

# Making Good Connections

How community participation enriches learning,  
wellbeing and a sense of identity in older men

**February 2010**







Australian Government  
Department of Health and Ageing

# Making Good Connections

How community participation enriches learning,  
wellbeing and a sense of identity in older men

**February 2010**



© National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre 2010

The National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre (NSPAC) owns copyright in this work. Apart from any use permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, the work may be reproduced in whole or in part for study or training purposes, subject to the inclusion of an acknowledgement of the source.

Reproduction for commercial use or sale requires written permission from NSPAC. While all care has been taken in preparing this publication, the NSPAC expressly disclaims any liability for any damage from the use of the material contained in this publication and will not be responsible for any loss, howsoever arising, from use or reliance on this material.

Publisher NSPAC      ABN 81 101 126 587      ISBN 978-0-9806526-4-2

The Australian Government accepts no responsibility for the accuracy or completeness of any material contained herein and recommends that users exercise their own skill and care with respect to its use.

The material in this Report may include views or recommendations of other parties, which do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government or indicate its commitment to a particular course of action.

A reference to a particular person, organisation, product or service in any part of this Report in no way implies any form of endorsement by the Australian Government of that person, organisation, product or service.

The Australian Government disclaims to the extent permitted by law all liability for claims, losses, expenses, damages and costs the user may incur as a result of, or associated with, the use of the information contained herein for any reason whatever.

## FOREWORD

Learning is a lifelong process and an important component of successful ageing. Many people understand the value of learning in gaining foundation skills such as literacy and numeracy, and initial vocational qualifications to gain employment. But not everyone realises the value of learning beyond initial education and training.

Learning serves personal and social purposes as well as vocational ones – it provides opportunities for social engagement, helps people to achieve their potential as citizens, and prepares them for active ageing for the future. There is growing evidence to suggest that learning has positive health effects, particularly for older members of our community.

This report highlights findings from a study of men aged 50 years and over in regions of Australia with a higher than average proportion of older men not in the labour force. It investigates men's attitudes towards and experiences of learning through engagement in the community.

The report has two key messages. First, learning outcomes should be recognised and valued, regardless of where and how they are achieved. Second, participation in informal learning appears to be particularly effective in enhancing the wellbeing of older men who are less likely to engage in formal learning.

One of the main challenges for policymakers in this field is to ensure that learning opportunities are keeping pace with the needs of individuals and society by motivating, encouraging and supporting the adults least likely to participate in learning.

Peter Matwijiw  
General Manager Policy and Research  
National Seniors Australia  
February 2010



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project was funded by a National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre 2008 Research Grant. The authors of the original study upon which this report is based are Barry Golding, Annette Foley, Mike Brown and Jack Harvey from the University of Ballarat\*.

The trust, support and cooperation of the many people and community organisations involved is gratefully acknowledged. In particular, the authors would like to thank the men involved in each of these organisations who generously volunteered their time to be interviewed and who completed the survey.

This report was prepared by Ellen Skladzien and Siobhan O'Dwyer.

National Seniors Australia and the National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre gratefully acknowledge the financial and other support provided by the Australian Government to the National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre project.

\*The original report is available in full at [www.productiveageing.com.au](http://www.productiveageing.com.au)

# CONTENTS

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>Foreword</b>                                | <b>5</b>  |
| <b>Acknowledgements</b>                        | <b>7</b>  |
| <b>Introduction</b>                            | <b>9</b>  |
| <b>Research Methods</b>                        | <b>10</b> |
| • Overview of sites and organisations          | 10        |
| • Surveys                                      | 12        |
| • Focus group interviews                       | 12        |
| <b>Survey Results</b>                          | <b>13</b> |
| • Participant characteristics                  | 13        |
| • Participant experiences in the organisation  | 13        |
| • Learning opportunities in the organisation   | 13        |
| • Participant learning preferences             | 14        |
| • Wellbeing outcomes                           | 14        |
| <b>Men's Stories of Learning and Wellbeing</b> | <b>14</b> |
| • Experiences of learning                      | 15        |
| • Experiences of wellbeing                     | 17        |
| • Reinforcing masculinity and identity         | 20        |
| <b>Discussion</b>                              | <b>21</b> |
| <b>Implications</b>                            | <b>22</b> |
| <b>References</b>                              | <b>22</b> |

# Making Good Connections

How community participation enriches learning, wellbeing and a sense of identity in older men



## INTRODUCTION

### Brief overview

Learning is an important component of productive ageing. In fact, research suggests that older adults who continue to learn new information and skills as they age have improved wellbeing (compared with their non-learning counterparts) including 'better health, higher levels of social and civic engagement, and greater resilience in the face of external crises' (Field, 2009, p14). As a result, learning in later life can lead to social and health benefits through reduced use of public health and other government services (ESREA, 2009).

