

About FACE: Implications of research into men's learning preferences in rural towns

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Abstract

Recent research by Golding Harvey and Echter(2004) of men's learning patterns in small rural towns has established the significance of a number of variables that determine whether and how men learn in these contexts. This paper presents the findings and implications of that research, based on a survey of men in ten towns. In essence, the research shows that men learn much from their active involvement in community and service organisations in small rural towns. They prefer learning that is informal, practical and local and provided through that organisation. The paper asks whether there might be a need, in the light of the research evidence and men's expressed learning preferences, to examine and reconsider the gendered nature of many adult and VET learning organisations in order to better accommodate the learning preferences of a wider range of men and women. The paper identifies particular problems for men in rural towns where a TAFE is often not accessible and where an adult and community education (ACE) provider becomes the primary public site for adults undertaking local, formal learning and for accessing services including the internet. The implications of the general reluctance of men to learn in formal and structured settings is contrasted with the many other ways in which men access learning in community-based, volunteer and service organisations. Some suggestions are made as to how learning contexts and policies might be reconfigured to more closely match the needs of older men as well as for the majority of rural men with negative previous experiences at school. The implications of the research for appropriate teaching and learning contexts for boys, as well as for re-engaging later learners and breaking the cycle of intergenerational reluctance to learn by some men, are also considered.

Introduction

This research and the survey reported in this paper was designed to investigate men's learning patterns and preferences in small rural towns. The reason for the focus on small rural towns is that the ACE provider in such towns is usually the only public site accessible to adult learners. Unlike in larger towns and cities, small towns seldom have access to a local TAFE provider. In the identified small, rural towns targeted in this study, the ACE provider is typically the only site that provides public access to

computers and to associated computer-based learning programs. In effect, if adults, including men in small rural towns, *don't* use the local ACE provider and are unable to travel considerable distances away from the towns to learn, the learning they experience is likely to be limited to informal learning in community organisations beyond ACE.

This survey was novel in at least three important senses. Firstly, it was specifically targeted to men, particularly in small rural towns. Secondly, it was deliberately inclusive of learning occurring within and beyond ACE, including informal learning through community involvement in service and leisure organisations. Thirdly, it was deliberately customised to be relevant to five different organisations and ten different ACE providers in ten towns. This customisation allowed the survey¹ to be distributed in 50 different organisations: to ACE learners - as well to community members involved in fire services, senior citizens, landcare and football clubs - in ten different towns. The purpose of this customisation, including the name of each local ACE organisation², apart from seeking to localise the survey and increase response rates, was to avoid further confusion with the poorly understood term 'ACE' as well as to gauge the perceived accessibility and effectiveness of the local ACE providers.

The 50 different surveys asked a diverse sample of relatively involved men in small rural towns similar questions about the learning they were experiencing and also about their learning attitudes and preferences. The survey design and questions were premised on the presupposition, to be tested in the research, that much important learning for men occurs beyond the bounds of 'courses' in 'providers'.

For the pragmatic purposes of this exploratory survey, the community organisations chosen to be surveyed were those where a broad spectrum of men – in terms of ages and interests - might be expected to be learning – either through ACE programs and/or through their wider community involvement. It is important to stress from the outset that the survey did not seek to either identify the learning needs of all men in these towns or to compare men between towns. On one hand, it provided a snapshot of rural male ACE learners in small towns - who comprised one third of the respondent sample (33.6%). On the other hand, it included other men in the same towns who, it was anticipated, would not only be relatively active members in the other four organisations, but also motivated enough to return the survey - if it could be customised sufficiently. Indeed across all five organisation types, 70 per cent of male respondents identified themselves as members of the organisations in which they were surveyed, around two thirds of respondents (66%) regarded themselves as 'active participants' in those organisations and one third (33%) held leadership roles. Consistent with the assumption that men in the overall sample would be undertaking learning beyond ACE, around one half (47%) of men reported that they had attended

¹ For example the 20 surveys distributed through the Boort Football Club were titled '*Survey of Men in the Boort Football Club*', and referred by name, at the relevant questions, to the local ACE provider, the *Boort Resource and Information Centre*.

² Two questions were customised to include the title of the local ACE provider in the town in which they were distributed. For example all Boort surveys asked for agreement or disagreement to statements '... as they apply to the Boort Resource and Information Centre'. Similarly, all Boort surveys sought responses to a set of questions about what '... the Boort Resource and Information Centre do to better support the learning needs of men?'

‘a formal learning program; some time in the past year including many men not learning in ACE.

