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Learning in later life: The experiences of older learners in regional Australia

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Some background info....

- Over 30 yrs research on teaching & learning in later life (particularly by Frank Glendenning)
- Lifelong learning research has focused on chronological age or stages and post-work period
- Many types of learning recognised post-work (Alex Withnall)
- Relevance of later life learning to healthy ageing has been recognised in policy and practice, but the research is limited
- Policy attention recently shifted from healthy ageing to productive ageing, focusing on the learning requirements of older workers
- Limited understanding of the learning needs of older adults and cohort differences; extent of formal and informal learning opportunities; standards and equity issues.

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Building a research agenda

- **Key questions:**
 - What are the emerging learning needs of older adults and how do they differ across cohorts, sectors and contexts? e.g. third sector, higher education, paid work, care.
 - What are the principles of good practice to inform later life learning approaches?
 - What are the personal, industry, policy and educational challenges to create inclusive approaches for later life learning?
- **Regional focus – Gippsland in South Eastern Victoria**

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So why Gippsland region?

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So why Gippsland region? – cont.

Proportion of the population 65+ from 2006-2036: Gippsland, Victoria and Australia

Data sources:
Gippsland: ABS Census 2006 & Department of Sustainability and Environment
Victoria: ABS 3222.0 Population Projections, Victoria, Series B
Australia: ABS 3222.0 Population Projections, Australia, Series B

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Exploratory research in regional Victoria

Study 1 – Five focus groups conducted in the Gippsland Region with students 45+

- Monash University Gippsland
- Central Gippsland Institute of TAFE (GippsTAFE – Yallourn and Morwell campuses)
- Education Centre Gippsland (Warragul campus)
- Latrobe Valley University of the Third Age (U3A)

Study 2 - Semi-structured interviews with senior educators at Monash University Gippsland and GippsTAFE Yallourn

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Study 1: Focus groups with older students on the experience of learning in later life

Key themes

1. Meaning of education changes over time
2. Motivation may be functional or driven by interest and self-actualisation
3. Barriers include family, personal, social, and financial issues
4. Learning benefits health, quality of life and life priorities.

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Meaning of education changes over time

“When you are in school in your teens you think you are great and all grown up and school is unimportant but it’s not until you hit your late 30s and 40s that you begin to understand what you want to do and then you have to go back and do it all again - and it’s much harder
GippsTAFE participant

“As a younger person there is so much pressure to succeed at high school with the sense that you only get one chance. As an older person you know that high school isn’t the be all and end all and that you can always try again later”
Monash participant

“Very different now. No comparison.... We had entrance exams and if you didn’t get in then for girls there was domestic arts and the technical schools were good for boys.”
ECG Gippsland Participant

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Motivation to learn/study

Functional:
“To learn how to spell”
GippsTAFE participant
(participating in the Language, Literacy & Numeracy Programme as a Centrelink requirement)

“Legislative change means that I have to formalise my qualifications this year”
GippsTAFE participant

Self actualisation:
“I always felt that I am not the person I should have been because I didn’t have a degree – that’s why I am here now”
Monash participant

“Seen too many fellows retire at 65 and a couple of years down the track they are pushing up daisies, mainly because they didn’t have an outside interest”
U3A participant

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Barriers to learning in later life

Social:
“Hardest thing I found when I first started was being talked to like a school kid”
“Learning is not a real job.”
GippsTAFE participants

Family tensions:
“If you are not working then you should be able to do all the cooking and the housework”
“You choose - the uni degree or me”
Monash participants

Personal attitude:
“At this age, the only barrier that any one has ... to learn is his or herself ... you need to have a positive attitude”
U3A participant

Health:
“Once you get past 40 you start developing health problems and yet they don’t make any particular allowances for it”
ECG Participant

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Barriers to learning – cont.

Financial:
“Time limits are a form of discrimination against older learners... their attitude is what you learnt 10 years ago isn’t relevant”
ECG participant

“Costs could be an issue – rising from a couple of hundred this year to 3 grand next year”
GippsTAFE participant

Regulations:
“The time limits are a form of discrimination against older learners... their attitude is what you learnt 10 years ago isn’t relevant”
ECG participant

Regional issues:
“For me to get to my course is over 50K each way ...it nearly sent me broke. Out here it is a study in isolation and the tyranny of distance.”
ECG Participant

Lack of prior knowledge:
“I am concerned I have huge gaps in my learning re spelling, referencing”
ECG Participant

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Benefits of learning

Health and social benefits
“My child is very happy because before coming back to education I was suffering from depression and now I am around people and he has seen the change in me”
GippsTAFE participant

“It has given me focus. I have a mental illness and my doctor has seen the progression in me. It has been very empowering”
Monash participant

“One’s own self respect – feeling like you are still alive”
U3A participant

“We get to mix with people of all ages & backgrounds – it’s amusing”
GippsTAFE participant

“My own personal growth and development, even if it didn’t earn me a cent”
Participant

Time management
“Learn to better use time and that there are things you can do without. I am not doing elaborate meals any more”
Monash participant

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Study 2: Learning in later life – discussions with educational providers

Semi-structured interviews with groups of senior educators at Monash Gippsland and GippsTAFE Yallourn

Key themes:

Trends in mature aged student enrolments.

Both groups reported strong uptake by older learners but this has been stable at university and increasing at TAFE over recent years as older people recognise they can change careers.

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Discussions with educational providers – cont.

Developments in targeting older learners

Neither group reported any specific strategies for targeting older learners. Both uni and TAFE saw that the TAFE was better suited to responding to this emerging need, particularly for older workers.

Strategies to increase participation

Both noted the importance of multiple attendance modes (full/part time, online etc). The need for additional funding targets at older learners was noted, perhaps to allow the provision of short courses. The need for additional support, particularly in IT, was also raised by TAFE.

Work transitions

The TAFE discussion highlighted the opportunity that education gives to transition to new careers, particularly for those people no longer able to “stay on the tools” or for women returning to the workforce after a long absence due to family commitments.

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Summary

• This initial scoping of the experiences of older students and educational providers in the Gippsland Region has identified that:

- Older students value the opportunity to undertake further learning
- They face multiple barriers not necessarily faced by younger learners
- They report significant health, social and personal benefits
- Education providers reported strong interest from older people in taking on learning opportunities and that this interest is increasing within the TAFE arena
- The possibility of directly targeting older learners was recognised by both organisations but seen as more of a TAFE issue.

• Older learners are complicated and so are the issues related to them!

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Next steps

• Findings will inform development of larger survey of experiences and needs of learners in later life in regional Victoria, including:

- Scoping of wider learning opportunities
- Exploration of the experience of older learners
- Possible intervention study on the benefits of learning in residential and community care

• So watch this space

www.gippsland.monash.edu.au/research/lifecourse

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