Most research on the benefits of lifelong learning, however, focuses on structured and accredited learning such as TAFE or other courses. Three-quarters of older adults, however, report engaging in learning through informal activities (ABS, 2007). This type of learning can occur through interacting with friends, reading books, or taking part in community groups and organisations. There is very limited research on the impact of learning in diverse settings on wellbeing

and productivity in later life. The aim of this report was to explore how participation in community organisations facilitates learning for socially disadvantaged older men who are no longer in the workforce, and how these experiences contribute to the men's wellbeing.

### Why focus on older men?

Many men miss out on opportunities for learning in later life, particularly those who are single, have poor social connections, have a disability or have limited education. Older men are much less likely to participate in education and training than older women, with only 6% of men over the age of 50 involved in formal learning compared with 15% of older women (ABS, 2007). Older men also have relatively low rates of participation in outlets such as Vocational Education Training (VET) and Adult Community Education (ACE) (Lattimore, 2007). Although older men are unlikely to seek formal learning opportunities as they age, they may participate in community organisations such as sporting groups, volunteer fire and emergency services, or hobby clubs. Little is known, however, about how these type of community organisations foster learning among older men.

Recent research by Golding and colleagues (2007), however, shows that disadvantaged men gain social benefits and an improved attitude to learning from regular and informal community involvement with other men.

Research also indicates that men's wellbeing and sense of identity are often closely associated with paid work. As a result, older men who are no longer in the workforce (whether retired or unemployed) may sometimes struggle in later life to redefine their identity and maintain their wellbeing. This report focuses on men's learning experiences in community organisations, specifically in regions of Australia with a higher than average proportion of older men (aged 50+) not in the labour force. A better understanding of the role of community organisations in learning and wellbeing for older men could have important implications for the development of policy and programs to support older men, particularly in areas of high unemployment.

### Why focus on community organisations?

Most educational research is based around individuals who are learning in order to change occupation, gain employment, or obtain a qualification. Golding and colleagues (2007), however, have found that many older men withdraw from full time work for health reasons and that engaging in formal learning with a specific vocational focus is not an effective way of increasing their employment opportunities, wellbeing, or social inclusion. Also, the men studied by Golding and colleagues (2007) were particularly interested in learning about how to be fit and live a healthier life. Some of these needs may be best met in an informal setting such as a community organisation. Currently the contribution of community organisations to learning and wellbeing is not clearly recognised by government or even the organisations themselves. A more specific understanding of the role of community organisations in supporting learning and wellbeing for older men could lead to more creative, cost-effective, and evidence-based policy and programs on lifelong learning.

### What are the potential benefits of this research?

This report will identify opportunities for marginalised men to develop positive identities and experience informal learning with other men in the community. It will also identify the barriers to learning experienced by older men, as well as their preferred mode of learning. This knowledge will enable community organisations to better tailor their programs for older men. It will also enable government to explore new community models for supporting older men, particularly those experiencing unemployment, disability or recent retirement.

## RESEARCH METHODS

### Overview of sites and organisations selected

Six Australian cities and towns were selected for investigation. The cities and towns were selected on the basis that they were located in regions with a higher than average proportion of men over 50 not in the labour force. These included suburban areas of three capital cities (Blacktown, New South Wales; Noarlunga, South Australia and Bridgewater, Tasmania) one regional city (Lismore, New South Wales), one rural town (Oatlands, Tasmania) and one remote town (Ceduna, South Australia) as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1:** The six sites included in the study



Within the selected cities and towns, five categories of organisations were approached. These included adult and community education (ACE) providers, sporting, religious, voluntary fire or emergency services, aged-care/support services, and men's special interest organisations. These categories were selected in order to capture a diverse range of men and potential learning experiences. An attempt was made to include at least one organisation of each type in each of the six sites.

### **Blacktown, NSW (pop. 271,000)**

Blacktown is located in outer western Sydney, lying half way between the Sydney Central Business District and the Blue Mountains. It is the largest retail and commercial centre west of Parramatta. One organisation from Blacktown was selected: the Blacktown Pottery Club.

The Blacktown Pottery Club is a group of local men who are gay and HIV positive. Formed to counter the social isolation and lack of services for gay, HIV positive men, the group gets together once a week to work on pottery pieces and connect with other men in friendship and support.

### **Noarlunga, South Australia (pop.117,000)**

Noarlunga is the district name for a cluster of coastal suburbs within the City of Onkaparinga, approximately 25km south of the centre of Adelaide. Around one-third of all residents aged over 15 years are not in the labour force. Two organisations from Noarlunga were selected: Hackham West Community Centre and Christies Beach Meals on Wheels.

Hackham West Community Centre (HWCC) provides a number of community programs and services for individuals of all ages. It is also an accredited Adult Community Education (ACE) provider.

Christies Beach Meals on Wheels is a voluntary service that prepares and distributes meals to elderly individuals who are not able to cook for themselves.