It is also important to stress that the survey did not seek to compare men with women - though it presupposed, on the basis of the existing data and literature, that men’s participation and preferences in adult and community education (ACE) are likely to be different. Rather this survey-based research sought to identify learning-related factors and variables within the selected men’s sample and across the small town, rural organisations sampled. It sought to give clues – largely missing in the literature, as to how men’s learning might be configured to meet the specific needs of different groups of men in as well as beyond ACE.

The reason for the focus on men in this study is the primary author’s experience - from extensive previous research into learning in small and rural towns over ten years - that women clearly outnumber men as participants in ACE: not only as students, but also as coordinators, staff, committee members and tutors. ACE programs as well as the services that they provide, are logically and typically skewed towards the particular needs of women who make up the majority of ACE participants. Golding (2003, 2004) has previously explored some of the literature on gender segmentation in ACE including gender-based segmentation and disadvantage associated with rural and remote geographic location. Johnson and Hinton (1986) noted nearly twenty years ago that on the basis of female participation rates approaching 80 per cent, women ‘almost own’ Australian adult education. Golding, Davies and Volkoff (2001, p.68) in their national review of ACE research, observed that ‘women clearly outnumber men as learners and workers in ACE. This phenomenon is historic and ongoing.’ The data on ACE participation from all Australian States and Territories³ over many years shows that men are indeed significantly under-represented in ACE compared to women. For example in Victoria in 2001, there were around two female ACE students for every male ACE student (Teese 2004). Byrne (2001 p.10, 2002) noted, in a NSW-based study, that ‘The gender balance for general interest course at the WEA⁴ is approx. 75:25% in favour of women’.

Recent research into boys learning provides another reason to focus on learning by adult males in rural towns. Research data from schools shows a tendency towards early and increasing disengagement from learning by rural boys, who are less likely than girls to value formal learning and more likely to value instrumental, practical learning. Boys and young men are also increasingly more likely than girls and young women are, to participate in and succeed in a wide range of formal educational settings at or beyond school. It is therefore considered important in this study to find out where and how post-school adults are learning - given also that many men are presumably critical role models and mentors to younger male learners as fathers and grandfathers.

These three reasons combined lead to two related research questions that underpin the ten-town survey: Why do adult men tend not to access ACE? If they are not accessing ACE, where, what and how do they prefer to learn?

³ It is important to note that ACE is not as accessible in some Australian States and Territories as it is through a State-supported ACE ‘sector’ in NSW and Victoria, particularly in rural areas: for details, see Golding, Davies and Volkoff (2001).

⁴ WEA is an ACE organisation based in NSW and also Adelaide.

What learning might we expect to find through voluntary organisations in these towns?

Three of the four non-ACE organisations included in the current survey of men are central to many men's lives in small country towns and have traditionally been male-dominated. A search of the literature reveals that while there is a wider international literature on learning by senior citizens including a recent and growing body of literature on learning by 'older workers', relatively little is known about learning, and particularly the possible gendered nature of learning, in fire services, football or landcare organisations.

The NCVER VOCED database⁵ includes nine papers that include mention of fire services training. The very recent and comprehensive Hayes, Golding and Harvey (2004) study of learning through fire and emergency services organisations in small and remote Australian towns found that 85 per cent of members in such organisations are male. The volunteer fire service organisations in this study might be expected to have a similar profile in the ten towns chosen for study.

Adult football competitions are almost exclusively male, and club membership in rural areas might be expected to exhibit a similarly heavy bias towards males. There are no Australian citations specific to Australian rules or other football training in the VOCED database though Parker's (2000) study of education and training related to English professional football is included. There are a number of references on the World Wide Web to 'learning through football' [soccer] initiatives in the UK, including through the FA Cup and Leeds United web sites (FA Cup 2004; Leeds United 2004) that involve education and training in community settings.

There are twelve entries in the VOCED data base that mention Landcare, including reference to a Western Australian-based Landcare training initiative (WADT 1997) and a study by Smith, Kidd and Barrow (1995) that included a recognition of gender differences in Landcare training (LEAP) learning styles. Though many Landcare organisations have significant numbers of active female members and though farming in Australia usually involves a couple farming in partnership, males have traditionally done most of the 'hands-on' farm work. Research by the author in many rural contexts has confirmed a significant division of labour, with the female farmer tending, in turn, to do much of the 'grazing for learning' including using ICT to keep records and do the farm books. Many farming women have to work off-farm to augment limited farming incomes and often travel considerable distances to do so.

