ADULT LEARNING AUSTRALIA Inc.

Promoting and fostering the value of learning

AGE IS NOT A DISEASE

Submission to
the House of Representatives
Standing Committee on Ageing Inquiry

Introduction

The current debate on the ageing of the population tends to portray this demographic trend as a problem. Adult Learning Australia, an advocacy and research body which represents a diversity of adult learning providers and learners across Australia, prefers to approach it in a more positive light. While it is impossible to predict the future, it does seem likely that the so-called babyboomers who are about to swell the population of those over 65 will do their best to ensure that society adjusts—as it is beginning to do—to a different set of demands and needs.

When it comes to considering older Australians, ALA recommends some do's and some don'ts:

Don'ts

- Don't expect 25 per cent of the population (the percentage of over 65s projected in 2040) to be an homogenous group and, therefore,
- Don't talk about older Australians assuming they all have the same needs and expectations.
- Don't expect older people to think of themselves old.
- Don't think of them as a cost.
- Don't assume they've stopped learning

Do's

- Do respect older people
- Do acknowledge their contribution
- Do mobilise their wisdom

Perceptions

ALA agrees with the Federal Minister for Ageing, Kevin Andrews, that we face a major challenge in overcoming negative stereotypes about older people, which affect not only their employment chances but also their overall standing in the community and the nature of the programs offered to them. (Unfortunately the major contribution older people can make to society--when their wisdom and experience are acknowledged--was not factored into the calculations made in the Intergenerational Report, which tended to see age as a fiscal burden and to assume that the present will be the future.)

Learning and health

The Intergenerational Report focuses on health issues. It assumes that old people will be burdens on the health system. But the evidence is that older Australians are staying healthy longer. It also assumes that views on ethical issues such as euthanasia, life saving health interventions; gene technology; etc. will not develop in response to changing demographic trends. Adult Learning Australia believes they will and that it is essential governments foster informed debate within the community on these issues. For Adult Learning Australia, it was particularly disturbing to see that the Report projects savings in education and training as the population ages. This is a retrogressive step in an era when lifelong learning is imperative both to maintain an effective workforce and, more fundamentally, a healthy and engaged citizenry. As mentioned above, keeping active minds is a very important part of that process and suggests that it will be essential to invest in lifelong learning as part of the nation's response to the ageing population.

Older Australians and learning

Older Australians, like all people, have many different approaches to learning. It is therefore difficult to make generalisations; except to say that for many they will prefer the opportunity to take a more reflective approach than the young. And more may have to contend with disabilities, such as poor hearing, arthritis etc. That is not to say the interactivity encouraged in children's learning should be abandoned when dealing with adults, of any age. It is also important to build on the wealth of experience an older person brings to learning—or to recognise and address any barriers to learning previous educational encounters have constructed.

Currently, surveys about education undertaken by the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) do not routinely record figures for people aged 64 and above. The figures in Box 1 do, however, support the adage, 'Never too old to learn'.

<div style="border:1px solid black; background-color:#e0e0e0;">

Box 1: Some Statistics

- In 2000, 17 per cent of all ACE students were in the 50-59 age group, while 5 per cent were from the 60-64 age group. (Source: NCVER, *Australian Adult and Community Education Statistics 2000*)
- In 2000, 40 to 64 year olds accounted for 31.5 per cent of all female VET students and 25.1 per cent of all male VET students. (Source NCVER, *Australian Vocational Education & training Statistics 2000: Women in VET 2000*).
- At May 2001, 1,781,000 people aged between 45-64 were enrolled in a course of study, this represents 8 per cent of the total number of people aged between 15 and 64, enrolled in study. The age group 55-64 accounted for 469,000 persons enrolled in a course of study, or 2 per cent of the total number of people, aged 15-64, who were enrolled in study.
- 513,000 people aged between 45 and 64 were enrolled in a course of study leading to a qualification, this represents 14 per cent of the total number of people (aged 15-64) enrolled in a course of study leading to a qualification. 123,000 were in the 55-64 age group, which represents 3 per cent of the total number of people enrolled in a course of study (aged 15-64). (Source ABS, *Education & Work*, May 2001).
- A 1999 an ABS study found that 33.5 per cent of the over 65 population attended a library, 27.45 per cent attended a botanical garden, 16.25 per cent attended an art gallery and 12.45 per cent attended a museum, although the statistics do not show to what extent 'learning' was the main reason for visiting (quoted in Lynda Kelly, Gillian Savage, Peta Landman, Susan Tonkin, *Energised, Engaged, Everywhere; Older Australians and Museums*).

