their learner's needs that are beyond the syllabus (Robson et al., 2004). The study by Guimarães et al. (2006b) further illustrates how an adult educator may learn that through such interaction, engaging with learners can also be emotionally taxing, which may lead to a further readjustment of their approach aimed at distancing themselves from the pastoral role of a teacher.

There is an increasing body of work on interaction with tools and texts as learning. Here, physical objects including texts are not disembodied from their actual use (Johri 2011). Adult educators interact with tools such as curriculum and learner guides, lesson plans, internet resources (including YouTube), social media platforms (LinkedIn, Facebook etc.), formal and non-formal learning resources (text books, worksheets from courses etc.), laptops, projectors, flip charts, markers, tables, chairs, training rooms, on-site tools, etc., all of which can co-create knowledge through interaction and shape the ways in which adult educators practice.

Key ideas: interaction with people and material objects; interaction involves questioning, listening, observing, discussing, writing, reading.

### *Reflection*

Reflection is largely seen as a process of mentalist, individual meditation on lived experience. Boud (2010 in Fenwick 2008), however, conceives of learning as reflection, whereby “reflection connects work and learning; it operates in the space between the two. It provides a link between knowing and producing.” Many commentators in adult education argue that the “reflective practitioner” has become a key signifier in the professional development of adult educators due to the unpredictable nature of adult education rendering the notion of learning theory and applying it in predictable ways irrelevant (Merriam, 1986; Cervero, 1988; Imel, 1992; Edwards & Usher, 1996; Jögi & Gross, 2010; Lehman, 2003; Maier-Gutheil & Hof, 2011; Nittel, 2000; Smilde, 2009, p.84). Along the lines of Schön's (1987) work, they see bringing together thought and action, as well as reflecting while doing, as key requirements for working in unpredictable and flexible conditions. Guimarães et al. (2006b) call this “knowing-on-action” where unpredictable events force adult educators to react quickly and use their tacit knowledge which they either reflect on in a “stop-and-think” moment or at a later point. Lehman (2003) argues that learning takes place with the integration of experience and critical reflection as reflection allows the learner to make meaning of their experience.

This involves “reflexivity”, as Edwards argues, with reflective practice a key condition of flexibility. Edwards argues that reflective practice, which revolves around the bringing together of thought and action, reflecting while doing, is a key condition of flexibility: “the significance of reflective practice becomes clearer when it is situated within the socioeconomic and cultural changes of reflexive modernisation. It is not simply the nature of professional practice that necessitates reflection-in-action. It is also a part and an outcome of a particular organisation and division of labour within which flexibility is a key component.” For workers reliant on short term contracts and freelancers navigating work opportunities, reflexivity becomes all important, but as Edwards takes care to note, the possibility for enterprise of the self are neither uniform nor equal.

Key ideas: reflection is a key reaction for learning in unpredictable and flexible arrangements; brings together thought and action; reflection makes meaning of experience.

## Summary

The above review makes evident the close interplay between the challenges that can shape how a contingent adult educator needs to *be* in order to survive or flourish, and the processes through which they learn what these challenges may be and how to build their identity through addressing these (and other) challenges. In a world of motivational conflicts, diversity, unpredictability and competition, the literature suggests that freelance adult educators learn through experience, interaction and reflection to be a medley of “reconcilers”, “shape shifters”, “permanent learners”, and “innovators”.

# Findings

This section presents the findings based on interviews with thirty freelance trainers. It covers the participant profiles followed by the dispositions and skills that help them engage in “identity work” and address the challenges they face. Identity and learning are not presented as two separate elements in this section as it is difficult to separate “what” these freelance adult educators learned (or need to learn) and “how” they learned.

## Participant profiles

As trainer profiles are so diverse, it is important to understand where the participants in this study stood in the training market. The participants offered training products in the WSQ and/or private market, and the different spaces they worked in came with different ways of working. By understanding where the participants stood, it will help us compare and contrast the findings, allowing for more targeted implications and recommendations. The areas covered in this section are: training markets; industries; motivations for freelance training and estimated income brackets.

**Figure 2: Market**

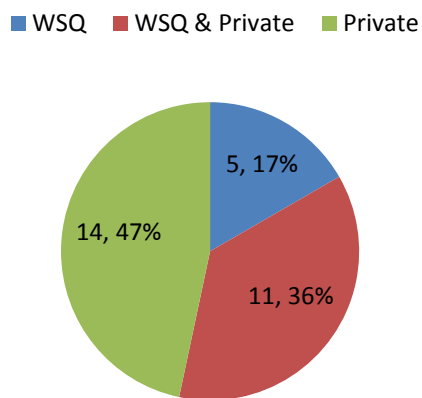


Figure 2 indicates that almost half of the participants (five of whom had less than five years of experience) operated solely in the private market while slightly over half did at least some of their work in the WSQ market. For those who worked across both markets, it was unclear how their time was divided, but WSQ work was talked about as “bread and butter”, while private work was described to require more preparation and as less predictable.

Figure 3 (on page 19) illustrates that the most common motivation for working in the private training market was the desire to be one’s own boss while the most common reason for working in both the WSQ and private markets was a career switch due to a difficult job market. For WSQ-only trainers, a tough job market and family duties were the most common push factors behind their work choice.

**Figure 3: Market area by motivation to become a freelance trainer**

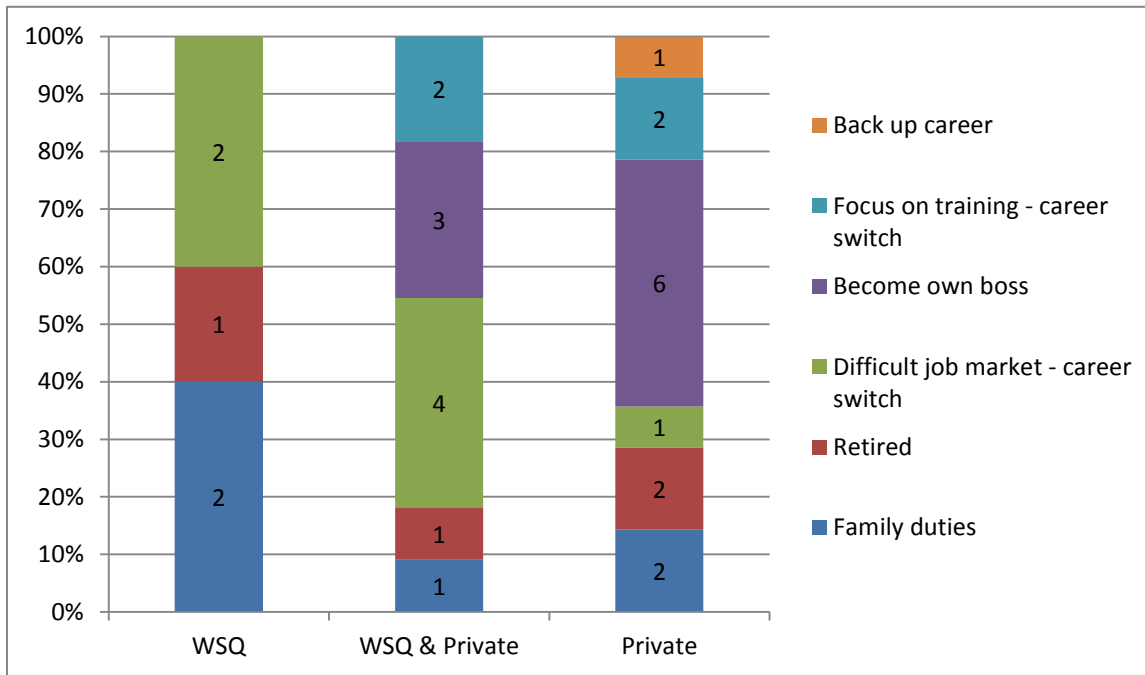
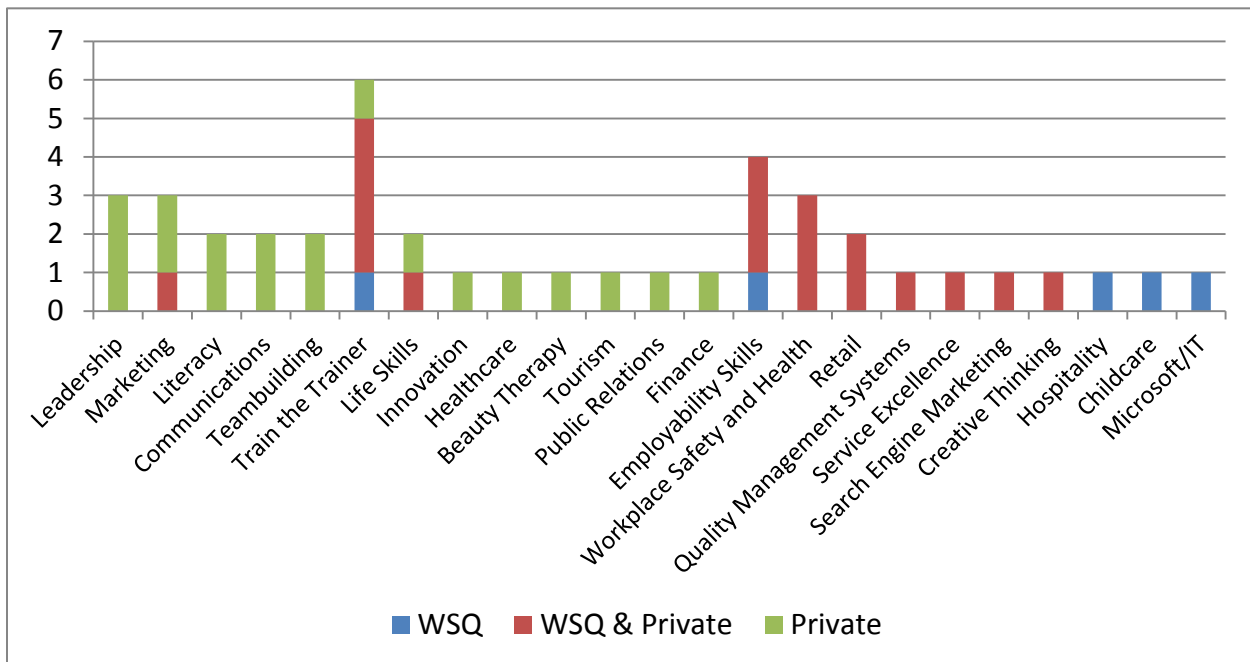


Figure 4 illustrates the number of adult educators by their content areas, the total is more than 30 as some trainers offered products in more than one area.

