



FACT SHEET

Health, Wellbeing and Relationships

Men's Sheds

Older men's learning spaces and programs in Australia

Week beginning 20 March 2006

Research Project for the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) through the University of Ballarat

Project approach: Literature review and data analysis, survey, interviews and focus group interviews on site.

Time Frame: September 2005 – August 2006

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PROJECT PURPOSE:

This research examines what skill development takes place for older men in dedicated men's programs and community spaces, usually referred to as 'men's sheds'. It aims to research the circumstances and attitudes that have been shown to bring otherwise disengaged men to learning, and from the research, to create a typology for learning by older men (defined as age 45+ years). In particular, it seeks to closely examine the rationales, pedagogies, experiences and outcomes of participants in Australian learning and community contexts and programs devised for and used by men.



These spaces and programs form a growing part of local government, community services and welfare provision for older men at a neighborhood and suburb level in towns and local communities across Australia, particularly in southern Australia. Voluntary community organizations with a significant proportion of older male participants such as those devoted to rural and remote public safety as well as football

clubs, Senior Citizens and Land Care organisations have been shown, through recent rigorous research, to be critically important sites for re-engaging older men in learning both formally and informally – with significant benefits to their lives, work, family and communities.

The research will consider the increasing difficulties older men are apparently having in the much changed world of work – typically with identities that are so tightly defined by their previous paid work, with sometimes negative attitudes towards new forms of formal learning including VET (vocational education and training); a lack of social and emotional connectedness; an inability to relate positively to existing formal and indoor learning programs or spaces and increasing discomfort with widely proliferated forms of information and computer technology (ICT) familiar to most younger men. Older men appear to flourish in situations where the emphasis is on hands-on, practical and/or outside activity and where program formality is minimal. The research is anticipated to provide pointers as to how more formal learning organisations, including VET and schools, might better meet the needs and interests of younger males who also learn through the experience of doing.



The research will include an examination of the impact of a range of factors - shown from previous research to pose barriers to older men's attitudes to learning. These include many of the already known barriers to learning for many older men: the lasting impact of negative school experiences, fear of failure, negative attitudes to formal post-compulsory education, the importance of work to male identity (and the deliberate avoidance of many forms of formal learning), resistance to change, lack of social capital, skepticism about

the benefits of learning and practical and structural obstacles including the formality of VET and comprehensively feminised nature of many existing learning spaces in community settings.

It is also envisaged that the interviews and surveys will have the capacity of explore the otherwise difficult to identify inter-generational effects of learning on older men - from their fathers as well as to their sons and grandsons. By including metropolitan, regional and rural sites in each state, some place-related effects of occupation and identity on learning will be able to be separated out.

Finally, the surveys and interviews of this large sample of older men informally participating in programs will provide unique and new insights about learning preferences for a diverse group of older men - who would not usually or typically be involved in adult and community education (ACE) or VET programs or be counted in VET statistics.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

- What do current data and research say about learning programs, settings, spaces, policies and pedagogies for older men (age over 45)?
- What are the rationales for creating dedicated men's learning spaces and programs including 'men's sheds' - specifically for older men in Australia? Who are

the participants, why are they participating, what are their outcomes and are they effective?

- How might findings about older men's learning in such settings be incorporated into a typology for older men's learning that enhances re-engagement, informs policy and leads to greater participation and outcomes in VET, ACE and pathways to work?

THE METHOD:

Comprehensive and critical analysis of current research, participation patterns, pedagogies and policies for older men in education and training by sector and setting, including participation in informal community-based, voluntary and service sectors and organizations, including men's sheds in aged care settings, health programs, veterans programs and community-based organizations.

Survey (up to 15 customised surveys distributed/site to shed participants/clients), site analysis and 20 minute group interview with key informants (e.g. coordinator, key staff member, committee member, volunteer) in 24 selected men's shed's or similar programs and spaces, including community sheds. Six sheds/providers surveyed in both SA and Victoria, 4 in NSW, Tasmania & WA. 2x20 minute group interviews with a broadly representative user group of male participants in all 24 sites with 3 participants all aged 45+. Analysis and synthesis of findings from Research Questions 1 & 2 resulting in a report, including a proposed comprehensive typology of older men's learning in Australia.

THE ORGANISATION:

The University of Ballarat has a strong track record in rural and regional research in Australia. It is a small, multi-sectoral University incorporating a strong Institute of Rural and Regional Research.