Kilpatrick, Johns et al. 1999, pp.14-15) showed that while Australian farmers⁶ tend to select their learning sources according to their particular need, informal learning plays an important part: and the main source of learning is other people. The main 'learning methods' identified by farmers in their survey were their own experience, father or family and other farmers. With field days, these three methods accounted for over half of the preferred learning methods. Kilpatrick and Rosenblat (1998) identified five main reasons why farmers prefer informal information to more formalised education

⁵ www.ncver.edu.au/voced

⁶ Their farmer survey comprised around one third women.

and training. They were valuing independence and self-sufficiency; preference for contextualised learning; lack of confidence in training settings; preference for receiving information from known sources (rather than unknown trainers) and a fear that new knowledge and skills might lead them to question their existing beliefs.

When analysed by gender, female farmers in Kilpatrick and Johns' et al's study (pp.156-161) were more likely than male farmers to learn through networks, often built 'from scratch'. When male farmers did utilise learning networks, they tended to learn through more organised activities such as farmer-directed groups, field days and field trips as well as through organised activities unrelated to agriculture. Male farmers were less likely than female farmers to undertake formal accredited training, more likely to rely on their own experience and their fathers or family and less likely to undertake learning for community development. Importantly for the current study, Kilpatrick and Johns (1999, p.164) identified three factors that tended to turn male farmers away from organised learning: including age, a disinclination to attend events sponsored by private organisations and an unsatisfactory previous experience of education and training

By contrast, senior citizens clubs in the current study might be expected to be used more by females, by virtue of the fact that women generally live longer and also tend to remain more socially active for longer. Beckett and Helme (2001) used ACE data for ages 50 to 80+ from 1998-2000 to conclude that, 'On average, older women were three times more likely to participate in ACE than older men, and this proportion remains relatively constant for each age group' (p.54). However they also noted that, 'gender differences in favour of women tend to decrease' with age (p.26), speculating that as men get older they may tend to give up physically demanding interests such as sport in favour of ACE.

International research on learning and social participation by senior citizens (Ohsako 1999, p.9) confirms that in all countries senior citizens have more free time as they grow older. Ironically 'no time' is almost universally cited as the main reason for non-participation in learning activities. The same study shows a high positive correlation between length of schooling and participation of senior citizens in learning activities. Importantly, Ohsako (p.14) also found '... that the more learning activity that a senior citizen engages in, they more they are an active participant in social and community activities.'

Separate research into gender differences in voluntary organisations (Elsdon 1995) suggests that while women have a higher rate of involvement in voluntary organisations than men, women tend more than men to join generalist groups. The CFA, Football Club and Landcare organisations, being specialist, single-interest voluntary organisations might be expected on the basis of Elsdon's research, to have more males with more limited school experience. As Elsdon (cited in McGivney 1999, p.11) noted, women tend more than men

... to discover new interests and gradually expand their range of activities beyond the group's immediate objectives. They also displayed: '*evidence of intellectual and cultural adventurousness to a much higher degree than men, whose interests are more linear and focussed, especially upon practical activities*' (p.44). (McGivney 1999, p.11; McGivney's italics)

Research method

The research was based primarily on a *Survey of Men in Small Rural Towns*, that aimed to investigate the pattern of adult male learning through ACE and four other community organizations (fire brigades, football clubs, landcare and senior citizens) in small rural towns. In particular, it sought to:

- compare the learning-related characteristics and motivations of men who access learning through a local adult and community education (ACE) provider with men who are learning through their involvement as volunteers and participants in community-based organisations
- identify men's preferred learning, learning styles in these contexts
- determine what effect the presence of women in organizations have on men's attitudes to engagement in community learning contexts and organisations
- determine how adult learning and community organizations might be assisted or reconfigured to involve more men as learners.

The target population was men in ten rural Victorian towns (population less than 2,500 and Remoteness Index [ARIA] of more than 2.0), with two towns in each ACFE Region. Surveys were distributed through the five different organisations to male participants in each of the ten towns. A total of up to 120 surveys were distributed in each town. Up to 40 surveys went to current male learners in ACFE-funded providers⁷. Up to 20 surveys were distributed to Landcare members, 20 to football club members, 20 to fire service (CFA) members and 20 to senior citizens members⁸.

The survey questions focussed on:

- the motivations and inhibitors of men's learning
- what men say they need to learn
- men's preferred learning styles and learning contexts
- men's perceptions of the role of gender in organizations and in adult and community learning contexts
- ways in which learning through adult and community education (ACE) organizations might be made more inclusive of men, as well as
- demographic information about men who answered the survey that might provide a basis for inter-group comparisons.