### **Bridgewater, Tasmania (pop. 10,000)**

Bridgewater is a small, outer suburb of Hobart, located approximately 20km north-west of the city, in the Municipality of Brighton. Bridgewater is one of the lowest socio-economic areas of Hobart. It has above-average unemployment and above-average crime figures. Two organisations from Bridgewater were selected: the Bridgewater Anglers Club and the Riverside Community Garden and Nursery.

The Bridgewater Anglers Club has been in operation for over a century. The club is known for its connections to the community and regularly arranges fishing and camping trips, field days, information nights and working bees. The Riverside Community Garden and Nursery has been leased by Southern Training, Employment and Placing Solutions Ltd (STEPS), a registered charity and Job Network organisation. The garden helps people from the community (particularly those doing the STEPS program) who do not have a garden at home, to plant a garden and grow fresh and cheap vegetables.

### **Lismore, New South Wales (pop. 45,000)**

Lismore is located 40km inland from Byron Bay, 90 minutes from the Gold Coast and two hours from Brisbane. Three organisations from Lismore were selected: ACE North Coast Inc Community College, Lismore City State Emergency Service (SES), and the Alstonville Seventh Day Adventist Men's Shed.

ACE North Coast Inc has been a provider of Adult Community Education since 1992. Approximately one-third of its advertised offerings are 'vocational qualifications' and one-third are 'foundation and supplementary skills' courses. The other third are 'leisure and lifestyle' courses.

The Lismore City SES provides 4,000 voluntary response hours each year, mainly for storm and flood requests. As a Registered Training Organisation, it trains its volunteers to national accreditation standards in flood management and storm damage control, as well as rescue, search, community education and emergency services liaison. Most of the volunteers are men, and only a minority are aged over 50.

The Alstonville Seventh Day Adventist Men's Shed is a place for older men within the Alstonville community to meet and enjoy shared activities. Ongoing funding for the shed is provided by the local retirement village and the Seventh Day Adventist Church.

### **Oatlands, Tasmania (pop. 540)**

Oatlands, located 83km north of Hobart and 115km south of Launceston, is one of Tasmania's oldest rural towns. Overseen by the Southern Midlands Council, Oatlands is noted for its ageing population, limited cultural/ethnic diversity, high dependence on tourism, and relatively high proportion of retirees. Two organisations from Oatlands were selected: the RSL Bowls Club and the Volunteer Fire Brigade.

The Oatlands RSL Bowls Club offers 'men only' bowls competitions. Women are only allowed to play on a 'special day'. Around three quarters of Bowls Club members are over 50, around 60 per cent are men and very few are returned servicemen.

The Oatlands Volunteer Fire Brigade is centrally located and well equipped. The number of people, mainly men, involved as volunteers is small. While 70 per cent of the volunteer ambulance work in Oatlands involves non-emergency work, 30 per cent is road trauma.

### **Ceduna, South Australia (pop.3,800)**

Ceduna is a small, remote town along the Eyre Highway approximately 800km east of Adelaide on the Great Australian Bight. It is a regional service centre for the surrounding areas.

The town also has several active community organisations and a relatively large proportion of retirees. Two organisations from Ceduna were selected: the Ceduna Uniting Church and the Ceduna Adult Activity Centre.

The Uniting Church in Ceduna is one of at least six separate and active churches in town. In addition to the one-hour weekly service and morning tea, the Minister also provides chaplaincy services to the Ceduna Area School and the Aboriginal 'Town Camp'. The Uniting Church also runs an Op Shop in town.

The Ceduna Adult Activity Centre is one block from The Ceduna Senior Citizens Village. Many male participants in the centre are permanent older residents at the Village. The activity centre provides various services including crafts, exercise classes, woodworking, bus trips and a communal garden.

## Surveys

Surveys were distributed to older men (50+) participating in each organisation. The survey focused on older men's experiences of participating in the organisation, attitudes towards and experiences of learning, and perceived outcomes from participating. The participant survey and overall results can be seen in the full report on the Productive Ageing Centre website ([www.productiveageing.com.au](http://www.productiveageing.com.au)).

## Focus group interviews

To expand on the information collected in the survey, focus group interviews took place with up to seven older men (age 50+) in up to six selected organisations in each city or town. The interviews took place at the organisation or in another place familiar to the participants. Interviews were audio recorded. The specific questions in the interviews can be found in the full report. All interviews were transcribed and transcripts analysed for key themes.

## SURVEY RESULTS

### Participant characteristics

Most respondents were married or previously married, with children. Around three quarters (73%) lived with a wife or partner. Most men (78%) reported that they were 'satisfied with life generally' in the past five years, but many of them had experienced a number of changes during those years including retirement, health problems, significant loss, or disability. Some also experienced family related changes in the past five years including a new personal relationship, separation from a partner and separation from children. Financial crises, unemployment, or difficulties with a business or job were relatively uncommon.