**Figure 4: Number of trainers by market and sector**





The areas represented by the WSQ only participants are Childcare, Train-the-trainer, Literacy, ESS, Microsoft and Hospitality. The earning potential indicated generally increased with the number of working days as a trainer (developing and delivering) and covered a range from \$20,000 up to approximately \$70,000 annually.

For the WSQ and private trainers, the lower earners (\$20,000 to \$50,000 annually) had other forms of income. Although large income brackets were indicated (e.g. one individual estimated they earned between \$45,000 and \$130,000 annually), the highest potential incomes were for females who provided train-the-trainer courses alongside other products. They generally engaged private clients (as well as ATOs/CETs) and worked between 100 and 200 days a year. The middle potential earners largely worked in marketing and safety training, and for over 200 days per year.

The potential incomes of trainers who operated only in the private market, or “private-only” trainers, span a wide range, covering the lowest and highest ranges of all 30 participants. The five lowest earners (\$5000 to \$18,000 annually) all supplemented their income with work in other fields or drew a pension . Two of these worked around 30 days a year, one was trying to get experience, and two were freelancing for family reasons. The four adult educators with the highest earning potential (\$60,000 to \$150,000 annually) gave reasonably small ranges, perhaps indicating more predictable incomes. They did training work for approximately 260, 130, 150 and 130 days per year. These higher earners all considered themselves sole proprietors and worked for private clients.

Overall, the annual income ranges of the participants suggest that private trainers are earning the highest and lowest figures, with WSQ-only and WSQ/private trainers making up the middle tier, depending on the products they offer and how they divide their work between the two markets. This may indicate the relatively safe haven that WSQ training can provide, and the cut-throat, higher risk market forces prevalent in the private market. The lower earners were retirees, family carers and full-time workers in other fields who might not want much training work. In addition to this group were the novice trainers who had not met the stricter criteria of the WSQ market nor successfully aligned their experiences with the needs of the private market. Offering more than one product seemed more common for trainers who straddled both WSQ and non-WSQ markets, compared to those who stayed within a single market.

Interestingly, when daily rates were calculated by dividing the annual incomes by the number of working days, a slightly different picture emerged. Among the participants, freelancers who operated in both the WSQ and private markets earned higher daily rates although they also had the largest income ranges (e.g. \$500 to \$1400 per day), indicating unpredictability or variance. The lowest earners (between \$50 to \$130 per day) in both the WSQ and private markets included retirees, those with caring duties,

those working in areas such as beauty therapy, healthcare (CPR training), literacy and those without a specialised content area.

**Figure 5 Individual daily rate ranges**

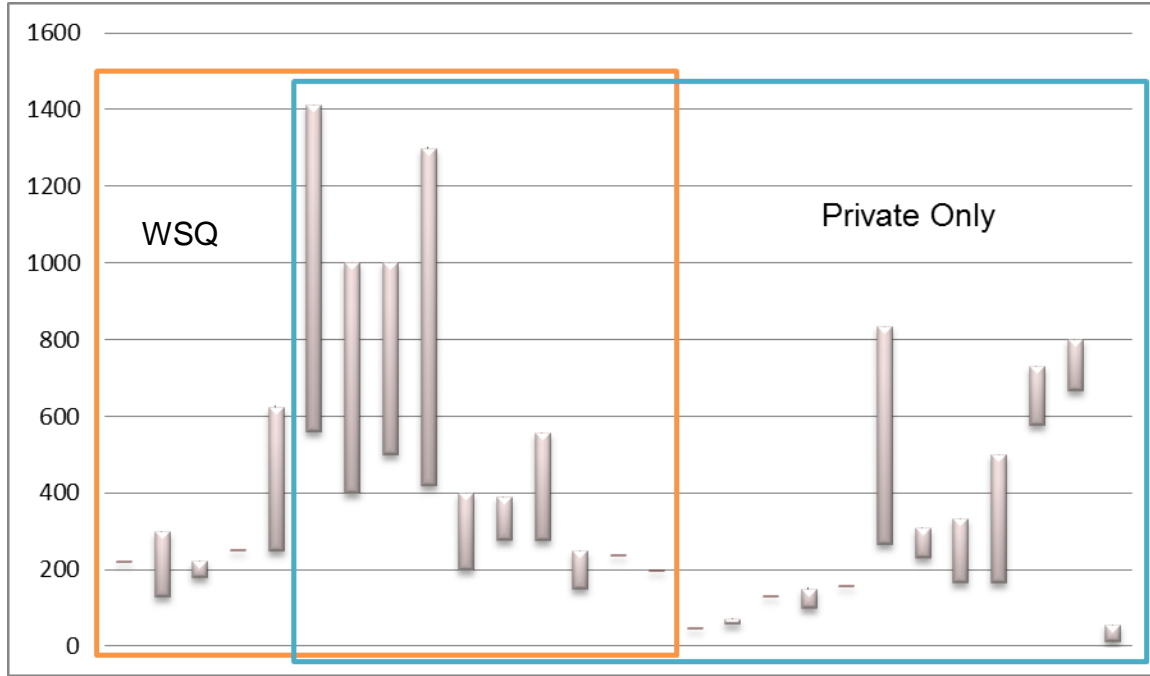
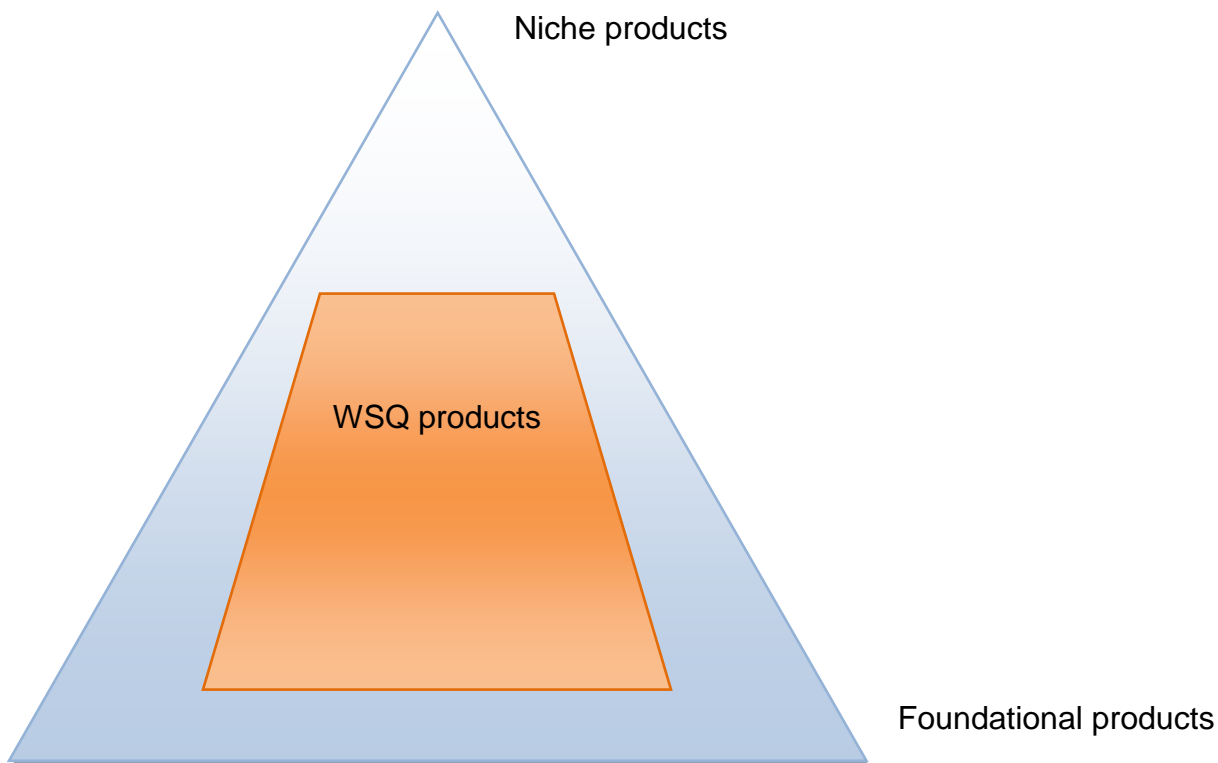


Figure 6 (on page 22) is an attempt to illustrate the training market that freelance trainers operate in. At the top, there is demand for niche training products and services. At the other end of the spectrum, there is demand for foundational training products, for example, literacy skills. In the lower to middle space, WSQ products/frameworks co-exist with WSQ products, which span from the foundational (employability skills) to more specialised topics (leadership). It seems that foundational skills target mainly lower-skilled workers, and thus generally have lower remuneration (even though the adult educators may be very experienced or specialised), while the niche products find demand from corporate clients with higher-skilled workers and command higher fees. This graphic does not capture hard versus soft skills as it seems that “specialisation” versus “foundation” is the spectrum that drives the market.

**Figure 6: The training market**



## Dispositions

This section presents four dispositions that the data suggest are important for freelance trainers to embrace. By being passionate, anchored, resilient, and a permanent learner a freelance trainer is better placed to deal with the unpredictability and diversity of their work, as well as its isolated nature.