The choice of towns and organisations

The ten towns, two in each ACFE Board Region, were selected to be both small and objectively rural. Nine of the towns had populations of less than 2500 people⁹. All but one town had an Accessibility / Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA) in the 'moderately accessible' range between 1.7 and 3.7. Importantly and deliberately, all ten towns were beyond easy commuting distance to the nearest regional TAFE, making the local ACE provider the only logical public provider of adult education.

⁷ Very few of the ACE providers could find a total of 40 men who had used the provider to survey.

⁸ Again, many senior citizens clubs had difficulty finding 20 male members.

⁹ Population based on 2001 census.

The first group of organisations targeted by the survey in each of the ten towns were men who had used ACE programs and services in the the local ACE provider in the past year. If the survey had been limited only to these men who had used these ACE providers, it would have only sampled men who accessed the provider *in spite of* the possible barriers to participation. For this reason, similar surveys were distributed to men in four other organisational types in each of the ten towns, in order to systematically sample rural men ‘beyond ACE’. The organisations surveyed were participants in the volunteer fire service, the Country Fire Authority (CFA), football clubs, senior citizens clubs¹⁰, and landcare¹¹. Surveys avoided possible overlap between individuals who were members of more than one organisation by requesting that only one survey to be completed (but both returned) by respondents if they received two copies.

The common questions assumed that some learning was taking place and being experienced by respondents in each organisation to a greater or lesser extent. In effect, all organisations were considered in some way to be ‘learning organisations’, in the sense that participation, and in some cases training or practice, was presumably associated with deliberate (formal or non-formal) or informal learning through each organisation.

The survey sought to explore men’s learning needs and preferences. It included identical questions about the nature of the learning and the learning opportunities in the organisation targeted as well as the respondent’s perceived importance and rating of particular skills. A series of statements were included to explore attitudes towards the learning occurring in and through the organisation targeted as well as towards the organisation itself. All survey variants included a series of statements to gauge the opinions of respondents towards the learning opportunities available or desired through the local ACE provider. A final bank of questions about the respondent sought to identify the respondent’s role in the organisation targeted by the survey as well as age and highest completed formal education.

Local people who assisted with survey distribution within particular organisations as well as respondents were encouraged to return surveys that, for whatever reason, were not completed in order to increase overall response rates and to establish true response rates by town and organisation type. Table 1 summarises the response rate by town and organisation type.

Table 1 Number of percentage of surveys returned and completed by town and organisation type

| Location | ACE | Fire | Football | Landcare | Seniors | Totals | % Response |
|-----------------|------------|-------------|-----------------|-----------------|----------------|---------------|-------------------|
| Birchip | 19 | 8 | 9 | 4 | 6 | 46 | 69.7 |
| St Arnaud | 18 | 10 | 14 | 0 | 0 | 42 | 64.6 |
| Simpson | 10 | 5 | 11 | 5 | 5 | 36 | 45.6 |

¹⁰ Two small towns without a local Senior Citizens Clubs distributed their surveys via Bowls Club members age 60 and over).

¹¹ Two small towns without local Landcare organisations distributed their surveys through local United Dairy Farmers and Victorian Farmers Federation organisations.

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|-------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|---------------|---------------|
| Apollo Bay | 13 | 9 | 9 | 5 | 6 | 42 | 43.8 |
| Inverloch | 18 | 6 | 0 | 5 | 1 | 30 | 42.9 |
| Foster | 6 | 3 | 0 | 5 | 1 | 15 | 15.0 |
| Corryong | 16 | 8 | 4 | 9 | 13 | 50 | 43.5 |
| Alexandra | 8 | 13 | 20 | 11 | 2 | 54 | 47.0 |
| Pyramid Hill | 8 | 3 | 12 | 3 | 10 | 36 | 36.4 |
| Boort | 18 | 1 | 8 | 10 | 11 | 48 | 56.5 |
| <i>Totals</i> | <i>134</i> | <i>66</i> | <i>87</i> | <i>57</i> | <i>55</i> | <i>399</i> | |
| % Response | 44.2 | 42.9 | 53.7 | 39.6 | 51.4 | 45.9 # | 45.9 # |

Overall Response rate is calculated by expressing the number surveys returned and completed (399), as a percentage of the total distributed (1200), less the number returned but not completed (330). Town and organisation response rates are calculated in a similar way.

The overall response rate of around 46 per cent comprised around one third of men from ACE organisations (n=134, 33.6%), one third service organisations (CFA and Landcare: n=123, 30.8%) and one-third leisure organisations (football and senior citizens: n=142, 35.6%). Table 1 confirms that response rates varied considerably by organisation type and particularly by town, largely as a consequence of differential effort and persistence by volunteers in particular organisations involved in survey distribution.