### Participant experiences in the organisation

Most respondents identified as 'active participants' in their organisation and many felt that they had 'some say over how the organisation is run'. Nearly half held 'a leadership role' within the organisation and the majority had been active in the organisation for more than two years.

Most men were positive about their experiences in the organisation. Around two-thirds participated in the organisation at least once a week.

The vast majority enjoyed being involved 'when they want to'. Respondents were positive about most of the outcomes that resulted from participating in the organisation, most notably 'doing what they really enjoy' and 'giving back to the community'. Most disagreed with the statement that they were 'expecting to get more paid work' or 'getting access to men's health information' as a result of participating.

### Learning opportunities in the organisation

Although only ACE and fire/emergency services organisations typically include formal learning or training, the majority of men (91%) indicated that 'being part of their organisation' helped them to learn. They identified a number of types of learning resulting from participation, including

- team or leadership skills
- technical skills
- hobby and leisure skills
- health and safety skills
- learning about computers or the internet; and
- communication and literacy skills

Many of these skills were seen to transfer in a useful way to home, work or other community activities.

Almost all participants agreed that they were keen to learn more (94%) and would like to improve their skills (95%). Around half (48%) agreed that their 'organisation should offer more opportunities for learning' and 47% indicated that they were interested in participating in further learning. The men expressed a wide interest in a range of preferred learning styles within their organisation, although there was a strong preference for hands-on learning (72%). Many were also interested in learning from a fellow organisation member with the appropriate skills (63%).

## Participant learning preferences

When asked about their general learning preferences, most men agreed that they enjoyed learning 'in practical situations' (95%), or 'by doing' (97%). The majority of men agreed that they would be more likely to be involved in learning 'if there was something they really wanted to learn' (86%). Around two-thirds (64%) of the men indicated that they did not enjoy learning 'via the computer or internet'.

Flexibility and accessibility were important for facilitating participation in learning, with the majority of men indicating that they would be more likely to engage in learning if there were programs at times that suited them, or if there was 'somewhere locally they considered a good place to learn'. Similarly nearly a third of men indicated that they would be more likely to learn if there were more short courses available, or if the organisation was closer to their home.

Gender issues were present for some men. Forty-three per cent reported that they would be more likely to learn 'if there were more learning situations where men were encouraged', while one in four saw the lack of locally available male tutors or teachers as an impediment to learning.

Interestingly, more men preferred learning 'in a mixed group including women' (89%) than learning in a group with men only (64%).

Some individuals indicated personal barriers to learning. Forty-two per cent saw their age as a barrier to further learning and a significant proportion identified either their health status (39%), or their confidence (31%), as an impediment to engaging in new learning opportunities.

## Wellbeing outcomes

The majority (89%) of participants reported that participating in the organisation improved their overall wellbeing. More specifically, participants reported that as a result of their participation they felt:

- better about themselves (98%)
- more accepted in their community (89%)
- happier at home (81%)
- that their confidence had improved (87%)
- that their social skills had improved (77%)

Men overwhelmingly viewed the community organisation with which they were involved as a place to meet new friends, keep them healthy, give back to the community, learn new skills and 'be with other men'. Many of the men (70%) also saw it as a way for them to 'get them out of the house'.

## MEN'S STORIES OF LEARNING AND WELLBEING

In the focus group interviews men discussed their participation in the organisation with regard to experiences of learning, wellbeing outcomes, and experiences which reinforced their masculinity and sense of identity.

In the interests of brevity, a selection of the men's stories is presented here which captures the diversity and consistency of the men's experiences across the different organisations. Additional stories, listed by organisation, can be found in the full report.

Although the real names of the organisations have been used, pseudonyms have been used for the participants.

## Experiences of learning

The men's stories of learning focused particularly on the learning of practical skills, the learning of interpersonal (or social) skills, and the general benefits of learning.

### Practical learning

We do training, health and safety training, we do customer service training and we are the first community centre that does it but every community centre will be doing it. The whole idea of people coming to the centre is we like the volunteering, we like teaching things. [We run] Certificate 3 [here] through TAFE. ...[We do it so] that the people who have never been to TAFE will get the experience of TAFE, so they can go on to further education.

Ned, 54, Hackham West Community Centre

[The first course I did] was on computing and the more recent one has been on using Photoshop... I wanted to improve my skills in those areas. ... When I was in the workforce and when I needed help with computing there was always someone down the corridor or in the building, IT people, who I could call and they could sort out my problem. But now that I work from home ... there is no one at home during the day when I want advice. Pat, 76, ACE North Coast

I came to SES with a background in outdoor education which was where I thought I could contribute initially, but of course as I have progressed with the service I have undergone a lot of training courses which has expanded my skills enormously and has enabled me to become a trainer as well in certain areas ... I assess trainees. So in that regard it has expanded my skills. Ted, 62, Lismore City SES

The learning in the organisation is a lot more practical to what people are used to working with theoretical stuff. ... The learning we do here is mainly skills and knowledge and we are starting to impact on ... attitudinal things, so affective learning. Also getting people to maintain safety wherever they go, so again [an emphasis on]

attitudinal things ... rather than 'do it on impulse', to apply what we are trying to pass on to the members here. Colin, 70, Lismore City SES.