### *Passion*

Almost all our participants talked about passion as a crucial element of their work. The WSQ freelancers used passion as a statement – “I am passionate” – while the other trainers used it in conjunction with a reason. Passion was largely used when talking about issues of risk, fatigue, and pay. For those who worked in both the WSQ and private markets passion was resistance to outside oppressing forces; for the established freelancers in the private market passion was a part of risk management; and the less established spoke of it as something they desired or needed for perseverance. Cathy equated going into training on her own with a strong passion and in doing so justified the risk she was taking and the chance that it might not work out. And after listing a

number of complaints, Terrence went on to say:

...it sounds very funny, but I guess it's really something I love to do. (Terrence: *Literacy; WSQ; 6 years*)

Passion and enjoyment are important in overcoming the physical and mental demands of training as well as low and uncertain income.

I can get good money this month, I may get little money next month but that doesn't concern so much but as long I can cover with the requirements of my living...but service to people is my main priority. (Bagus: *Healthcare; non WSQ; 3 years*)

Passion seems to have become a mantra that trainers adopt and retell. It connotes having integrity and ethics that puts an altruistic image forward and protects against the risks of the job.

### *Anchored*

Diversity is a part of working as a freelance adult educator. In moving across diverse environments with different types of learners, content, social norms, expectations, and pressures, freelancers need to be able to protect themselves against fragmentation. Among our participants, being anchored or having a strong sense of self was most clearly exhibited by the more established freelance trainers and those who operated at least partly in the private market. This indicates the importance of developing a strong core to help mitigate the challenges of a fluctuating market and diversity in their work. Those in the private market with less experience, however, demonstrated a period of trying to figure out who they were.

...but to pinpoint a particular market now is still quite early...I'm quite new and (need to) try out different sectors... (Daisy, *Life Skills, non WSQ, 2 years*)

At the time of the interview, Bagus was busy developing a programme on clinical massage and physical rehabilitation. His secondary activity was freelancing as a cardiopulmonary trainer and auditor. In addition, he also spent time providing holistic massage/rehabilitation services to the elderly, doing part-time/seasonal catering of Nonya food (his own small enterprise), and was also a sales representative for a health product brand (something he had been doing for over 20 years). Due to the diversity of these activities, Bagus emphasised quality and care, rather than a particular subject matter or type of educator, as his core.

I'm very particular, I'm very focused... I must give the best, that means I'm willing to help a person. ... and the same when I do all preparation of the catering or the food. ...As a therapist you must be very professional. ...you are a professional trainer, you are a professional assessor, you are a professional auditor and that is where you build up the confidence... (Bagus: *Healthcare; non WSQ; 3 years*)

This example illustrates that although freelance trainers work across diverse environments, they can develop a core identity that is not connected to a particular place, but to an internal sense of self. For other freelance adult educators, their internal sense of self may be anchored on a high level of skills mastery or the notion of being a pedagogic specialist.

### *Resilience*

There are many opportunities for freelance trainers to doubt themselves and the viability of this occupation. The more established freelance trainers we interviewed and those who operated partially in the private market seemed to be more resilient to setbacks. The less established private trainers, however, grappled with self-doubt and the WSQ-only freelancers battled a system of student feedback which they felt lacked transparency. As a novice trainer, Daisy was trying to overcome her self-doubt by affirming her sincerity and integrity regardless of her lack of training experience.

I would say every one of us always have this little voice that tells us you're not good enough and all those things. (Daisy: *Life Skills; non WSQ; 2 years*)

As well as that "little voice", resilience against poor student feedback or someone else gaining an assignment can be important. Stories about "the power of pizza" surfaced in a number of interviews, referring to stories where *other* trainers provided pizzas to gain favour with their learners. The pizza story may be a protective mechanism allowing trainers to assure themselves of their good performance and attributing unsatisfactory feedback to their failure to "bribe" students into liking them.

...you get constantly of course, rated, every semester, and they emphasise very much on student surveys nowadays which I'm not sure exactly if that is totally accurate. Because this bunch of people [the students], you throw a few pizzas they adore you... So you get, you see some fellow staff members who try to like, so-called, bribe their way through their hearts. So I'm not sure about this whole system at all. I feel there has to be some caution to be exercised there. And there's a lot of ethical issues on the table as well. (Francine: *Communications; 6 years*)

Spiritual beliefs were talked about by a number of participants as a source of resilience when work arrangements caused uncertainty.

Sometimes as a Christian I say pray to God and say please give me that amount of strength needed for today and it comes (Kelvin: *ESS, TTT, Life Skills, Search Engine Marketing; WSQ & non WSQ; 10 years*)

As a more experienced freelancer, Debra summed up that resilience is important for coping with the ups and downs:

It is not just about getting the work in, it is about staying in a certain state of mind. It is about I think having a high level of personal mastery and being able to just weather through whatever the world holds. (Debra: *Creative Thinking, TTT; WSQ & non WSQ; 16 years*)

Debra implies that even with a high level of mastery, resilience is important for survival. While a novice trainer like Daisy needs resilience to quieten personal doubts about her training experience and the job market, experienced freelancers like Debra, who already have confidence in their training and development skills, require resilience to protect them against external factors in the job market that are often beyond their control.

### *Permanent learner*

There is a great deal of pressure on freelance trainers to continually update, upgrade and renew their knowledge. Some clients, like training providers, prefer trainers with certain qualifications. Some clients want something “new”, and nobody is interested in out-of-date information. The WSQ-only freelancers talked about the importance of learning and reflection. They focused on learning through reading, experimenting with school students and other types of informal learning. Those who operated in both the WSQ and private market also talked about learning as an internal process that mostly occurred through reflection, and learning from their learners. The private freelancers seem to reach out a lot more, investing in formal learning opportunities, hunting out challenges to stretch their skills and combining these with an attitude of “everything offers something to learn”. Newer entrants to the private market talked more about the need to refresh by dipping back into the industry and trying out new things.

Weighing up the opportunity costs, however, can make committing time and money to formal professional development a serious challenge. The more established freelancers who worked at least partly in the private market thought of investing in formal professional development as part of their job. Barry, for example, would pay for himself to attend international conferences related to his subject area. Zeng Gong talked about committing to one professional event each month – either a short course or networking event. He also talked about the importance of travelling to absorb different cultures to help understand different types of clients. Generally, however, opportunity costs make the permanent learning disposition crucial for turning all experiences into learning opportunities. This means nothing is a waste of time, and everything can be helpful if viewed constructively (even the bus ride home).

...the growing cycle. I always welcome (my learners to) bother me...but if you don't want your students to bother you, then you will never [learn]... I learn, they learn, I teach, they teach... (Mandy: Public Relations, Tourism, *Marketing; non WSQ*)

I think the more important thing...is to try to find something to learn from the experience, whether it's positive or negative, it is still something to learn from.... and know that failure is really a pathway to success. (Cathy: *Communications; non WSQ; 7 years*)

Lata also talked about the importance of learning from her learners.

...the major thing is the cause of uncertainty for freelancers but...I see through my learners...over time and anything can happen to the economy...But what I learnt out of it is that wherever we are, it doesn't matter. Most important thing you must be able to know the ways and strategies to be able to survive in any situation. That means...I have to develop this kind of resilience and mind-set as what my learners say... (Lata: *TTT; WSQ & non WSQ; 9 years*)

This idea of using all experiences as learning opportunities was also described by participants as a reaction to working with people and taking jobs they did not like. For example, when Karthik worked with people he did not like, he tried to find something as a learning point, such as better marketing skills. These examples illustrate that permanently learning is an important disposition that is a professional commitment. It neatly minimises opportunity costs arising from investing in formal professional development, and marries the mantra of lifelong learning with the ad hoc, diverse and uncertain nature of freelance training.

## Skills

Building on the dispositions that are important for the mindset of a freelance trainer are the various skills they need to help them get work. These may be more pertinent in some markets compared to others, but are all important for approaching freelance training as a professional career with a sense of autonomy. Our data surfaced the following skills as important areas for a freelance trainer to develop: planning, continual networking, positioning yourself and your products, shape shifting and innovation. These skills are in addition to the pedagogic and subject matter expertise that all trainers need to hold.

### *Planning*

Before venturing into freelancing as an adult educator, a number of elements need to be considered to make a measured decision. Covered in this section are the skills of planning prior to exiting permanent employment, financial planning, planning your client approach, flexibility and juggling as well as schedule management.

## The exit plan

From our data, the most successful freelance adult educators consciously built experience and contacts while still under permanent employment arrangements.

I said, in two years' time, I am going to leave. I need to know finance, I need to know customer service, I need to know how to handle conflicts. So now, where can I learn this, while I am in this company? (Karthik: *Leadership; non WSQ; 3.5 years*)

Freelance trainers who used to be permanent trainers also banked on their experiences. Those who worked in large organisations before were often taken through an induction programme to learn how to train.

...I actually had like, 3 months of... workplace curriculum where they really train you, prepare you, orientate you from novice trainer to...a competent trainer. I grew, in my probably, 2½ to 3 years there [at a training centre]. (Qui Ling: *Retail; WSQ & non WSQ; 13 years*)

Building expertise during full-time employment was a process of careful consideration for some participants, and involved consciously pursuing opportunities and making meaning of them in the mind frame of becoming a freelance trainer. Having a plan and working towards, setting themselves up *before* removing the security of full-time employment, helped these freelance trainers to acquire the relevant content and training experience, establish useful contacts and have more realistic expectations.

## Financial planning

Another important part of planning is financial preparedness. Freelance training comes with high financial risk and the benefits that a permanent employee normally receives are largely absent (paid leave, CPF, structured annual raise). A number of experienced male freelance trainers interviewed felt that this was not a good job for people concerned with financial commitments.

