Driving and licensing experiences of learner drivers in two Australian states prior to major changes in the licensing laws

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Abstract

The learner licence is an important component of the graduated driver licensing system. This research describes the driving and licensing experiences of learner drivers in Queensland and New South Wales licensed prior to the changes made to the system in mid-2007. The sample consisted of 392 participants who completed a telephone interview just after they obtained their provisional licence. The results suggest that learner drivers in the two states had many similar experiences when they were obtaining a learner licence. However, once a learner licence was obtained, there were differences in the amount of practice, the supervisor learners practised with, the type of vehicle they used and the amount of unlicensed driving. This paper provides important baseline descriptive data that can be used to measure the impact of the changes that were introduced to the learner licence phase in mid-2007 in both of these states.

Keywords: learner driver, driver licensing, learner licence, learner test, learner practice

Introduction

The learner phase is a key component of a graduated driver licensing system. GDL systems typically have three stages, the learner stage where the driver is supervised at all times, a provisional stage that allows unsupervised driving but with restrictions and then a full licence [1]. The learner phase is designed to allow new drivers the opportunity to gain practical driving experience with vehicle handling, the road environment and with the behaviour of other drivers [2]. This phase recognises that individuals need to learn how to drive and to accumulate their initial driving experience in lower risk situations [3]. Learner driver behavior appears to differ on measures that the driver licensing system is likely to influence such as the completion of logbooks [4]. Every state and territory within Australia has a learner phase, although each is different [5]. This study examines the learner phase in Queensland and New South Wales as they represented, at the time, a more traditional learner phase and a more progressive learner phase respectively, as outlined below.

In Queensland, at the time this study was conducted, the youngest age at which a person could obtain their learner licence was 16 ½ years by passing a road law knowledge test. The learner had to hold their licence for a minimum of six months, display L plates and drive under supervision. Unless they were over the age of 25, they had to have a zero blood alcohol limit. They lost their licence if they obtained four demerit points within twelve months for driving offences. Once they turned 17 years, they were eligible to obtain their provisional licence [5].

The New South Wales system, at the time the data for this study was collected, had similarities with the Queensland system. Individuals in New South Wales were able to obtain their learner licence from 16 years by passing a road law knowledge test and holding this licence for a minimum of six months. Learners in New South Wales also had to display L plates and drive under supervision with no alcohol in their blood. Additionally, they were restricted to a maximum driving speed of 80 kilometres per hour and had a towing restriction. They could obtain a provisional licence from when they turned 17 years [5]. However, the key difference between the Queensland and New South Wales licensing systems was the requirement for learner drivers in New South Wales to record a minimum 50 hours of driving experience in a logbook.

Both of these systems have now changed. In July 2007 the Queensland Government made a number of changes to their GDL system including lowering the minimum learner age to 16 years, and introducing a two phase provisional licence and a hazard perception test as well as a passenger and high powered vehicle restriction [5]. The New South Wales Government also changed their GDL system from 1 July 2007. They extended the learner period to 12 months and required 120 hours of practice. They also amended the restrictions that applied to drivers on their provisional licence [5].
This article describes the self-reported experiences of learner drivers in Queensland and New South Wales under the pre mid-2007 licensing system. The experiences described include obtaining a learner licence, their practice experiences, the vehicles they had access to and used while on a learner licence, their exposure to driver education and their experiences in obtaining a provisional licence. It is important that the behaviours of learner drivers under the previous system are documented in order to identify if the modified learner licence systems in both of these states are effective.

Method
Participants for this study were recruited during 2006 and 2007 from driver licensing centres that undertook a significant number of driving tests in Queensland and New South Wales. At the driver licensing centres, 687 eligible individuals were approached with 494 agreeing to participate in the study. The actual number of participants that completed the interview over the phone was 392 resulting in a participation rate of 57.1 per cent. The learners were licensed under the pre-July 2007 licensing system. In Queensland, participants were recruited from Brisbane and Townsville while in New South Wales, participants were recruited from Sydney, Newcastle, Ballina and Lismore. The participants were recruited just after they had passed their practical driving test to obtain a provisional licence. Although the sample was not selected randomly, this was partially addressed by the inclusion of both urban and regional licensing centres.