</div>

Older Australians can engage in learning in a variety of ways. For example:

Universities of the Third Age (U3As)

There is no doubt that many retired people want to continue their interest in learning and broadening their minds--the message that keeping the brain alive is as important as keeping physically fit is well appreciated by at least a large section of this age group. Membership of U3A is one way they do this and such is the flow of people enrolling in the movement, that many groups, both in Australia and elsewhere, are seriously considering how to cope with the influx of new members. In Canberra, for example, the number of members will reach 3000 in the next few months. (It needs to be remembered that U3As are administered on an entirely voluntary system and course leaders give their time freely.)

U3A was started in Australia in 1984. Many of those who joined within the first few years remain members so that U3As are expanding at both ends of the age spectrum, with new members coming from those who are retiring in their 50s and early 60s and those existing members who are moving towards their 80s and even 90s.
In addition to providing a wide range of subjects for the members to study in a relaxed environment without the pressure of exams, U3As also offer an invaluable opportunity for social interaction. This aspect of providing a way older people can enjoy the company of other like minded people—or even those of unlike-mind--cannot be overlooked, given that so many older people, especially those who have to live on their own, can become very lonely, a state which can lead to depression and on to ill health.

Some of the older people who have transport difficulties and those who are 'isolated' by disabilities or their geographical location or because they are kept at home as carers are now taking advantage of U3A Online. Already some 700 participants have studied through this project in Australia. It is expected to grow steadily, especially as U3A Online has established a joint venture with U3A in the UK.

Adult and vocational education classes/museums/libraries (See Box 1 above)

U3As are by no means the only way older people continue to learn. Many are found in evening colleges, in WEAs (Worker Education Associations), in Centres for Continuing Education, in a variety of religious groups, in cultural groups, at museums and galleries, in music groups of all kinds and other associations. And of course many people choose to continue to learn by themselves, drawing on the resources of libraries, museums, the Internet and so on.

Comparatively little is known about how people in the 80 plus age group want to go on learning: what their needs and expectations are; what the implications of the growing number of people reaching this age will be for learning institutions such as U3A; and what contribution such people continue to make in their work and to the community. (There are many scientists, academics and others who continue to give service to the community by passing on their knowledge and their wisdom.) Two of U3As longest standing and experienced members, Rick Swindell and Dorothy Braxton have started the preliminary work for such a study which they hope will be completed in 2003. Adult Learning Australia has undertaken to support this study.

Learning circles

Learning circles were developed during the late nineteenth century as a tool to facilitate worker education. A learning circle is a dynamic, flexible, and highly participatory approach to adult learning. The informal learning approach it employs can encourages a culture of public or citizenship education.

Over the past nine years Adult Learning Australia, through its program Learning Circles Australia, has been fostering the use of learning circles—in the community, the school and the workplace. The self-directed nature of learning circles and their portability is attracting many older people, who like the ability to determine the pace of their own learning, the content of their courses and the type of follow-up action they will pursue. Learning circles are also proving to be an effective way of disseminating important messages to older people.

During the International Year of Older People Adult Learning Australia was funded by the then Office for Older Australians ($124,000) to conduct the first phase of a national project for older Australians. This took the form of a Learning Circle kit, *Learning and Living in the Third Age*, for people living in retirement villages, nursing homes and elsewhere. The kit (example attached with final project report (A)) provided material for ten discussions on topics as diverse as gambling to volunteering. It was very popular and remains in demand. Further funding , however, has not been available to develop more material or to offer training for potential facilitators or to disseminate the idea of learning circles and this particular kit more widely into rural and remote centres where there is an strong need for innovative programs targeting older learners.