I would say also that if your family needs you, then think twice about it...it comes off and on, the money. (Chong Min: *Leadership, TTT; Non-WSQ; 40 years*)

Ah, this is a problem. I have a ACTA course mate...he took about 2, 3 courses, after that he conduct the class, a 2-day WSQ program. Then subsequently say he cannot survive, he can't survive. So he went back to the industry.... Then he got a kid... some, they say, very difficult financially. (Barry: *Workplace Safety Health; WSQ & non WSQ; 20 years*)

Most of the participants were not the main breadwinners, but either had limited financial responsibilities as retirees, good savings and/or support from their spouse. This was the case for trainers with both higher and lower annual incomes. Those who planned their move into freelance training generally put money aside as a security net to anticipate



periods with scarce work and no income. This preparation was important because expenses could increase during slow financial periods. This was especially the case if a freelancer felt a need to invest in formal qualifications or a specialised license which may or may not yield returns.

I have had to be ready financially. I have had to have enough reserve to tie me over. And that is also something to consider really...it's a double whammy right? First you're not getting your receipts, and then here you are having to make additional expenditures....  
(Cathy: *Communications; non WSQ; 7 years*)

Barry found that financial savings and discipline were not common among the trainers he knew. His approach, however, was to think of himself as his own boss and put money towards insurance and savings. Barry's approach to his finances was informed by a long established practice of saving money. He learnt how to prepare himself through researching various plans and thinking about what a boss needs to do for their employees. In contrast, a less established participant felt she could not contribute towards her own financial planning until she was more established. Although the vast majority of participants did not talk about investing their finances for the future, a number did share that they bought insurance plans, invested in the stock market, and intended to buy property one day.

### Client approach

Freelance work presents an ironic juxtaposition between the urge to build a strong relationship with a core provider/client versus protecting oneself from such heavy dependence on a single client.

I have particularly heard of a few people who depended on one vendor...they kind of get carried away by that and then suddenly...work stops and they had no money and they kind of struggling. (Karthik: *Leadership; non WSQ; 3.5 years*)

Developing a strong relationship with a core provider can be a strategy that provides a more stable income in the short term, while having a wider client base requires more effort, but offers greater long-term security against market changes. The data generally indicate that freelance trainers, particularly those in the WSQ, were enticed by the stability of a good relationship with a core provider, but were cautious of this employment strategy's drawback in an unpredictable market.

### Flexibility and juggling

Regardless of how many clients a freelancer takes, the unpredictability of the work requires flexibility. This is often an expectation of freelancers (especially those who want to spend more time with their family, be their own boss, or are retirees), but flexibility on the client/provider side often extends only to scheduling. This indicates that flexibility is

less straightforward in reality, and requires the skill to juggle work and family commitments.

Our participants in both the WSQ and private markets were able to pick and choose their work assignments, basing their choices on their other time commitments, matching their personal values or maximising their earning potential. But when the need to earn money, the pressure to secure work and the unspoken rules of freelance training became evident, true freedom and flexibility could come at a high price. Once an assignment was accepted, flexibility and freedom only applied, within reason, to development work.

...my father used to be in and out of hospital...but I found that I can just bring my work along...and when he is discharged, then I continue the teaching. (Tian Yun: Childcare; WSQ; 5 years)

My working time could be anytime in the day, after my kids sleep then I start to prepare for my classes, do my assignments and grading... (Francine: Communications; non WSQ; 6 years)

Regarding delivery work, however, our data indicate that freelance trainers who were sole proprietors or worked for continuing education providers (including ATOs) rarely cancelled a training session once it was confirmed – even if they were sick.

I've been donning (a) mask to classes before....Needless to say there's no such idea where you have a reserve pool of trainers within the company who does nothing but just to wait for (you) to get sick. (Terrence: *Literacy*; WSQ; 6 years)

That's the last thing you want to happen, to fall sick on training days...there's a lot of recovery...because they (the learners) must graduate... (Qui Ling: *Retail, Service Excellence, ESS*; WSQ & non WSQ; 13years)

This situation was largely linked to two reasons. Firstly, a trainer cannot control how a replacement may perform, and they may disrupt the class and require damage control, especially in cases where assessment is involved. The idea of needing a replacement is uncomfortable for many freelancers as it invites competition to their work, and jeopardises their reputation as a reliable and responsible trainer. Trainers who have spent time developing and preparing their work are particularly hesitant, as they are attached to their content and have already done most of the work (which will go unpaid if they do not deliver).

The second reason is related to logistics. It takes a lot of work to organise training sessions so that the learners can be released from their work and attend a programme. The consequences for rescheduling or cancelling a training session can be very high not only for the trainer's reputation, but also affects the relationship with the client and learners. Freelance trainers interviewed learnt about this largely through sensing the

work environment or expectations of providers/clients, hearing stories of what happened to other trainers when they cancelled sessions and reflecting on the amount of work already put in to a training session.

A number of our participants found arrangements that provided both a degree of flexibility and stability by working on annual part-time contracts with continuing education providers or institutes of higher learning. In these arrangements, full-time staff were available as backup replacements.

So it is best of two worlds ...so I suggested and they also work on part-time basis so I am with them...on a contract basis.... (Lata: *TTT; WSQ & non WSQ; 9 years*)

Freelance training you can't. The minute you're training you have to be there...if the child is sick, you cannot say sorry I call in sick. That is not responsible. You have learners waiting for you. I think part-time is ideal for people with young children, because they get sick all the time. (Tabitha: *TTT; WSQ; 8 years*)

In general, such arrangements, however, are not easy to find and may not be attractive for people who want to have a higher earning capacity.

### Schedule management

Being able to schedule well is crucial for engaging multiple clients and having a flexible lifestyle. Few freelance trainers, however, are able to organise their schedules too far into the future, although the trainers who are more sought after, or those who work with large organisations (such as a polytechnic), have more stable schedules.

More common, however, are jobs that may take a couple of hours, days, or just be a one-off workshop. Some clients may book a trainer's time months in advance, while others may give very little notice. Even when time is booked in advance, a trainer may find the training cancelled at the last minute.

The pay rate is also an important factor when deciding which jobs to take. Terrence would not take classes that paid a lower rate because they required just as much work and spoilt the market.

You are asked to do a lower rate. That's the reason why I decline some of the classes. I don't find it worthwhile for my time...But there are other trainers within that outfit who will go on and take. In Singapore there is a local term I think you might be familiar with. We call it "spoil the market". (Terrence: *Literacy; WSQ; 6 years*)

With jobs coming in from different clients and with different levels of certainty, some trainers face the "happy problem" of having clashes in their timetable. Negotiating this can impact a trainer's projected earnings and reputation. Keegan recently experienced moving his schedule around for an existing booking, only to find this booking rescheduled to another time. After this, he became very cautious of confirming dates

before rearranging other clients.

Overall, planning skills were strongest for the more established private freelance trainers interviewed. Those who exited full-time employment by choice, and who had held upper management positions, were the most likely to have exit plans. They also talked about their occupation as a potentially lucrative one and carried out financial planning. Their ability to engage a wide client base and juggle flexibility with commitment also seemed well developed. The other types of trainers rarely talked about having exit plans, unless they had previous experience as full-time trainers, which gave them realistic expectations. Income was talked about as being unpredictable and often unappealing, and although the importance of financial planning was acknowledged, it is a low priority, particularly for less established freelance trainers, retirees, and people with caring duties who relied on their family for stability. Freelance trainers who worked at least partly in the WSQ system or with public sector training institutions (PSTIs) often developed a dependence on one provider, which was talked about as comforting but high risk.

### *Continual networking*

The importance of a functional network cannot be underestimated for freelance adult educators. There are two aspects to networking: being a part of a functional network and maintaining and growing this network to counter the effects of absence and time. People who enter training with weak networks often resort to cold calling, but soon find this approach ineffective.

Among the participants, there were apparent differences in the types of networks and the strategies to build and maintain networks between the more experienced freelancers who operated at least partly in the private market and those less experienced or in the WSQ-only market. These latter types talked about smaller networks of friends often developed from personal relationships, through a course such as ACTA or through course coordinators who managed work engagements. It was common for a friend to recommend training as a possible occupation but these networks seemed to have limited outreach. Caution about handling contacts was also expressed as poaching or feeling obliged to accept less gratifying work were real problems. The more established freelance trainers tended to have wider and more powerful networks, often leveraging on previous careers, but also built through proactive strategies directed at useful contacts. Marketing agents were mentioned as important members of networks, along with other professional contacts who operated in similar but distinct subject areas. These freelance trainers also had strategies on how to maintain their networks and keep good favour through billing strategies and never being out of sight for too long.

The networks freelance trainers had when they left full-time employment could help in lining up assignments if they included the right people. Freelance trainers who offered services related to their previous work had stronger networks to leverage on while others had to figure out how to befriend the right people.

How you get to the level of clients again depends on where you were before you left. If you weren't very high up in the hierarchy and you didn't have that network up and going, so when you left, you will not reach that level of clientele as easily. (Debra: *Creative Thinking, TTT; WSQ & non WSQ; 16 years*)

Apart from leveraging on existing networks, Kiew pointed out the importance for a freelance trainer to be proactive. Trainers operating in the private market also emphasised the importance of involvement in communities, events, professional associations (such as STADA), professional development courses and working with agents to build a powerful network. The key idea expressed here is to know people who can open doors for you.

You have to go out and get your clients...So you have to get to know people (Kiew: *Retail, TTT; WSQ & non WSQ; 30 years*)

Relationships that help a freelance trainer get work are built over time and stem from common interests, repeat exposure and proving oneself. The riskiest type of network to have is one with rival freelance adult educators who offer similar products, which has limited trust due to the competitive nature of the job market.

Interestingly, participants did not identify social media as a useful way to network. One marketing agent, though, said that he was "seriously using social media platforms to actually reach out to trainers", both locally and internationally.

Even freelance adult educators who enter the training market with a strong network need to continually renew and adjust their relationships to remain useful. For example, Debra found that she became friends with many of her clients and used festive times of the year to pop in, refresh their memory and find out if anything interesting was going on. Kelvin talked about how he ensured his relationship with a key administrator remained on good terms.