The recruiter approached the learner driver outside the driver licensing centre and provided information regarding the study and its voluntary nature, and offered them a movie ticket as an incentive for completion. After the individual agreed to participate, the recruiter recorded their name and phone number so they could be contacted to complete the interview over the phone. Participants completed the interview within a few weeks of recruitment. If the interviewer was unable to reach the participant on their first call, they continued to ring back on up to three occasions. It took participants approximately 35 minutes to complete the interview. The interview collected information regarding the personal, social, environmental and socio-demographic factors that affect the driving and licensing experiences of learner drivers. The data was analysed using SPSS with non-parametric tests used for categorical level data and parametric tests used for Likert scale items. Although this is not strictly interval level data, it approaches normality as sample size increases.

Results
Sample characteristics
There were slightly more females (51.6 per cent) than males (48.4 per cent) within the sample. The mean age was 19.82 (sd = 4.66) although the most common age was 17 years. Most of the sample (84.9 per cent) was single. Over two-thirds of the sample (67.4 per cent) was still studying although a significant number of the sample had completed either grade 10 (41.9 per cent) or grade 12 (37.3 per cent) at school.

Although 82.4 per cent of the sample were employed, 61.9 per cent of those jobs were part time. This would explain why 52.4 per cent of the sample had an annual income of less than $10,000 per annum. A further 20.7 per cent had an annual income of between $11,000 and $20,000 per annum. Over half of the sample (54.4 per cent) were unaware of their parents’ annual income.

Further analysis was conducted to identify if there were any differences between the learners who participated from Queensland and those from New South Wales. These tests revealed that there was no difference in terms of age (t(389) = 1.64, p = .102), gender (X2(1) = .59, p = .444, φ = .03), level of education completed (X2(1) = 1.01, p = .314, φ = .05), marital status (X2(1) = 3.16, p = .076, φ = .09), learner income (X2(1) = 2.01, p = .156, φ = -.08) or parent income (X2(1) = .14, p = .71, φ = -.03). However, participants from New South Wales were more likely to be studying (X2(1) = 10.28, p = .001, φ = -.16) while those from Queensland were more likely to work (X2(1) = 13.10, p = <.001, φ = .18) and more likely to work full time (X2(1) = 6.44, p = .011, φ = .14).

Obtaining a learner licence
Participants were asked the length of time since they had sat the learner knowledge test for the first time. As shown in Table 1, there was no difference between the states with the average length of time in Queensland being 25.27 months (n = 218, sd = 32.93) and in New South Wales, 23.73 months (n = 172, sd = 22.32).

There was also no difference in the number of times that the learner drivers in each state reported that they sat the test. In Queensland, the average number of attempts was 1.93 (n = 216, sd = .99) while it was 1.74 attempts in New South Wales (n = 172, sd = 2.47).

In Queensland, it had been an average of 15.21 months (n = 212, sd = 32.84) since they had sat their test and passed. In New South Wales, the average was 23.23 months (n = 172, sd

| Table 1: Obtaining a learner licence in Queensland and New South Wales |
|---------------------------------|----------|----------|---------------|---|---|
| Months since first sat test     | QLD M (sd) | NSW M (sd) | t     | df | sig |
| 25.27 (32.93)                  | 23.73 (22.32) | .527     | 388  | .599 |
| No. of times sat test          | 1.93 (.99)  | 1.74 (2.47) | 1.02 | 386 | .308 |
| Months since sat test and passed | 24.45 (32.84) | 23.23 (27.94) | .385 | 382 | .701 |
= 27.94). This was not significantly different. Once learners obtained their licence, 91.7 per cent of them held their licence continuously. There were no differences between the two states on this measure ($X^2(1) = .827, p = .363, \phi = .05$).