You do storm training, first aid training, the general rescue and road rescue... You are learning all the different aspects of it and updating your skills. A lot of the skills change over the years. ... Some of the skills I learnt back here in 1965-67 are totally different to the skills now. [You work] with the different men and pass your skills on. Someone might not be conversant with road rescue or ropes or something like that where I can come into the first aid side of it and vice versa. Vince, 64, Lismore City SES

I have memorised 'trigger points' for most of the district at what height, grades, bridges and things to do with every flood. Matt, 74, Lismore City SES.

Our supervisors come down from Burnie every second Wednesday of each month. ...They keep you up to scratch with your training and most of the time we assess ourselves on jobs and come back and say what we could have done right and what we did do right and talk about it and go from there. Ray, 64, Oatlands Fire Brigade

We have found with the 'Work for the Dole' ... [that] the older men are not interested in potting up plants from one size pot to the next one up. You feel as though you have to have a variety of activities for them to 'suck them in' to some extent. It can't be just the boring and repetitive, one kind of job ... You do have the variety here. Bill, 60, Riverside Community Garden and Nursery.

## Interpersonal learning

[Learning] changes your whole life, you become a totally different person. These days I tend to listen to what someone else has to say rather than just the blank wall.

Trevor, 59, Hackham West Community Centre

You talk to different people every day about different subjects. [I hear] a lot of stories of different parts of the world that I have never been to. There are other interesting things that you learn. Ross, 68, Oatlands RSL Bowls Club

I think probably what I have learned most is to be more tolerant. I have always been in a role where I have been a trainer, so I have always been the 'head' of an organisation in the social sense, but SES has taught me I think to be a lot more tolerant of people's abilities and their attitudes and their personalities. It has made me a strong, more rounded person. There were times when I was less patient. .... Working with volunteers is different to what most people have experienced in their other lives. Ted, 62, Lismore City SES

Certainly when he first came here he didn't say much and now he's even been insubordinate at times ... It has been great to see the skills that he has and the regard that other members have for him. Matt, 74, Lismore City SES

Probably the most important thing is that you learn that everyone is human ... Different people have got different capabilities, different people have got different levels that you can put them to ... I mean I know [Noel's] skills, he knows mine I guess, and that flows into the day to day jobs and I know that I can go and say to [Noel] "Can you do this?" whereas it might be a totally different role to what I would ask [Jack] to do.

Colin, 56, Oatlands Fire Brigade

I have learnt a lot of people skills, particularly since I have got into this job. I started here cooking in the beginning in the kitchen and driving delivery.

Boris, 64, Christies Beach Meals on Wheels

I have been here for two and a bit years and I am enjoying every minute of it. In between the cooking, [I've] probably [learned] a bit of people skills too...how to speak to people properly and just generally getting on with my fellow work mates here, my team members.

Colin, 59, Christies Beach Meals on Wheels

You find people you know and tend to go back. It's great to find people with similar interests. Most of the stuff I have done is music and it's actually nice to get with people who don't do the same as you. It also gives you discipline because if you have to be here at 8 o'clock it makes you do stuff ... It's the discipline that I need.

Paul, 53, ACE North Coast

For me it's a 'carry on' from what I used to do. I used to do my own woodwork in the Village and it has given me the opportunity to keep contact with the people I had contact with before ... It has given me a chance to see different [woodwork] and ideas. Don, 94, Seventh Day Adventist Men's Shed.

During the course of your life there are all new learning curves: the different aspects of handling people, different aspects of kitchen work and this and that, but out on the road you keep an eye on things while you are delivering. I know one person I delivered to one day scared the living heck out of me. He asked me for assistance to 'knock himself off' and he was quite adamant about it ... In a case like that you stop and think "Will he or won't he?" and in a case like that it was either a case of ringing back here to let them know what was going on or to return yourself.

Colin, 59, Christies Beach Meals on Wheels

## Learning outcomes

[Learning] gets you a comfortable life, it gets you a good job, helps you grow and get your qualifications up and that kind of stuff makes you who you are. [Paul, 53, ACE North Coast](#)

You have to challenge yourself I reckon. Otherwise you become an old man at 45. You have to keep trying. [Carl, 71, ACE North Coast](#)

We have had three people who have got experience here and are now in a paid position as learning and development officers. Some of our team leaders have been able to carry that skill and qualification over to their work as well. It has helped them with their progression through their point of employment. [Matt, 74, Lismore City SES](#)

I get, as I say, great satisfaction out of seeing things grow. I have always had a garden since I was a little fellow...I have always had an enquiring mind, I like to do things that I enjoy and it's affected my life in as much as I like to know [what] makes things tick.