...even when she makes a mistake, I will say you must be very busy, you overlooked this and said "ha ha", instead of saying "mistake again" ...Because I have (heard of) occasions where friends, training colleagues, offended the coordinator and their classes (stopped). (Kelvin: *ESS, TTT, Life Skills, Search Engine Marketing; WSQ & non WSQ; 10 years*)

Jobs acquired through contacts require freelance trainers to be mindful of behaving appropriately as both their contacts' and their own reputations are at stake. In Bashir's case, in order to help his network remain useful, he was careful about how he charged

for his time. Not charging for various meetings was his strategy to build good favour and potentially get more work.

There are different strategies freelance trainers use to maintain their networks, including being diplomatic and friendly to being careful about billing. Something that all freelance trainers seem to agree on is that integrity is vital, and stealing clients is a sure way to destroy a relationship.

### *Positioning*

Being able to position yourself and your products within the training market is important for a freelance trainer to get financially and/or intrinsically rewarding jobs. This involves the choice of offering generalist products or specialising in a particular area, and ideally, carving out a niche market. An aspect of this choice is the potential to build a brand or good reputation so that clients can identify or seek your services. Another part of positioning is looking at past experiences to assess whether or not you are a credible source for a particular product.

In general, WSQ-only trainers we interviewed displayed the weakest skills in positioning themselves as viable businesses in the market. They talked very little about specialising or the importance of finding a niche market, unless it was in the work they did outside adult education. Their reputations were largely based on learner feedback and making sure they were not bothersome to their clients, and their credibility was strengthened through repeat exposure to the same programme or putting on a front to appear credible to their learners. The less established private freelancers also illustrated a struggle in identifying a niche area, either talking about going through a period of discovery or finding it difficult to pinpoint an area they could focus on with credibility. Some felt that having a niche or a brand was too limiting, and credibility was bolstered by credentials. Freelance adult educators who operated in both the WSQ and private markets acknowledged the value of having a specialisation, but also talked about specialising in numerous areas. This was an interesting strategy, but one which also required a long work history and diverse investment. Reputation was built through the quality of their work, and credibility was developed through their interactions with learners, accreditation and work experience. Those who were established in the private market found that having a niche was crucial, and they could tap on tools and licenses to help them shape their place in the market. Reputation building was a conscious effort that required continual work and needed to be sustainable (meaning it could not be “fake”). Having credibility was a part of freelancers’ ethical code, and developing credibility took time, effort and sincerity. The adult educators who operated in both the WSQ and private markets and those established in the private market would refer a contact for a job if it was not in their area of expertise. Those who were less established or who operated only in the WSQ markets, however, were more likely to take on such jobs. The following subsections go into more detail of each aspect of positioning.

## Generalist or specialist

Having a niche or specialising can be crucial for gaining an edge in a competitive training market. Trainers who specialise in a single area make a higher return on their work as they get paid for face time, their preparation work gets shorter as the content becomes more familiar and customisation becomes natural. Specialists with niche products are also more likely to be able to tap into the higher end of the training market.

...the product that I am selling is getting so commercialised. In our line when we sell consultancy or sell training packages, it is always the niche that give you the best value.  
(Xavier: *Quality Management Systems; WSQ & non WSQ; 20 years*)

Trainers with a niche developed this through sensing the market, reflecting on their experiences and interests, sourcing particular licenses and looking to gurus or other high-flying speakers/trainers at the international level for inspiration. Trainers specialising in more foundational subjects may have difficulties tapping into the higher end of the market, but they can still build sound expertise and a strong reputation within the field they operate.

Most trainers, particularly those in the private market, go through a “figuring out” period, taking assignments in many subject areas. This can serve the purpose of experimenting, refining, finding a new challenge or fulfilling the need to take whatever paid assignments are available. Training as a generalist is more common in the lower-paying end of the training market and may not be very cost effective. Offering training in various subjects also means that each new topic requires more preparation work.

... the problem is the income is not regular....And when I get the job assignment I have to spend time preparing...So I take two weeks to prepare for one-two day training. Then you get another assignment two months later, a different module. By the time I get back the same module it's probably six months later which I've forgotten what I have trained six months back. So I find that the return on investment on time isn't there...because I'm only paid for that two days of contact time... (Tabitha: *TTT; WSQ; 20 years*)

For both novices and veterans, the decision to specialise or generalise has consequences for their reputation, work flow and effective use of time. It might be the case that some trainers have little choice but to offer training in various subjects. While some trainers justify this as good practice for professional growth, others see it as weakening their credibility and their chances of creating a niche service.

## Branding and reputation

Similar to having a niche, branding and reputation can help clients distinguish between trainers and identify who they want to engage. Developing a brand can also provide an identity marker for a freelance trainer, related to the disposition of having a strong sense

of self (being anchored). On the other hand, trainers may find focusing on branding a distraction from the work they want to do. For example, after a couple of years, Karthik decided formal branding should not be his core focus if he wanted to be happy. He detached himself from people who focused on branding and only took work he enjoyed, whether it came under his company or someone else's. Being true to his intrinsic motivation was a "personal" brand he preferred to focus on.

Clearly not every trainer may want to build a brand in the formal sense (with a logo, letter head, etc.), but if they are getting work, they will develop a reputation. This becomes personal branding. A positive reputation can mean repeat assignments or getting work through word of mouth.

How the client finds us - through word of mouth (Kiew: *Retail, TTT; WSQ & non WSQ; 30 years*)

Evans found that researching and making sure he was knowledgeable about his field was the key to having a good reputation. But a negative reputation can drastically threaten a training career.

Everything is about reputation actually...it's basically branding. So if people say that this trainer sucks for example, than you've had it, that's it. Then no one's going to touch you. (Evans: *Marketing; WSQ & non WSQ; 14 years*)

...on average they say you have to score above 3.8...if you got lower than that, you know the answer, you won't get jobs from them. (Keith: *ESS, IT; WSQ; 7 years*)

A reputation is unavoidable in an industry where student feedback and client satisfaction lead to positive or negative reviews. These reviews impact the next assignments a trainer can get. Developing and maintaining a reputation is an ongoing process throughout the career of a freelance trainer. Debra found that positive word of mouth evaporates quickly unless clients are reminded of what you offer.

Although the idea of building a brand in a formal sense was questioned by some participants as being restrictive and hard work, it is clear that developing a good personal brand or reputation is key to a successful freelance career. As each job is like an interview for freelance trainers, developing a good reputation can be the difference between getting work and becoming unemployable.

### Credibility

Working in tandem with branding/reputation and a freelance trainer's choice of products is their credibility. The majority of freelance trainers enter the field with years of working experience, but not all trainers find it easy to establish their credibility. This is especially the case for those who offer generic products and/or have weaker networks. Conducting training pro bono is a common strategy for trainers to prove their worth. Another



common strategy is investing in formal qualifications to assure potential clients of their expertise. This is important as Lata found that even though she was willing to train for free initially, clients remained unwilling to give her a chance.

So for almost good six months, I was...even offering people that you don't need to pay me a single cent...But no one is forthcoming. (Lata: *TTT; WSQ & non WSQ; 9 years*)

The data suggest that it is challenging to gain opportunities even without pay. Participants who were able to conduct free training offered more specialised skill sets and found these assignments required more emotional and physical work. For some trainers, these work arrangements were impractical, exploitative and not always useful for gaining future assignments. For others, though, they provided a chance to give back to the community or to experiment with new ideas. However, offering free training did not seem to be a reliable strategy for many novice trainers to establish credibility.

Some experienced trainers recommended doing a course such as ACTA as a good starting point to gain credibility for someone with weak mobility capital. A lot of trainers interviewed felt that doing ACTA was necessary for getting work.

...the reasons I took ACTA was because it offered a door, a foothold through the door for more work. Because a lot of programmes were WSQ certified. (Steven: *Hospitality; WSQ & non WSQ; 5 years*)

Trainers without any formal pedagogic qualifications often found that ACTA provided a professional language and guidelines on how training should be done. This helped them feel more confident when they offered their services.

More seasoned trainers might complete ACTA just in case they required it, but they were reluctant to reveal their ACTA qualification as it might damage their professional image. Many trainers also felt that ACTA gave inexperienced trainers unrealistic hopes of getting work. They found it too prescriptive which caused them to be sceptical about its value.

But ACTA has now become a big joke in the industry because even taxi drivers have got ACTA. I'm not kidding you...I've seen a lot of people who's got ACTA...And I was telling myself is this the standards that we're looking at? ...A lot of people have got the ACTA certification. But there's no job. (Evans: *Marketing; WSQ & non WSQ; 14 years*)

I like the ACTA program, it's very structured, basic but unfortunately the implementation was, I call, not professional. I attend one (session) where it tells us that training is very easy, it's like chao hor fun. Just repeat session after session. (Zeng Gong: *Finance, Leadership; non WSQ; 17 years*)

Presently, besides ACTA, there are many other formal qualifications from master's programmes to specific licenses that freelance trainers may take to improve their

credibility. But participants also expressed reservations about the practical value of such programmes in the interviews. Tian Yun explained that although such qualifications, despite being helpful, might not necessarily get you more work. The practice of trying to establish credibility through offering free training and investing in formal qualifications illustrates that it is difficult for a freelance trainer to prove the value of their past experiences unless they come “paper certified”.

For freelance trainers to be able to position themselves in the market as professional and mobile, they need to know what products they can offer, how to build a reputation of quality and how to illustrate their credibility. Key to this is using reflection and research to constantly realign and refine products, making value of past experiences and learning from contacts about how the various markets function.

### *Shape shifting*

The nature of freelance training means that diversity is common in terms of: learners, content, environments, colleagues and clients. It is necessary for freelance trainers to learn to assess or read the people and environments they encounter in their work so that they behave appropriately, negotiate expectations and deliver. In general, most trainers in both the WSQ and private markets interviewed felt confident when it came to reading their learners and adapting to the unexpected in the classroom.