**Practice while on a learner licence**

As shown in Table 2, there was no difference between the states in terms of the length of time that participants had spent actively learning to drive or holding their learner licence before they took the practical driving test. On average, learners in Queensland spent 15.44 months ($sd = 22.26$) actively learning to drive and held their learner licence for 17.47 months ($sd = 21.34$) before they took the practical driving test. In New South Wales, learners spent 19.24 months ($sd = 20.39$) actively learning to drive and held their learner licence for 18.88 months ($sd = 16.23$) before they took their practical driving test. This suggests that some participants from New South Wales started to actively learn to drive before they obtained their learner licence.

Participants from both states were asked to recall the amount of time they spent practising their driving. In Queensland, learners reported that they completed an average of 64.11 hours of practice ($sd = 51.05$) while the mean in New South Wales was 73.31 hours ($sd = 29.12$). This difference was significant ($t (389) = -2.11, p = .035$). The practice undertaken by learners was divided between time spent with professional driving instructors and time spent with parents or friends. In Queensland, learners reported that they spent an average of 13.25 hours with a professional instructor ($sd = 17.40$) and 51.09 hours with parents and friends ($sd = 48.86$). In New South Wales, learners reported that they spent an average of 9.05 hours with a professional instructor ($sd = 15.84$) and 64.26 hours with parents and friends ($sd = 30.17$). As shown in Table 2, the differences between the states on both of these types of practice was significant. Learners in Queensland spent a greater amount of time with professional driving instructors compared to those in New South Wales ($t (389) = -2.46, p = .014$). Learners in New South Wales spent a greater amount of time with parents and friends ($t (388) = -3.103, p = .002$).

Learners in New South Wales were required at the time to complete 50 hours of practice, which needed to be recorded in a logbook. Learners in Queensland also had access to a log book for voluntary completion. Participants from Queensland were asked if they were aware of the log book. Over two-thirds (67.7 per cent) responded that they were unaware that a log book was available.

Within the sample, 14.5 per cent of the participants reported practicing driving without a supervisor. Learners from Queensland were more likely than those from New South Wales to practice their driving unsupervised ($X^2(1) = 5.54, p = .019, \phi = .12$). Within the Queensland sub-sample, 18.3 per cent reported driving unlicensed while 9.8 per cent of those from New South Wales reported the same behavior.

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**Table 2: Practice while on a learner licence**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>QLD M (sd)</th>
<th>NSW M (sd)</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Months since started actively learning to drive</td>
<td>15.44 (22.26)</td>
<td>19.24 (20.39)</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>386</td>
<td>.308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Months held learner licence before attempting practical driving test</td>
<td>17.47 (21.34)</td>
<td>18.88 (16.23)</td>
<td>-.723</td>
<td>389</td>
<td>.470</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total hours of practice</td>
<td>64.11 (51.05)</td>
<td>73.31 (29.12)</td>
<td>-2.11</td>
<td>389</td>
<td>.035</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours with a professional instructor</td>
<td>13.25 (17.40)</td>
<td>9.05 (15.84)</td>
<td>2.46</td>
<td>389</td>
<td>.014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours with parents and friends</td>
<td>51.09 (48.86)</td>
<td>64.26 (30.17)</td>
<td>-3.10</td>
<td>388</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Table 3: Availability of vehicles**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>QLD M (sd)</th>
<th>NSW M (sd)</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of cars in household possible to learn in</td>
<td>2.12 (1.40)</td>
<td>2.12 (1.08)</td>
<td>.015</td>
<td>390</td>
<td>.988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of manual cars in household possible to learn in</td>
<td>1.08 (1.07)</td>
<td>.86 (1.00)</td>
<td>2.04</td>
<td>389</td>
<td>.042</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of automatic cars in household possible to learn</td>
<td>1.16 (1.08)</td>
<td>1.43 (.98)</td>
<td>-.255</td>
<td>390</td>
<td>.111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manual cars that were learnt in</td>
<td>2.44 (3.59)</td>
<td>1.47 (1.72)</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>389</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Automatic cars that were learnt in</td>
<td>1.76 (3.32)</td>
<td>1.98 (1.53)</td>
<td>-.825</td>
<td>388</td>
<td>.410</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Availability of vehicles

