

## Learning at the end of the rainbow

A study of community learning availability & outcomes for older men in an Australian regional community

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## Context for the paper

- Part of a UB study for National Seniors Australia into *Senior men's learning and wellbeing through community participation in Australia* (2009).
- Lismore (pop. 45,000) was one of six selected sites in three states, where the proportion of men not in paid work was higher than average.
- Audio-recorded and transcribed interviews and surveys with men who voluntarily participate in nine Lismore community-based organisations.
- Six organisation types: ACE; age-related; fire & emergency; sporting; men's special interest.

## The organisations

- North Coast Community College
- Over 50s Learning Centre; Northern Rivers U3A; Lismore Senior Citizens
- Lismore City SES
- Lismore Rugby Union Club
- Men's & Family Centre; Richmond Valley Woodcrafters; Alstonville Adventist Men's Shed.

## Context for the study

- Most education & training organisations are oriented to formal training for youth.
- Around half of the working population has no post school qualification.
- At least one third of adults are functionally illiterate.
- Most learning (and its maintenance) is via the workforce, home or internet.
- Discretionary learning for 50+ is not universal in Australia; where it exists one quarter are men.
- So ... where and how do older men not in work learn?

## Literature

- Men invest significantly in paid work.
- Retirement, particularly if forced early, creates a potential identity crisis for men.
- Older men without access to learning through work, through community involvement or ACE are at elevated risk of social exclusion.
- Dedicated learning programs are rarely pitched to older men.
- Australia has a highly gender-segmented labour force, education & training courses and sectors as well as community-based organisations.

## About Lismore & data

- Rainbow Region: inland city; NSW north coast
- Well developed capability in region in all tiers of adult education (uni, TAFE, ACE, community learning and other organisations)
- 98m pages of transcript data from 38 men 50+
- Limitations: only one site; small sample in 9 organisations; only one quarter of men 50+ are involved in community-based organisations; does not account for experiences of disconnected men.

## Results (Narratives)

- ACE
- Age-related
- Fire/SES
- Sporting
- Men's Special interest

## Discussion 1

- There is a rich & diversity of community-based, learning-related experiences available to older men as participants in community based organisations in the Lismore region.
- The learning and wellbeing benefits are significant and interrelated, particularly where the learning is social, incidental & deliberately informal
- Only one third of the organisations had learning as their core business.
- The learning most sought valued and experienced is not narrow, formal or vocational.
- Much of the learning is social, broad, deep and salutogenic (health giving)

## Discussion 2

- There is significant value to older men's lives of regular social activity in community settings and opportunities to give back *through* participation.
- This value is at odds with neo-liberal policies which restrict government support to accredited VET for younger, working-age adults.
- There is pressure to 'take the vocational training' with whatever other services are available, regardless of what older men actually want or need to learn.
- It is difficult to avoid 'the diverse tentacles of the VET system' (Bardon 2006)
- Men avoid being placed in patronizing positions as students, customers & clients, and prefer learning that is practical, regular, social, hands on and that enhances wellbeing.

## Conclusions

- Older men deliberately withdraw from full time paid work (sometimes early), usually for pragmatic, socially sensible and economically rational and logical reasons.
- More vocational training is seldom the silver bullet. In many cases it is inappropriate and irrelevant to older men.
- Many older men are seeking opportunities to learn how to stay well & socially connected, but are severely limited in their choices.
- A city like Lismore provides a far greater range of learning organisation choices than most regional in Australia. In most other areas, surrogate learning organisations become important.