Adult Learning Australia has, however, been able to develop other learning circles which have had demonstrated benefits for older people, for example a program which encouraged cervical screening among older women. (Copy of the Kit and final evaluation report also attached (B).)

Intergenerational programs

There are many examples of successful learning programs which bring old and young together for mutual benefit. These combine the wisdom and patience of older people with the enthusiasms, particularly for computers, of younger people. Skillswise on the Mornington Peninsula, for instance, is undertaking a program where young people who have dropped out of school and who have poor literacy skills are teamed up with older members of the local community. The older people tell their life stories; the younger ones record these (and in the course of this transfer IT skills), learning not only some history but also important literacy skills. These stories will be recorded on digital cameras.

The inaugural ALA-ANTA research grant will be offering a $5,000 scholarship in 2003 for research into intergenerational learning.

The near future

If one takes an optimistic view of the capacity of the growing number of older Australians to be well equipped to face their 'third' and 'fourth' ages, it is important to concentrate efforts on the nearer future--which may be thought of as a transitional period--when we know many older Australians will be disadvantaged, including because they have stopped learning.

ALA considers that the following issues require attention in the immediate future:

Changing attitudes

Ageing is about attitude—much needs to be done to encourage more positive approaches to older people, among employers and all sorts of other communities. The more older people are integrated into communities of interest, rather than categorised by age (which they themselves may not feel) attitudes will change.

Older people too need sometimes to be encouraged to change their attitudes. It is, for example, the case that many older men have decided that they are done with learning, thus cutting off many options, both for employment and for healthy ageing. Those who do return to learning sometimes only do so after a crisis. Adult Learning Australia is currently working on a guide for adult learning providers which suggests strategies for engaging older men. (See attachment C.)

Information Technology (IT)

ALA welcomes Dr Nelson's initiative to introduce vouchers to help older workers gain IT skills. However, these need to be administered in a way that takes account of the particular barriers many older people who are not able to use a computer may encounter. Instructors need to understand that participants may have an initial fear of the machine, difficulty controlling the mouse, be unfamiliar with the terminology. This may require a course with a different pace from those usually offered. The participants are likely to need both structured lessons and time for

practice. They want to be able to understand what they are doing, have the basics explained, be provided with manuals, have time to take notes and to revise. They must feel free to ask questions, discuss with their peers and get advice on buying a computer. Taster sessions to help choose the right course are also recommended. This style of learning does not always sit comfortably with that offered in vocational education. There is, however, scope to look to the broader adult education sector, which may have more flexibility to offer tailor-made courses, with different timetabling and a more supportive atmosphere. It may also be necessary to consider taking such courses to the customers, for example into the club. There are many groups with tremendous experience in this area, notably the Australian Seniors Computer Clubs.

During the transitional period, there will continue to be a demand for IT training for older Australians—both for those needing to acquire new skills in order to remain in the workforce; and for those in the older category who wish to operate in the contemporary world and need the skills to use the Internet for keeping in touch with family, for banking, for researching health issues, or for keeping their minds active.

In the longer term the challenges will be different, as most people will have computer skills. For them—now and in the future--the issue is more their possible dislocation from IT support services once they leave the workplace. Computer companies and sales outlets will need to consider what sort of customer service they offer individuals. And in doing so, they should also take account of the profile of the user and their learning styles. (For example, they may need to ensure that the 20-something technician is versed in older software and does not assume it does not exist because they do not know about it. They may also need to understand that adapting to the new may take a bit longer for the older user, or be approached in a different way. Today's Apple user groups are a model to be built upon.

Older workers

ABS data from 2000 shows that 57.4 per cent of unemployed persons aged between 45 and 54 in Australia had no post-school qualifications and 44.6 per cent had not completed the highest level of school. Once unemployed, these people remain out of the workforce for double the average time for younger people. Nearly two out five become long-term unemployed.