[Ken, 76, Ceduna Adult Activity Centre](#)

Well I think education can be liberating, it can take me out of what I was and the more I learn, the more I understand.

[Joe, 81, Blacktown Pottery Group](#)

I have always used my hands and I have always had hobbies in fine work. I did a lot of woodwork and I have carried these things right through and I can still work.

[Don, 94, Seventh Day Adventist Men's Shed](#)

## Experiences of wellbeing

The men's stories of wellbeing focused particularly on improved mental health, increased social support, feeling valued, and contributing to society.

### Mental health

I had depression and anxiety and I went to a course at the Noarlunga Centre 'health and wellbeing' something like that, and they brought me here to the centre and I started coming one day a week just to see how I would go and I got in touch with this bloke and he counselled me ... I get a lot out of [volunteering in the kitchen], if I didn't I would be a bundle of nerves. [I get] enjoyment, a feeling of being wanted, friendship. I would rather be here than at home...Except for this place I would be in a big rut.

[Trevor, 59, Hackham West Community Centre](#)

About four years ago .... I had an emotional breakdown [while] I was teaching in [a regional city] and life changed dramatically for me. I was in a relationship and when that crashed I went to the Men's [and Family] Centre in Lismore to get my mind back on track. So my life changed. I [now] want to gain more skills to navigate this particular culture. [Ed, 51, ACE North Coast](#)

I am ...an amputee ... a widow, and I look after the father-in-law, he's a widow too ... my wife passed away about three years ago and to be with the members here, they have helped me a hell of a lot. I went through a bit of a black stage a few months back ... Very depressed ... actually OD'd ... but I am over that ... and bowls is really great [for] joining in.

[Ross, 65, Oatlands RSL Bowls Club](#)

It has been a great benefit to me and if it hadn't been I would have died.

[Don, 94, Seventh Day Adventist Men's Shed](#)

## Social interaction/support

What I get out of it mainly, as well as the qualification, is the group contact. I think that is really important to me. Through that group contact I am able to have some sort of reference on how my life is going and I find that the most valuable factor ... How people respond to me is a pretty big part in how I measure how I am getting through the world. Without [group contact] I would be more narrow minded, more black and white, probably racist, probably sexist, probably everything else. Because I am isolated [at home] ... I avoid isolation in these [group] surroundings.  
Ed, 51, ACE North Coast

I have always been interested, and you only do things because you like doing them and I get a lot of enjoyment out of helping other people. The company and the good friendship really evolve from my interest. I have made a lot of good friends ...that's one of the greatest things about playing bowls, is the people you meet, the contacts you make in different walks of life, you are involved with all walks of life and I love my sport ... It's just a part of you. It's just a diversion from other things. It's the team participation, you are not just out there playing for yourself, you are playing for your three other playing partners and your club.  
Peter, 62, Oatlands RSL Bowls Club

You get to know people and it's a good day out. [I like] to socialise with other people and to get away from my own little thing at home...I like the competition with other participants and I just enjoy being with the bowls folk.  
Bruce, 59, Oatlands RSL Bowls Club

Sometimes I ask myself "Why do I bother going to church?" but I still do get a lot out of it from the moral issues, from the social side of it and the bonding within that church group is terrific. If somebody has got problems then everybody comes around and that 'church family' as we call it, well that's terrific to have that support around the place. That's the reason I go.  
George, 72, Ceduna Uniting Church

It has benefits for me personally. I am retired so it has a function to keep me focused on a certain regimen of behaviour ... I do enjoy coming along to the training nights and it meets the need for affiliation, as a lot of people would be around.  
Matt, 74, Lismore City SES

It [fulfils my] need to be with people who have the same interest as you and the need for achievement that I probably had in the younger part of my life. The 'like kind of people' is probably the best way of expressing [affiliation]. Being with them, [with] similar values, similar focus, similar levels of responsibility and similar levels of ... [putting] something back into the community. It's becoming a bit of a cliché but it is none the less true with our organisation.  
Colin, 68, Lismore City SES

I get companionship out of coming...I come down here the same as everyone else if there is a BBQ on or the bus trip. [Now I'm separated] I find it very lonely. I was married for 49 years, married in 1960, and even now at the Village I find it very lonely, but I busy myself, my days. I spend half an hour in the garden almost every day.  
Ken, 76, Ceduna Adult Activity Centre

The real satisfaction comes when you go out talking to these people who we supply the food to.  
Boris, 61, Christies Beach Meals on Wheels

At the age we are at now, '60 plus', we are coming into retirement and it's a big thing for me to fall back on ... but if I didn't have that to fall back on, life would be pretty empty at present.  
John, 64, Bridgewater Anglers Club

I think that social interaction actually makes for a more evenness to your life and that will extend to whatever there is ... like I could become very insular because for a while I have only left home to go to the doctor's or go shopping ... so it actually improves your whole outlook and therefore your relationship with other people.  
Michael, 71, Blacktown Pottery Group

I'm talking about coming in here as a virtual stranger. I know some of the people up in the Village but you get people that give you the support that you need behind you ... a lot of people do [need support] and I think that's what I get out of it ... I can get in my buggy and drive up here which is fortunate, the wife goes off and does shopping and gets her hair periwinkled or something or other ... And she's happy and I get back and I'm happy.