...you have all kinds of participants...it can be daunting and challenging...And not to say about some logistics hiccups you face. So I grow along the way, but I suppose I already had several years of training under my arm...you just grow, and you learn and adapt to the different situations. (Qui Ling: *Retail, Service Excellence, ESS; WSQ & non WSQ; 13 years*)

The light goes off and you have to do something. You must have a contingency plan...Sometimes they don't have proper seating...We say for this kind we need group work, so capacity between 20-30 trainees...But when I arrived, my goodness! 60 of them! In Vietnam worse, 120!...so you have to start scrambling around... (Chong Min: *Leadership, TTT; non WSQ; 40 years*)

Most freelance trainers took reading diverse learners and adapting to different environments as a part of who they were as trainers. But dealing with private clients offered different challenges, be it managing clients who did not know what they wanted (Debra), learning to take a softer approach (Chong Min) or taking a firmer approach to attempt a change of mindset and potentially losing a client (Karthik). From the data, it is evident that these skills are crucial for trainers in the private market and are often learnt through trial and error and interacting with peers who are familiar with similar types of clients.

The skill of shape shifting most clearly brings into focus the impact of the working environment on how a freelance adult educator can operate. As freelancers have no control of the organisations and operating systems in which they work, it can be difficult to know how to shape shift to position a product for optimising job offers. Many freelance trainers feel there is little transparency on how assignments are allocated and on what basis one trainer is chosen over another. Learner feedback is thought to be very important, but some people feel there is an inner circle of people who are given preference by coordinators, while the “outliers” are ignored. Although this relationship is discussed as an important part of a network, it seems that it can also be viewed as unethical when work should be allocated based on the most suitable candidate.

If this is going to the ears of the WDA policy makers, maybe it helps to let them understand to a deeper and greater extent. There’s no control of what the company does...I honestly don’t know, how they assign, to be frank. Because I’m not at the other end. (Terrence: *Literacy; WSQ; 6 years*)

Some trainers felt that things were going well with a provider or client and then suddenly found they stopped getting assignments. Such incidents can leave freelancers confused and with no explanation to help them understand the system better.

Sometimes it’s beyond us. The organisation suddenly they won’t call you. (Evans: *Marketing; WSQ & non WSQ; 14 years*)

Another systemic practice that freelancers are subjected to is the requirement for government departments to see a minimum number of tenders before they select a provider.

...you know they have this game that they play...government departments, they want to appear to be transparent, they want to make sure they have seen a number of vendors and they don’t get enough vendors they will call people to meet so that they can log in that I have met this person. (Debra: *Creative Thinking, TTT; WSQ & non WSQ; 16 years*)

Such practices illustrate little respect for a freelancer’s time and effort, and those unaware of this “game” do not know how to guard themselves against it. In our interviews, Karthik and Bagus also mentioned racial preferences as another element beyond their control. In the market that Karthik was most interested in, he had come across instances of not getting an assignment because the client wanted a Caucasian facilitator. Bagus also felt that being Malay meant he had trouble getting work in a Chinese-dominated market.

“Sorry, we want an Ang Moh (Caucasian) facilitator” because the perception is that Ang Mohs have more impact and more of a wow factor. (Karthik: *Leadership; non WSQ; 3.5 years*)

Such practices that exist at the client/provider level and at a systemic level stifle the ability of freelance adult educators to practice professionally and understand the systems in which they operate. Some freelance trainers seem better at dealing with these issues than others. From our data, the freelance trainers who operated only in the private market were proactive in seeking information on their potential clients and learners. They developed an innate ability to sense different vibes through gaining a variety of experiences and leveraging on their past experiences of how organisations operate. WSQ and private freelancers also displayed reasonable shape-shifting skills and talked about the importance of being a chameleon and understanding different cultures (particularly for international work). This was an ongoing challenge, however, because with each new job, they became a new trainer. Both these types of trainers had stronger networks they could leverage on to understand how to negotiate within their operating environments. The WSQ-only and less established private trainers interviewed felt comfortable adapting to different types of learners, but found it difficult to understand how CET centres or potential clients operated or valued freelance adult educators.

### *Innovation*

Not only do different environments affect how a freelance adult educator can operate, they also allow for and encourage different levels of innovation. In the private market (particularly the higher end), the ability to innovate was often a part of a freelancer’s brand or reputation. For others, innovation was a very subtle aspect of their work, and was limited to tweaking existing materials or not repeating the same activity too many times. Established private freelance trainers (unless they worked in a polytechnic) revelled in being creative and needing to constantly customise and reinvent products so they were attractive and relevant to clients. On a professional level, too, they were uncomfortable following guides and emphasised the importance of developing their own materials. Although they acknowledged that being truly innovative takes time, effort, and collaboration, it was one aspect of their job that they found to be very rewarding in a fast-changing world.

So then I can start reading it a bit, researching a bit, talking to people and looking into my toolkit and see what I want and pull things together...my personal experience has been less dependency on content. Content has absolutely no value when you move into the organizational change... (Karthik: *Leadership; non WSQ; 3.5 years*)

Less experienced private trainers talked more about using guides and existing materials which they tweaked (except one who felt that for the subject of organisational change dependence on content was suicide). They also discovered that not all clients were open to trying innovative methods. Those who worked solely or partially in the WSQ market focused on the limiting nature of competency-based curriculums for innovation and the need to follow guides. They also perceived a general sentiment of fear and lack of sharing which limited collaborative learning important for innovation. Some found the guides a comforting crutch that made their jobs a lot easier. On the other hand, freelancers who also worked in the private market adopted a more creative approach and developed ways to cover the curriculum without sticking to the book. For trainers who talked of their work as a craft, these constraints to innovation make training in the WSQ system unappealing in most instances. Interestingly, one marketing agent found he needed to rely on international trainers for innovative and unique training products as most Singaporean trainers were uninterested in developing something outside the box. This was especially the case for freelance trainers who entered the market after the introduction of the WSQ system and found it difficult to move away from competency-based training and the use of guides.

## Summary

Our data indicate that it is beneficial for a freelance adult educator to develop the dispositions of being passionate, anchored, resilient and a permanent learner. These dispositions can help minimise fragmentation and provide a central driving force for professional ethics and actions. Building on these dispositions are skills such as planning, continual networking, positioning, shape shifting and innovation. The data indicate a significant interplay between these dispositions and skills, and that learning through experience, interaction and reflection is how a freelance adult educator comes to embody these elements. The form and degree that this embodiment takes, however, is negotiated with the environments (markets, systems, organisations) that provide a context for the individual to interpret what it means to “be” a freelance adult educator in Singapore.

# Discussion & implications

---

When it comes to learning how to be a freelance adult educator, it is clear that interaction, experience, and reflection are very important and are intertwined into the many aspects of this work. These ways of learning may occur through formally structured courses, but to a large extent, happen through previous work experience, the experience of seeking, delivering, and refining work as a freelancer, interacting with clients, learners, other adult educators, and contacts from other industries, and to a reasonable extent reflecting on personal practice/experiences with the intent to improve future practice. This suggests that learning through work is crucial for freelance adult educators, yet challenges to such opportunities arise due to the nature of this occupation. The following discusses the findings and their implications for freelance adult educators and the system.

The motivations for trying to freelance as an adult educator vary from attempts at work-life balance, retirement and recovering from redundancy to pursuing adult education as a career focus and the challenge of being your own boss. This variety means that some freelance adult educators have stronger skills than others and more drive to hunt for work and hone in on the development of professional skills while others may be content with small and “safe” snippets of work that they can deliver easily.

















As well as motivational differences, the nature of freelance work means that the workplace expands over multiple sites, and colleagues are temporary, guarded, and largely invisible. This has implications for a freelancers’ ability to understand how different environments operate, what the needs of a client may be, how to position their product and also how to develop a contingency plan against likely obstacles. There are also implications here for clients (including providers). Each time they engage a new freelancer, that person must figure out all of the above before she can be productive. Yet once the project is completed, the knowledge of operating with the organisation/team goes with the freelancer. The client organisation is unable to pass that learning onto the next freelancer who will have to start from scratch.



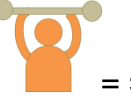
Adding to this challenge is how most freelance adult educators find their occupation a lonely one, and issues of competition can make open sharing high risk with people who offer similar products. This isolation also makes it difficult for adult educators to know where they stand in the wider market, how they compare with other trainers and who they can reach to for genuine support, which could help turn reflective thinking into transformational action.

With these challenges in mind, the below tables present an attempt to summarise the types of dispositions and skills that are necessary to navigate the “liquid life” of a

freelance adult educator, and also indicate the extent to which freelancers in different markets (captured by this study) possess these elements. These are dispositions and skills that are on top of those required by all adult educators (pedagogic and subject), and focus on the question of how to be a *freelance* adult educator. It should also be noted that there is significant interplay between these elements. The purpose of this table is to help compare and identify possible gaps that the recommendations can help address. The private-only freelancers are split into two groups here because of apparent differences between more established adult educators (those with more than five years of experience) and those trying to establish themselves (who have five years or less experience).

**Table 1: Dispositions of freelance adult educators**

Disposition	WSQ	Both WSQ and private	Private (established)	Private (less established)
Passionate				
Anchored				
Resilient				
Permanent Learner				

Key:  = weak  = okay  = strong

Overall, our freelance trainers seem to be well placed in terms of having developed the dispositions that will help them in their freelancing endeavours. This is important as the extent to which learning takes place is dependent on an individual's dispositions (Grusec and Goodnow, 1994). All the participants talked about passion in one form or another, using it for slightly different purposes depending on the challenges they faced, within the systems they worked. This implies that passion as a mantra for freelance trainers is well established as the difficulties they face necessitate it.

In terms of being anchored to avoid fragmentation, experience, reflection, and professional necessity seem to be key. In the private market, it is necessary to know who you are, which is related to the skill of positioning and the nature of the market. Most experienced trainers have gone through a time of figuring this out, which the less established ones seem to be going through now. The reason why WSQ-only trainers

may exhibit less coherent “senses of self” could be because the system does not demand it, and the motivations of these freelancers (in this study) are less tied to professional career drivers and more related to personal circumstances (for example, family or retirement).