ALA is aware that the Departments of Education, Science and Training and the Department of Workplace Relations have done considerable work in identifying the training needs of older workers. It hopes that the research both departments have undertaken will contribute to a flexible learning program which will accommodate the needs of older workers and ensure that retraining begins well before a process of demoralisation sets in.

The points made above in relation to information technology have wider application to other groups of older learners who may be facing the requirement to retrain in order to stay in the labour market. Most of these people will also have barriers to learning, created by poor experiences at school and a mindset that they are too old to learn, or that learning will not help them. It is therefore imperative to invest time in breaking down those barriers before launching them on a series of training courses which do not deliver the desired results but instead contribute to further disaffection. It is important to provide the right learning environment (which does not intimidate but rather acknowledges prior experience and builds self-esteem); to rekindle an appetite for learning and then institute the right pace for the training program

and to consider the appropriateness of peer learning and work in small groups. Other practical issues such as accessibility of venues need to be addressed.

Adult Learning Australia is about to start a research project into the efficacy of developing a learning audit tool for use in the Job Network. The tool would assist case managers to identify learning barriers of the unemployed as well as to identify the right sort of learning environments to which to direct clients. The project will also aim at strengthening partnerships between employment and learning providers.

Disadvantaged older people

Forty-five percent of Australians do not have adequate literacy and numeracy skills to operate effectively in our sophisticated society. Among these are older Australians, for example people who have not used their literacy skills for many, many years, or who do not have good English language ability. It is imperative that literacy programs reach such people to ensure that they are able to cope. Their's can be a life threatening problem, for instance, if they are unable to read the label on a medicine bottle.

Recommendations

Adult Learning Australia puts forward to the Inquiry the following recommendations for its consideration. These aim to address some of the issues outlined above:

1. Develop a national framework for lifelong learning which acknowledges that it will be essential to encourage all Australians to continue learning throughout life and that this will require an investment of public funds.

2. Introduce more flexible approaches to learning provision for older workers and the mature unemployed, which recognise the barriers to returning to learning (e.g. the loss of self esteem, the fear of participating in courses with very young learners, the need for different pace of courses, the recognition of prior learning).

3. As a contribution to the effort of changing perceptions about older people, introduce a national award which celebrates the achievement of older learners—the Senior Learner of the Year award—to be presented to an inspirational learner over 65 years of age during Adult Learners' Week or at some other opportune time in the year.. This could be a joint enterprise between the Minister for Education, Science and Training and the Minister for Ageing.

4. Provide further funding ($100,000) to allow for the further development and dissemination of the highly popular learning circle, *Learning and Living in the Third Age*.

5. Extend ABS Education surveys & NCVER studies to include a 65+ category (or even three new categories, 65-74, 75-84 & 85+) and to allow for surveys on non-work related learning.

Francesca Beddie
Adult Learning Australia
13 December 2002
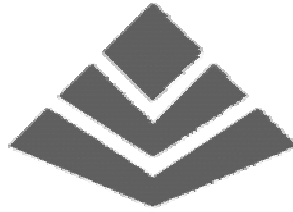
ADULT LEARNING AUSTRALIA Inc.

ALA Submission to Inquiry on Ageing: Attachments

Attachments A and B follow in hard copy.

Attachment C: Focus on older males

In 2002 Adult Learners' Week sought to highlight the learning needs of older men. The following outlines some of findings from ALA' research into the area.

In their late forties and through their fifties, many men are contemplating early retirement. Others are having to face enforced retirement or transfer to a different field of work, often owing to industry restructure and downsizing. Many men are having to consider an extension to their working lives, which often involves learning new skills, including how to cope constructively with unemployment. These are not always easy transitions. Australia has one of the world's highest rates of suicide. Men are four times more likely than women to die from suicide. The highest figures appear in the 25 to 34 age group, but there is another noticeable raise for men in the 65 plus age group, significantly around retirement age.