Errol, 85, Seventh Day Adventist Men's Shed

### **Giving back to the community/feeling valued**

What I get out of it is the satisfaction of being able to pass on my skills. The other satisfaction is that when you are out on jobs you are able to assist and help people in need and offer our services. Vince, 63, Lismore City SES

I do get a great deal of satisfaction out of it. I like to use the skills I have. I would hate to see them pass away or die. I am in community radio too at the moment and that keeps me pretty busy, but I am maintaining SES because I like it and it's just another mountain to climb.

Ken, 71, Lismore City SES

There are members who are in their 70s and 80s who have 20 or 30 years in the fire service as a volunteer, they are still members but they may step down from active duty, they attend all practices and sweep the station or make coffee but they still remain brigade members ... In an active role they would probably go into communications on a big fire day rather than go out into the more strenuous roles.

Noel, 55, Oatlands Fire Brigade

The only benefit I have is that you are doing something for the community, somebody has to do it and you are there with your mate and I am there to help put the house fire out down the street. Jack, 67, Oatlands Fire Brigade

This senior guy called me in [after an incident] and when I walked away he shook hands and said "Good job mate" and I think that is comradeship. That is where the rewards come as far as I am concerned, just knowing that you have done a good job, or done it to the best of your ability that is the most important.

Colin, 56, Oatlands Fire Brigade

The things I get out of it are self-satisfaction of assisting in the community [and] doing something different. I enjoy cooking and the days here are so much fun because people are here because they want to be here. We have a real good quorum. I get [the] satisfaction of putting something back in and I get something out of it too.

Stewart, 64, Christies Beach Meals on Wheels

It's just the satisfaction I get when I meet the elderly folk that we do the meals for ... In fact there was one particular elderly woman...she wanted to adopt me as a son. Some of the elderly are real characters and they are glad to see you there.

Colin, 59, Christies Beach Meals on Wheels

It's good to be able to continue to be involved within the community. This is a great place, to see the Shed be part of the community and be part of something that we can build on and make it better.

Frank, 74, Seventh Day Adventist Men's Shed

## Reinforcing masculinity and identity

The men's stories illustrate how participation in the organisation had reinforced their masculinity and helped them develop a (new) sense of identity.

Most of the guys are in their 50s and they need to sit down with men and talk about men's issues, which going back 10 years ago or 15 years ago, men didn't get into that side of things. They would sit at home and they wouldn't open up how they felt about things. Some people are a bit shy when they get in there and you put your hand up and say "Look this happened to me 20 years ago". When they sit with people and hear their stories they then come out and tell their story and feel better about that as well.

Ned, 54, Hackham West Community Centre

We got more men on the management [committee] and we started thinking about more men's programs.

Ned, 54, Hackham West Community Centre

[If I was at TAFE or a uni] I would be [seen as] a failure if I said I don't know something, I would be a failure if I said I had better go and learn something else. It would be a failure, for the Australian male would say 'Gee someone else might know something'.

Paul, 53, ACE North Coast

The comraderie...the wife is the local GP so she is out most of the time. The Fire and Rescue fills in that bit of my life that is missing, it's a continuation. You meet a lot of people ... there's a different bunch of guys with different attitudes.

Noel, 55, Oatlands Fire Brigade

[The monthly bus trip is] a good day away with men, I live on my own and it's a really good day...

[We] always get a good meal wherever we go.

[If I didn't come here it'd be] a lonely sort of a life, I don't do anything else, I don't drink, I don't smoke.

Douglas, 82, Ceduna Adult Activity Centre

It's a change from home. [My] wife she comes down here on Tuesdays and enjoys herself with the women, sewing and things like that. It's a change from being home and you get a good attitude just talking to different men ... Different conversations [than talking with women] ... You don't talk about the same things as you do at home all the time.

Jock, 79, Ceduna Adult Activity Centre.

[I enjoy] the friendship of all the fellows and people around me. They are always friendly and if you meet them in the street they always talk. It's the companionship I suppose, something different to when you are home with your wife all the time. Jock, 79, Ceduna Adult Activity Centre

There has been quite a number of gay men that would have been at the bowling club or whatever that are just not out and they don't feel they have the confidence to come out. That is what we are aiming to do, is break those barriers. We are just normal people, we just have fun like everyone else and we have arguments like everyone else, there is nothing different about [us].