The story for resilience is similar. Personal doubt and uncertainties about credibility and how work is allocated can reduce the resilience of the WSQ-only and less established freelancers. Being anchored and resilient seem particularly low for people who enter freelance training after being made redundant.

The disposition of being a permanent learner is reasonably strong across the board, which is likely related to the centrality of learning for this occupation. The effort of turning “everything as a learning experience” into transformational actions, however, is less evident, largely due to time and/or a lack of support and motivation for truly reflective practice.

While the above dispositions seem to be reasonably well developed across the board, the skills of freelancing appear to be less well developed, particularly for the WSQ and less established private trainers. The following discusses why this might be the case.

**Table 2: Skills of freelance adult educators**

Skill	WSQ	Both WSQ and private	Private (established)	Private (un-established)
Planning				
Continual networker				
Positioning you and your product				
Shape shifter				
Innovative				

Key: = weak = okay = strong

These findings suggest that WSQ and less established freelance trainers have weaker planning skills and a poorer understanding of how to operate as a freelance trainer. This seems to be related to both experience in previous careers, as well as experience negotiating (both internally and professionally) as a freelance trainer. These skills are



very important, however, as they can impact one's confidence in the decision to freelance, as well as one's reputation and ability to attract and retain clients.

With small networks, high chances of direct competition and few proactive strategies, WSQ and less-established private trainers are again in a weaker position to be highly mobile freelancers. Although formal platforms and social media exist for networking purposes, their functional usage seems limited. This implies either that they are not marketed effectively or are unable to offer the right connections. Motivations to engage these platforms may be low or there are obstacles within these networks that are difficult for less experienced trainers to break through. The lack of a collaborative culture and the difficulty some freelancers have in proving themselves also make it difficult for more inclusive networks to exist.

The implications for having poor positioning skills are felt mostly at the individual level as it makes it hard to know how to market your products and compete with credibility. It also affects a client's ability to judge whether you are worth engaging. On top of this, planning for professional development becomes more difficult without an area to focus on, which increases the risk of wasting resources and threatens professional integrity.

Shape-shifting skills determine the ease with which freelance trainers can navigate the diversity they come across. These skills also have implications for clients and providers, mainly because they help freelancers link a product to client needs and deliver it appropriately. The longer a freelance trainer takes to "figure out" a client, or the less transparent a client is, the more difficult a trainer's job becomes in terms of providing something meaningful.

The weaker innovative skills demonstrated by the WSQ and less experienced freelancers indicate that the system (including expectations of clients/providers) can easily stifle innovation and potentially encourage complacency among trainers with limited professional aspirations and standards. The impetus to put the effort into innovation and customisation seemed lacking in these freelancers, raising questions about reward structures, internal motivations and the types of products they can offer. The skill and drive to innovate are an important aspect of professional gratification for more experienced freelance trainers, and also point out the crucial relationship between development and delivery for more responsive products.

Overall, it seems that motivations, experience, strong networks and having access to more challenging, creative jobs are crucial for the development of the dispositions freelancers need, particularly the skills highlighted by this study. These factors are much more prevalent for freelance trainers who only operate in the private market or in combination with WSQ work. This suggests that the system and the individual's ability to negotiate with it are crucial. Our WSQ trainers have more personal than professional motivations and experience fewer "stretch" opportunities as they operate in a system that:

- is difficult for them to read,
- has an isolating, closed and competitive culture,
- demands competency rather than excellence,
- separates the roles of development work, delivery and assessment (encourages “stand and regurgitate” practices),
- offers small, but generally more stable, financial rewards and
- does not value creativity or innovation.

Our less experienced private trainers have trouble figuring out who they are and how their experience can help them, making it hard to negotiate with a system that:

- is difficult to understand without experience
- is made up of a diverse group of people who are generally cautious with whom they interact
- values image, reputation and credibility,
- requires proactive networking with the right people,
- includes both “transactional” and “stretch” opportunities,
- demands value for money,
- requires deeper skill sets to do development, delivery and customisation work,
- is meant to be financially attractive, but is not always so (rates often remain stagnant and do not keep up with inflation) and
- encourages the ability to be innovative for those who want to be.

Although the above emphasise the need to address WSQ and less experienced trainers, it does not mean the other types of freelance trainers perceive themselves as having “the complete package”, without further need of improvement. If anything, the more experienced freelancers are always striving to improve themselves, and importantly, seem to have the dispositions and skills to do so. The challenges they focus on, and they could benefit with external help here, are more related to difficulty accessing existing funding mechanisms for either their own businesses or for clients to get subsidies for high profile/non-WSQ training.

## Summary

The above mentioned dispositions and skills have been raised in our data as useful for freelance trainers who want to pursue their freelancing endeavours as viable and rewarding professions. These are learnt largely through experience, interaction, and reflection, which are related to the opportunities they have to develop their craft. These opportunities are influenced by the products they have the ability to offer and the environments they work in (including different organisational cultures, competency-based, non-competency based, WSQ, and/ or free market systems). While the individual freelance adult educator is most directly affected by the acquisition of these dispositions and skills in terms of getting work and gaining professional satisfaction,

there are also implications for their clients, including providers, and the system. The environments that clients/providers create for freelancers can enhance the freelancer's contribution or limit it, make it easier or more difficult for a freelancer to understand their needs, and how to work and encourage sharing, collaboration, and innovation or a guarded and isolated working culture. At a systemic level also, a free market seems more able to encourage responsiveness and professionalism, where clients expect more from the freelance adult educators they engage, while a system that focuses on standardisation has a different agenda that may, on the one hand, expect a certain level of competency from their adult educators, but on the other hand, does not seem to encourage or reward those who strive for more. This is not to say, however, that all opportunities in the free market are equally rewarding. The final section of this paper makes some recommendations to address the above raised issues.

# Recommendations

---

The apparent gap in dispositions and, particularly, skills between the different types of freelance adult educators, raises the following pedagogic and institutional recommendations:

## Pedagogic Recommendations

- Disseminate more information on what it is like to freelance as an adult educator in the various markets to potential entrants before they invest their time and money in starting out.
- Provide support to help freelance adult educators create meaningful, goal-oriented and actionable professional development plans that emphasise learning through interaction, experience and reflection.
- Support “stretch” (challenging learning) opportunities for adult educators to work with partners on collaborative projects across different settings.

## Institutional Recommendations

- Encourage professional qualities by creating a system that values adult educators who can work creatively and autonomously within the WSQ System or the free market.
- Foster conducive and collaborative working cultures that include freelancers, and help them understand how to operate meaningfully. This includes understanding the challenges and demands freelancers face when they work with an organisation.
- Reduce the division of labour between design, delivery, and assessment roles to encourage deeper professional knowledge, wider and more marketable skill sets, and higher quality professional practice of adult educators.

# Appendix 1: methods

---

## Sample

For this study, we were interested in collecting qualitative data from current freelance adult educators in Singapore. The selection criteria for participation are detailed in Table 3. In view of the immense diversity within adult education, conducting face-to-face training was seen as an important selection criterion in order to gain some commonalities across the participants.

**Table 3: Selection Criteria**

<b>Inclusion</b>	<b>Exclusion</b>
Currently consider themselves as freelancers or sole proprietors	Currently in ongoing permanent employment
Face-to-face training as at least one aspect of their employment	Only designing curriculum or conducting assessment/ not conducting any face-to-face training.
Singaporean or permanent resident	Non-Singaporean or permanent resident

We were also interested in including freelance adult educators from a range of industries, salary brackets and from the private and/or WSQ (Workforce Skills Qualification Frameworks) markets. To access this range, multiple sources were approached to invite participants for interviews.

With the intention of involving 30 participants, we have not attempted to get a random sample or one that can claim representation of freelance adult educators in Singapore as a whole. Rather, we hope that by intentionally selecting participants from a range of situations, the research will contain a good variety of stories, both successes and struggles, which can illuminate divergent and common issues for further consideration

In addition to freelance adult educators, we also interviewed a small number of providers in order to gain a better understanding of the landscape.

A reference group consisting of industry stakeholders was also formed in order to gather feedback on the initial findings.

## Data collection

Data collection was conducted through face-to-face interviews with each participant. Four participants were contacted for further information over the phone two months after their interviews. Six initial interviews were conducted in November 2012 while the others were conducted between June and October 2013. The first six face-to-face interviews were conducted by two interviewers while the subsequent ones were conducted by a single interviewer. Interviews were largely conducted at the Institute for Adult Learning, and to a lesser extent in cafes, depending on what was convenient for participants. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

## Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data. This involved developing a coding frame, coding the data and abstracting the text to form themes and arguments. The codes were not developed to capture literal instances of the interviewee mentioning a specific topic, but were rather developed in an effort to capture the *meaning* of the interviewee's talk in the context of the research project. Operating on this level of abstraction, analysis required a very close reading of the interviews and discouraged merely coding literal utterances, which is often a criticism of thematic analysis (Silverman, 2005). Analysis was conducted in the following stages:

1. A preliminary coding frame was shaped by initial "literal" readings of the first six transcripts, the field notes and individual coding of four transcripts – one per researcher.
2. At this point, the coding frame was abstracted to a higher level through returning to the research questions and relevant literature, which allowed the resulting coding frame to provide a more conceptual and interpretive lens to the data. Multiple coding of one transcript was conducted to refine the explicit definitions of the codes so they were not interchangeable or redundant (Attride-Stirling, 2001).
3. With the refined coding frame, the remaining transcripts were divided among the researchers and coded.
4. The segments of text for each code were then analysed to inform the findings of this study.
5. Another round of analysis was conducted after the reference group to elicit the more specific differences and similarities between the types of participants. This involved running matrix coding of the coded data against the classifications of the participants and capturing the ways that the different adult educators talked about a particular theme. These were then compared in tables as can be seen in the findings section.