A return to learning can, however, is one way in which to help cope with change. Increasing participation rates of men in learning, especially those over 45, does not just benefit the individual through offering access to new social networks, development of skills and development of positive attitudes. It has positive benefits for the wider community. In particular, a visible increase in male participation in learning can help redefine masculinity in more constructive ways and help provide better role models for boys attending – and doing poorly – in school.

Despite the clear reasons for older men to participate in a learning as a way of helping them through workplace, technological, or lifestyle change, many older men steadfastly refuse to take part in any form of structured learning. For example, in ACE personal enrichment courses, only 30% of enrolments are from men. Studies conducted by the Australian National Training Authority in 2000, suggested that males aged 45 plus feature disproportionately in the "Been there/Done That"; "I'm Done With It", and "Forget It" attitudinal segments. Moreover the male 45+ group does not have significant representation in the other, more positive, attitudinal segments. (Source; National Marketing Strategy for Skills and Lifelong Learning, ANTA 2000).

Recently, ALA participated in a workshop for men aged 50 and above from Northern NSW. In this workshop, the men talked about how the fear of showing a lack of knowledge and the feeling that their wisdom – and by extension themselves – was no longer relevant, as well for some as a sense that learning was effeminate, prevent them from engaging in learning activities. In the rural context the distances required to travel to learning providers was also presented as a barrier to participation.

The beliefs that 'real' learning must be formalised and must directly relate to work goals were strongly held by many of the men and presented barriers to participation, especially for those men who had had bad experiences of structured learning or those who were no longer in paid employment. This observation is also borne out by the findings of a soon-to-be-published evaluation of Adult Learners' Week in which older men were interviewed about their attitude to learning. (NCVER, *National Evaluation of Adult Learners' Week 2001 and 2002*, forthcoming 2003).

The 'feminisation' of some forms of learning, in particular community education, has also been identified as a barrier for some older men, especially with regards to personal enrichment learning. In their study into Adult and Community Education in small and remote towns in Victoria in 2001, Barry Golding and Maureen Rogers noted:

> *Most ACFE providers in small towns are run, staffed and networked primarily by women. Most have a rich history of women's involvement through patronage, management and volunteerism. The program profiles are typically oriented to women's needs. The learning environments are typically shaped in ways which are overtly inclusive of women and which promote connection to community through learning... As a consequence, men in small and remote towns are much less likely to become involved in ACFEB-funded adult learning.*

Rod Mitchell makes a similar point in his 2002 publication, *Bringing in the Blokes*. He notes that, "The influence of women extends to all aspects of the running of centres…it influences the type of courses that are offered and the way they are marketed, the opening times of the Centre and the environment that is created." Furthermore, some men feel that participating in learning with their wives or their wife's peers embarrassing, especially if they hold a belief that they must be the 'head' of the household.

When thinking about developing learning opportunities for older men, consideration must be given to offering entry points that are grounded in older men's culture. These will allow older men to come into learning through environments in which they feel comfortable, for example, in the pub or club, or in groups with other older men. Once the men have made the first step and overcome fears and negative perceptions of learning, progression to mixed learning environments can occur more easily.

Many of the age-related issues that older men face are often exacerbated by widely held stereotypes of masculinity. Lengthy periods of unemployment can affect any adult, however, the older one gets, the harder it becomes to find work. For a man who has comes from a culture in which men were expected to be the breadwinner, the idea that they may never work again can be crushing. The social notion that unemployment is something that only younger people experience

can make these feelings of failure and exclusion worse, as can the general perception that only young people can--and should--undertake training.