Phil, 64, Blacktown Pottery Group

## DISCUSSION

This report provides substantial evidence of older men learning through participation in community organisations in diverse locations across Australia. The survey responses, along with the men's stories, illustrate the different types of learning which can occur in these organisations. This includes (but is certainly not limited to) learning practical and interpersonal skills and techniques, as well as learning about leadership and working in teams. Many men indicated that these skills had practical application in their everyday lives.

Although most men reported learning through their organisation, the majority were keen to learn more and continue improving their skills. This suggests that some organisations are not capitalising on the learning opportunities inherent in their programs. About half of the men thought that their organisation should offer more opportunities for learning, including providing programs and courses at convenient times and locations. Some men also wanted more learning situations where 'men were encouraged' or where there were more male instructors.

There is a clear opportunity here for community organisations to expand on the learning opportunities they provide, but they must take into account the learning preferences and style of older men, as well as their need for flexible and engaging opportunities. The personal barriers identified by men, including age, health and confidence, must also be considered when expanding the opportunities for older men to learn in community organisations. Despite the desire for more learning opportunities, more than 90% of men reported that being part of their community organisation helped them to learn.

This research also revealed positive outcomes from learning. Although most men reported that they did not expect to get more paid work through their participation in the organisation, some identified flow on effects of their participation to vocational opportunities. Others saw learning as liberating - a way to stay young - as well as a way to stay connected with the community.

Taken together, these findings provide strong support for the concept that learning in later life is not limited to traditional education and training settings. These findings are consistent with the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) recommendations which note that all learning environments, not just formal settings, are important for older adults (OECD, 2001).

This research also shows a direct link between participation in community organisations and a sense of wellbeing. Nine out of ten men reported that participating in the organisation led to an increase in their wellbeing. The stories supported these results, with men describing improved mental health, increased social interaction and support, a sense of purpose, and feeling valued through giving back to the community. In the survey, men also reported feelings of increased confidence, being happier at home, increased social engagement, feeling more accepted in the community and feeling as if they had a place where they belonged.

In addition to providing learning and wellbeing benefits, older men's participation in community organisations also helped to reinforce masculinity and identity. The men reported having the opportunity to talk about things that they wouldn't feel comfortable speaking about with their wives or partners, as well as enjoying being able to spend time with other men in healthy, productive ways. Many of the men saw their organisation as a place 'to be with other men'. Although the benefits are clear, older men's participation in some community organisations is still less than that of women, despite their obvious enthusiasm for learning through being involved. Programs that specifically target men clearly play an important role in engaging men in activities that lead to both personal and community benefits.

Finally, this report also shows that older men's participation in community organisations also provides significant benefits for the organisation and the broader community through the passing on of skills and knowledge, making of products, and provision of community services.

## IMPLICATIONS

This report has a number of implications for government and those working in the community sector:

- Community organisations and government need to work together to develop policy and programs which promote and support the participation of older men in community organisations.
- Government needs to formally recognise the important role that community organisations, other than those which provide accredited training, play in the learning and wellbeing of older adults.
- Community organisations also need to promote the learning opportunities available within their programs and work to engage men who see their age, health or confidence as barriers to learning.
- Community organisations need to actively engage (more) older men who could benefit from the experience (through learning and wellbeing) and also make significant contributions to the work of the organisation and the broader community.

## REFERENCES

- ABS. (2007). Adult learning, Australia, 2006-2007. Cat no. 4229.0
- ESREA. (2007). Education and learning for older adults. European Society for Research into the Education of Adults: Munich.
- Field, J. (2009). Well-being and happiness. Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning Thematic Paper 4, NIACE: Leicester.
- Golding, B., Brown, M., Foley, A., Harvey, J. and Gleeson, J. (2007). Men's sheds in Australia: Learning through community contexts. National Centre for Vocational Education Research: Adelaide.
- Lattimore, R. (2007). Men not at work: An analysis of men outside the labour force. Staff Working Paper, Australian Government Productivity Commission: Canberra.
- OECD. (2001). Closing the gap: Securing benefits for all from education and training. Education Policy Analysis, OECD: Paris

## ABOUT THE NATIONAL SENIORS PRODUCTIVE AGEING CENTRE

The National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre is an initiative of National Seniors Australia and the Department of Health and Ageing. The Centre's aim is to advance knowledge and understanding of all aspects of productive ageing to improve the quality of life of people aged 50 and over.

The Centre's key objectives are to:

- Support quality consumer oriented research informed by the experience of people aged 50 years and over;
- Inform Government, business and the community on productive ageing across the life-course;
- Raise awareness of research findings which are useful for older people; and
- Be a leading centre for research, education and information on productive ageing in Australia.

For more information about the Productive Ageing Centre, visit [www.productiveageing.com.au](http://www.productiveageing.com.au) or call 02 6230 4588.



---

23 Torrens Street, Braddon, ACT 2612 **P** 02 6230 4588 **F** 02 6230 4277  
**E** [info@productiveageing.com.au](mailto:info@productiveageing.com.au) **W** [www.productiveageing.com.au](http://www.productiveageing.com.au)