# Appendix 2: work arrangements

The work arrangements for freelance trainers can vary dramatically. Table 4 presents the three main work arrangements that the participants have experienced. Some of them work within a single type of arrangement while others' work involve two or three work arrangements. Nine of the participants also supplement their incomes with non-training related work. The purpose of this table is to provide a brief understanding of the different expectations, requirements and resources that freelance trainers meet depending on the types of work they (try to) engage in.

**Table 4 Work Arrangements**

	Adjunct/ associate with one or more providers (ATO/PEI/PSTEI)	Part-timer with PSEIs (Polytechnic, University)	Sole proprietor with corporate clients
Need to source clients	<b>Yes</b> (provider as client)	<b>Yes</b> (PSEI as client)	<b>Yes</b> (corporate businesses/ learners as client)
Content development	<b>Not always necessary</b> (tweaking optional; non-WSQ may require development work)	<b>Not necessary</b> (tweaking optional)	<b>Necessary</b>
Need to provide resources (training room, projector, paper, markers etc.)	<b>Not normally</b> (usually provided and organised by provider, but extent of resources depends on the provider)	<b>No</b> (provided by institutions)	<b>Yes</b> (may be able to draw on client)
Flexibility to determine schedule	<b>High</b> (if offered assignment, can choose to take or leave it)	<b>Medium</b> (can negotiate the workload for the semester)	<b>High</b> (if a deal is closed, can negotiate the schedule of training programme)
Flexibility to change schedule/ cancel/ find a replacement	<b>Very Low</b> (replacement trainers are unlikely, replacement trainers may pose threat, changes upset provider and their clients)	<b>High</b> (can draw from existing pool of back up trainers)	<b>Extremely Low</b> (replacement is extremely unlikely, changes upset clients)
Professional development	<b>Expected</b> (but not formally supported; opportunity cost factor)	<b>Supported</b> (Number of hours may be stipulated for inhouse PD; external PD is at individual's discretion)	<b>Expected</b> (but not formally supported; opportunity cost factor)
Physical Space provided to work or interact with other trainers	<b>Unlikely</b>	<b>Yes</b> (less likely for evening classes)	<b>No</b>
Importance of learner feedback for repeat work	<b>High</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>High</b>
Low season	<b>Yes</b> (Christmas to Chinese New Year)	<b>Yes</b> (Semestral breaks)	<b>Yes</b> (Christmas to Chinese New Year)
Basis of pay	<b>Per project</b> (Decided by provider; amount of development work is at individual's discretion)	<b>Per semester contract</b>	<b>Per project</b> (Negotiated with client; proposal work is unpaid unless deal is closed; development work is included in project fee)
Earning potential	<b>Reasonable</b>	<b>Unlikely to be a</b>	<b>Good</b>

	(depending on ability to get steady work; likely to cause stress for a breadwinner; very little potential for pay increase over time)	<b>breadwinner</b>	(depending on ability to get steady work and negotiate lucrative deals)
--	---	--------------------	---



# Bibliography

---

- Attride-Stirling, J. (2001). Thematic networks: an analytic tool for qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 1(3), 385–405.  
doi:10.1177/146879410100100307
- Alvesson & Willmott. (2002). Identity Regulation as Organisational Control: Producing the Appropriate Individual. *Journal of Management Studies* 39(5)
- Bogenrieder, I., & Nooteboom, B. (2004). Learning groups: what types are there? A theoretical analysis and an empirical study in a consultancy firm. *Organization Studies*, 25(2), 287-313.
- Boreham, N., & Gray, P. (2006). Professional Identity of teachers in their early development. *Early Professional Learning Project*, 1–21.
- Buiskool, B. J., Broek, S. D., Lakerveld, J. A. Van, Zarifis, G. K., & Osborne, M. (2010). *Key Competences for Adult Learning Professionals: Contribution to the Development of a Reference Framework of Key Competences for Adult Learning Professionals - Final Report*. Zoetermeer.
- Cervero, R. M. (1988). *Effective Continuing Education for Professionals*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Clayton, B., Meyers, D., Bateman, A., & Bluer, R. (2010). *Practitioner expectations and experiences with the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment*. Managing. Adelaide.
- Council for Private Education. (2013). *CPE Annual Report 2012/13*. Council for Private Education, Singapore, Singapore
- Edwards, R., & Usher, R. (1996). What stories do I tell now? New times and new narratives for the adult educator, *International Journal of Lifelong* (May 2013), 37–41.
- Engestrom, Y. (1999). 23 Innovative learning in work teams: Analysing cycles of knowledge creation in practice. *Perspectives on Activity Theory*, 377.
- Evans, K., Dovaston, V., & Holland, D. (1990). The Changing Role of the In-Company Trainer: An Analysis of british Trainers in the European Community Context. *Comparative Education*, 26(1), 45–59.

- Farinelli, F. (2010). Adult Education as a Professional Field of Practice. In M. Milana (Ed.), *BAEA Becoming Adult Educators in the European Area-Synthesis research report* (pp. 14–22). Copenhagen: Danish School of Education, Aarhus University.
- Fenwick, T. (2000). Adventure Guides, Outfitters, Firestarters, and Caregivers: Continuing Educators' Images of Identity. *Canadian Journal of University Continuing Education*, 26(1), 53–77.
- Fenwick, T. J. (2004). Learning in portfolio work: anchored innovation and mobile identity. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 26(2), 229–245.
- Fenwick, T. J. (2006). Contradictions in portfolio careers: work design and client relations. *Career Development International*, 11(1), 65–79.
- Fenwick, T. (2008). Women's Learning in Contract Work: Practicing Contradictions in Boundaryless Conditions. *Vocations and Learning*, 1(1), 11–26.
- Fenwick, T. (2010). Workplace 'learning' and adult education. Messy objects, blurry maps and making difference. *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, 1(1-2), 79-95.
- Gee, J. P., Hull, G., & Lankshear, C. (1996). *The new work order: Behind the language of the new capitalism*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Gherardi, S., & Nicolini, D. (2000). The organizational learning of safety in communities of practice. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 9(1), 7-18.
- Grusec, J. E., & Goodnow, J. J. (1994). Impact of parental discipline methods on the child's internalisation of values: A reconceptualisation of current points of view. *Developmental Psychology*, 30 (2), 4-19.
- Guimarães, P., Sancho, A. V., & Oliveira, R. (2006). Life as a Patchwork, Reflecting on Adult Educators' Learning Experiences. In T. Jääger & J. Irons (Eds.), *Towards Becoming a Good Adult Educator* (pp. 24–37). Sweden: AGADE.
- IAL (unpublished). The CET landscape and the changing demand (Part 1: Strategic Intelligence). Institute for Adult Learning, Singapore: Singapore.
- Imel, S. (1992). Reflective practice in adult education (ERIC Digest No. 122). *Columbus, OH: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED346319).
- Jacques, N. (2012). *Improving workforce planning and development: perspectives of sessional VET practitioners*. NCVET: Adelaide

- Jögi, L., & Gross, M. (2010). Individual Paths of Professionalisation. In M. Milana (Ed.), *BAEA Becoming Adult Educators in the European Area-Synthesis research report* (pp. 31–35). Copenhagen: Danish School of Education, Aarhus University.
- Johri, A. (2011). The socio-materiality of learning practices and implications for the field of learning technology. *Research in Learning Technology*, 19(3).
- Jütte, W., Nicoll, K., & Olsen, H. S. (2011). Editorial: Professionalisation - the struggle within. *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, 2(1), 7–20.
- Lehman, M. A. (2003). Interrupting the Reflective Practitioner: Discovering the Espoused Philosophies and Theories and Theories-In-Use of 13 Adult Educators, 1–369.
- Maier-Gutheil, C., & Hof, C. (2011). The development of the Professionalism of Adult Educators. *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, 2(1), 75–88.
- Merriam, S. B. (1987). Adult learning and theory building: A review. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 37(4), 187-198.
- NCVER (National Centre for Vocational Education Research). (2004). *Profiling the National Vocational Education and Training Workforce*. NCVER: Adelaide
- Nuissl, E., & Pehl, K. (2000). *Portrait Adult Education Germany*. Bielefeld.
- Robson, J., Bailey, B., & Larkin, S. (2004). Adding value: investigating the discourse of professionalism adopted by vocational teachers in further education colleges. *Journal of Education and Work*, 17(2), 183–195.
- Rushbrook, P., Evans, K., Waite, E. & Bound, H. *Ephemeral Work and Workplace Identity in the New Millennium: a Literature Review*. Centre for Work and Learning, Institute for Adult Learning: Singapore.
- Sawchuk, P. H. (2003). The ‘unionization effect’ among adult computer learners. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 24(5), 637-648.
- Schön, D. A. (1987). *Educating the reflective practitioner* (pp. 3–21;22–40;157–174;305–326). Jossey-Bass San Francisco.
- Silverman, D. (2005). Instances or Sequences? Improving the State of the Art of Qualitative Research. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 6(3).

- Simons, M., Harris, R., Pudney, V., & Clayton, B. (2009). *Careers in vocational education and training. Managing.*
- Smeaton, D. (2003). Self-employed workers: Calling the shots or hesitant independents? A consideration of the trends. *Work, Employment, and Society*, 17, 379–391.
- Smilde, R. (2009). *Musicians as lifelong learners.* Delft: Eburon Academic Publishers.
- Stack & Bound (2012). *Tools for Learning and Design.* Institute for Adult Learning, Singapore: Singapore
- Wenger, E. (1998). Communities of practice: Learning as a social system. *Systems Thinker*, 9(5), 2-3.
- Willmott, G. (2011). *The WSQ: A Retrospective Reflections on the Development, Implementation and Future of Singapore's National CET System.* Institute for Adult Learning: Singapore.
- Willmott, G., Karmel, A., Loke, F., & Ramos, C. (2011). *Emerging developments in National Vocational Education Systems: Singapore, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand.* Institute of Adult Learning, Singapore.