As Laurie Daly, a student at Challenger TAFE in correspondence with ALA explains:

> *At 50 you are not trained to handle redundancy. You are either too old or over qualified for the jobs you want. Eventually you become one of the faceless older men looking for work. Being unemployed for two years really reduced my confidence – and the Challenger TAFE course has really helped build it again.*

Even if a person is in employment, feelings of exclusion and irrelevance may develop because of a belief that valuable training resources are more profitably spent on younger people. Given that people aged 45 still have at least twenty years of working life ahead of them, the notion that older workers are not 'worth' training is patently ridiculous. However this belief is widespread, and is often supported by the actions of employers who do not actively encourage their older workers to continue training and by the mass media's depiction of workplace training as something that only involves people in their twenties.

Even for men who are entering a planned retirement, the sudden change of lifestyle, which brings with it a loss of identity, a new set of social practises, or greater leisure time, can come as a shock. As Graham Ascough, author of *Oh Happy Happy Days: The New Rules for Retirement*, has noted, many men plan for their retirement in financial terms but forget to consider planning for retirement in social, intellectual or even spiritual terms. Many men find the sudden transition from an active working life, where goals and roles gave structure to their lives, to a life that has few external goals and structures, very difficult indeed. Participation in a learning activity--regardless of the subject matter--can be a valuable tool to help make this transition less difficult. (Increasingly, this advice will also be pertinent for women preparing to leave the workforce after decades of formal employment.) However, many older men maintain the belief that learning is only for younger people, must be 'formal' and is only relevant to work. Better promotion of the intrinsic value of learning activity, *any* learning activity, is vital.

The story of older men's relationship with adult learning is twofold - strong negativity stemming from internalised attitudes to masculinity or education, balanced by the positive benefits that men who have 'crossed the barrier' enjoy. To get men from the former to the latter attitudinal place is the challenge. This challenge is described an Irish publication, *Men on the Move,* (National Association of Adult Education in Dublin, published in 2000):

> *We need to create a culture of education, in the sense that it's acceptable for everyone to do it and everyone can do it.*

John Cross
Adult Learning Australia
10 December 2002

Key documents

National Marketing Strategy for Skills and Lifelong Learning, Brisbane; ANTA, 2000

*Students in Vocational Education and Training: An Overview, NCVER/*ANTA, 2001

Women in Vet 2000 at a Glance , NCVER/ANTA, 2001

Adult Learning Australia's 3rd Age Online Forum (where you can ask questions, raise issues or make comments): http://www.ala.asn.au/interests/index.html

J.H.Chapman, *The Northern College Coalfields Learning Project – Final Report of the Research into Male Participation: Male Participation and the Life-long learning Agenda* Barnsley: the Northern College, 2002

Family and Community Development Committee Parliament of Victoria, *Report no.71 – Inquiry into Planning for Positive Ageing*, December 1997

Ros Foskey, *Older Men Matter*, Armidale; The Institute for Rural Futures, 2001

Geoff Ford & Jim Soulsby, *Mature Workforce Development: East Midlands 2000 Research and Report*, Leicester: NIACE, 2001

Veronica McGivney, *Excluding Men: Men who are Missing from Education and Training*, Leicester: NIACE, 1999

Rod Mitchell, *Bringing in the Blokes: A Guide to Attracting and Involving Men in Community Neighbourhood and Learning Centres*, Perth: Learning Centre Link, 2002

OM:NI, *Inquiry into issues specific to workers over 45 years of age seeking employment, or establishing a business, following unemployment: A submission by Older Men: New Idea (OM:NI) and initiative of COTA*, prepared for the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Workplace Relations, 1999

Toni Owens, *Men on the Move: A Study of Barriers to Male Participation in Education and Training Initiatives*, Dublin*: AONTAS* (National Association of Adult Education), 2000

Jim Soulsby & Geoff Ford, *Northhamptonshire Third Age Employment and Learning Project*, Leicester; NIACE, 2000

Dr John Ward, 'Involvement of Older Men in Education and Activity Programs' in *No limits to learning – Proceedings of the Adult Learners Week Conference, 1995* Sydney: NSW BACE, 1996

Mark Wooden, Adriana Van den Heuvel, Mark Cully and Richard Curtain, *Barriers to Training for Older Workers and Possible Policy Solutions*, Canberra: DETYA, 2001