Participants were asked to provide information regarding the number of cars in their household that it was possible for them to practice in. There was no difference between the states in the number of cars that it was possible for learners to use. As shown in Table 3, learners from Queensland (Md = 1.40) and New South Wales (Md = 1.08) reported that they had access to an average of 2.12 vehicles. On average, 1.08 (sd = 1.07) of these vehicles were manual in Queensland, while .86 (sd = 1.00) were in New South Wales. This is a significant difference (t (389) = 2.04, p = .042). There was also a significant difference between the two states regarding the number of cars that were automatic (t (390) = -2.55, p = .011) with an average of 1.16 vehicles (sd = 1.08) in Queensland and 1.43 vehicles (sd = .98) in New South Wales.

As shown in Table 3, in Queensland, learners reported using an average of 2.44 manual cars (sd = 3.59) in which to learn to drive. This contrasts with New South Wales learners who used an average of 1.47 manual vehicles (sd = 1.72). This difference is significant (t (389) = 3.27, p = .001). However, there was no difference between the states for the number of automatic cars that learners used with an average of 1.76 vehicles (sd = 3.32) in Queensland and an average of 1.98 vehicles (sd = 1.53) in New South Wales. Learners from Queensland were more likely than those from New South Wales to obtain a manual licence ($X^2(1) = 32.95, p < .001, \phi = .29$). In Queensland, 65.6 per cent of learners obtained a manual licence while in New South Wales 36.4 per cent obtained a manual licence. In Queensland if you are tested in an automatic vehicle you are only able to drive automatic vehicles. However, if tested in an automatic vehicle in New South Wales you are able to drive either a manual or an automatic vehicle once you obtain your stage two provisional licence.

Driver education courses

Very few participants reported that they completed a formal driver education course while on their learner licence (12.3 per cent). Of those from Queensland, 6.9 per cent completed a course while it was 19.1 per cent of participants from New South Wales. This difference between the states was significant ($X^2(1) = 13.19, p < .001, \phi = -.18$).

Obtaining a provisional licence

Of the total sample, 62.8 per cent obtained their provisional licence on the first attempt. There was no difference between the states ($X^2(1) = 3.15, p = .076, \phi = -.09$). Within Queensland, 58.9 per cent obtained their provisional licence on the first attempt while in New South Wales 67.6 per cent of participants reported obtaining their provisional licence on the first attempt.

Discussion

This paper describes the experiences of learners in Queensland and New South Wales prior to the changes introduced to this licence stage in mid-2007. As shown, the process of obtaining a learner licence was very similar in both states. There was no difference between Queensland and New South Wales regarding the number of times that the learners sat the knowledge test in order to obtain their learner licence. There was also no difference in the months since they first sat their test, the months since they sat the test and passed and the number that held their learner licence continuously. This suggests that the experience of obtaining a licence was similar in both Queensland and New South Wales, although it appears that more learners in New South Wales started learning to drive before they obtained their learner licence.

However, learners in Queensland and New South Wales had different experiences once they obtained their learner licence. Learners in New South Wales obtained more hours of practice than those in Queensland and they did so by spending a greater amount of hours practising with their parents and friends rather than professional driving instructors. Although there were differences in the amount of hours that learners spent practising while on their learner licence, there was no difference between the states regarding the number of months that learners had spent actively learning to drive and the number of months they had held their learner licence before attempting the practical driving test.

A key difference between the states at the time was that learners in New South Wales were required to complete a log book that demonstrated they had obtained a minimum of 50 hours of supervised practice. The fact that learners in New South Wales had to complete a certain number of hours may explain why they spent a greater amount of time practicing their driving with parents and friends. Given the low income levels of learners, they are unlikely to be able to afford to pay for 50 hours of supervised practice with professional driving instructors. While a voluntary log book was available in Queensland, over two-thirds of learners were unaware of the log book’s existence. Additionally, learners in Queensland were more likely to practise their driving without a supervisor than those from New South Wales.

Learners from New South Wales were more likely to obtain an automatic licence than those from Queensland. This may have reflected a difference in the licensing laws. As noted earlier, in Queensland, learners that obtained an automatic provisional licence were restricted to driving automatic vehicles. In New South Wales, this restriction only applied for the first provisional licence stage (unless supervised by an unrestricted Australian licence holder). After the new driver upgraded to the stage two provisional licence they were able to drive either a manual or an automatic vehicle. As a result, New South Wales drivers are probably less motivated to sit the test in a manual as the restriction on driving an automatic vehicle lapses.

Participants from New South Wales were more likely to complete a formal driver education course than those from Queensland. However, the actual number of participants that completed a driver education course while on their learner licence was very small (12.3 per cent). This probably reflects the fact that driver education programs are not a compulsory part of the licensing system [6].

There was no difference between Queensland and New South Wales learners in the numbers of learners that obtained their provisional driver licence on the first attempt. Overall, 62.8 per cent of the group obtained their provisional driver licence on the first attempt.
The major strength of this work is the high participation rate. Of the 687 eligible individuals approached, 392 participants completed the interview. This resulted in a participation rate of 57.1 per cent. However, this study has a number of limitations that need to be acknowledged. The first is that this data is self-report and, therefore, could be influenced by phenomena such as the social desirability bias or recall issues. However, self-report data relating to a range of behaviours, such as drink driving and crashes is considered to have an acceptable level of validity when it is collected anonymously and there are no consequences associated with providing responses [7] as was the case with these interviews. The second is that, to ensure the recruitment of sufficient participants for this research, recruitment occurred at larger driving licensing centres. As the recruitment did not occur a random basis, the sample may not be representative of all learner drivers. This problem has been partially addressed by recruiting learner drivers from both metropolitan and regional locations. Thirdly, the fact that New South Wales learners were required to record supervised driving in a log book while Queensland learners were not may result in a recording bias. In other words, the completion of the log book by New South Wales drivers may have improved the accuracy of their recall. In contrast, without this aid, the Queensland drivers may have either over estimated or under estimated the amount of hours of supervised driving that they completed. In this regard, it is worth reiterating that there was no licensing related reason to inflate hours.

Further research could help overcome these limitations by utilising different methodologies that do not use self-report data and using different sampling techniques. Further research is also needed to assess the impact of the changes made to the learner phase in mid-2007. Additional research could examine the experiences of provisional licence holders and the role of parents in the graduated driver licensing system. Ideally, as much of the existing work regarding graduated driver licensing systems is from other countries such as New Zealand, the United States of America and Canada, this research should occur within Australia and compare the different licensing systems operating across the country. Given that learners had sat the theory test approximately two years prior to undertaking the practical test, further research could identify if there were benefits in requiring learners to resit the test before they completed the practical driving test.

Conclusion

This paper describes the driving and licensing experiences of learner drivers in Queensland and New South Wales prior to the changes introduced to the licensing systems in these states in mid-2007. Queensland and New South Wales had very similar learner phases at this time with the key difference being the requirement of learners in New South Wales to complete, and record in a log book, 50 hours of supervised driving.

The research found that learners in both states had very similar driving and licensing experiences prior to obtaining a learner licence with some exceptions such as the proportion of learners who engage in unlicensed driving. Participants in both states sat the test a similar number of times, and held their learner licence for a similar amount of time. However, those from New South Wales spent more time practising with supervisors than those from Queensland. Learners from New South Wales spent a greater amount of time being supervised by parents and friends when compared with those from Queensland. In contrast, those from Queensland spent more time with a professional driving instructor. Learners from Queensland were more likely than those from New South Wales to drive unsupervised. Learners from New South Wales were more likely to obtain an automatic driver’s licence than those from Queensland. This may be a reflection of differences in the licensing systems and the restrictions that apply to the licences in each state.

Since the data for this study was collected, there have been changes to the learner licence in both Queensland and New South Wales. This research has provided important baseline data that can be used to identify the impacts of changes to the learner licence.

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References