In general, response rates were lower when surveys were mailed rather than being distributed personally. Given that 19 of the 50 organisations surveyed returned five or less surveys and that four organisations returned no surveys, the confidence of the percentages cited in the survey results are subject to these variable response rates. It is important to acknowledge the limitations posed by significant differences in response between particular towns and organisations and the likely sampling errors and problems with comparisons of relatively small respondent populations.

Findings and discussion

The most significant¹² differences identified for the learning-related variables explored in this research related to the type of organisation in which men were participants. In effect, for the respondent sample of men analysed from the five organisation types in the ten, small rural towns, men learnt in significantly differently ways in the different types of organisations. In general, learning as a consequence of participation within and through non-ACE service and leisure organisations was more effective for men than learning through adult and community education (ACE).

On most learning-related criteria, fire, football and senior citizens organisations in particular fulfil a number of critical, learning-related roles for men who are actively involved in those organisations. There is evidence from the survey that learning through regular and active community participation is more effective and more closely matched to men's learning preferences than learning through the local ACE provider – even for men who are already users of ACE.

Fire and senior citizens organisations provide men with significantly more opportunities than the local ACE provider for learning in modes preferred by men:

¹² In this paper, the term 'significantly' refers to a test of significance using a Pearson Chi-Square Test (p<0.05).

through regular practice, by taking on responsibility through the organisation and for one-on-one learning. Fire organisations also provide significantly more opportunities for accredited learning through the organisation than ACE provides for men to learn through special interest courses.

Local ACE providers facilitate significantly more opportunities to learn through the internet than do the other organisations. For many men who need internet skills, particularly those involved in senior citizens and landcare, there remain large gaps between the importance of internet skills and self rating of those skills, that ACE does not currently meet. Of the organisations surveyed, ACE users were significantly more likely to agree that the small size of the organisation made their learning easier, but were significantly more likely to regard ACE as a mainly women's organisation.

Men involved in organisations other than ACE were significantly more involved as participants and also in leadership roles in those organisations than men who participated in ACE. They were also more satisfied that their level of skill allowed them to take an active part in their organisation and significantly less likely than ACE users to regard opportunities to learn elsewhere in their communities as limited. Non-ACE organisation participants were significantly more likely than ACE participants were to value the importance of skills to take responsible positions in community organisations as well as public speaking skills.

Most men that do not use the local ACE provider nevertheless regarded it as a valuable resource and around nine out of ten would use it anytime if they really needed it. However over one half of football club and senior citizens participants and four out of ten fire organisation members did not know enough about the local ACE provider to use it.

A number of factors affected men's attitudes to and participation in learning in the towns surveyed. Men in *smaller* towns were significantly more active participants in their organisation's activities than in larger towns. They were also more likely to regard opportunities to learn elsewhere in the community as limited, and more likely to regard the local ACE provider as a useful place to do course, but also more likely to regard the provider as a women's space. Men in *remoter* towns showed somewhat similar trends to those in smaller towns, but importantly, were around one half as likely to agree (only 16 per cent in remoter towns agreed) that they 'really enjoyed learning at school' than men in the less remote towns.

There is evidence of a clear link between knowledge about learning and community involvement. Men who had been involved in organisations for more than ten years were significantly more active and interested learners on a whole range of adult learning criteria, but being older, had more limited computer and internet skills and held relatively negative attitudes towards the local ACE provider.

Men who knew enough about the local ACE provider to use it were significantly more involved in their own organisation's activities and more aware of the opportunities to learn through those organisations. Men who *don't* know enough about the local ACE provider to use it were significantly more satisfied with their current skill levels and less likely to take part in learning - even through their own organisation. Men with a limited knowledge of the local ACE provider were around five times as likely to feel uncomfortable using the local ACE provider. They were also around twice as likely to

be older, not know other people using the provider and regard it as a women's space - than men with a good working knowledge of ACE.

For the small number of towns surveyed, the position of the ACE provider in town appeared to affect men's attitudes to the provider. Around twice as many men in towns where the provider was shopfront did not feel comfortable going there as men where the ACE provider was not shopfront.

Age was a significant intervening variable in terms of men's attitudes to and involvement in learning generally, and to ACE in particular. Younger men had significantly higher internet and computer skills, were much less comfortable about going to the local ACE provider and were more likely to regard it as a 'women's space'. Around six out of ten men of age 24 years or younger did know enough about the local ACE provider to use it and over one half considered it did not currently offer anything they needed to learn. At the other extreme, men over 55 years had more negative and limited experiences of formal learning and ICT and were also unlikely to access ACE.

The survey provides strong and disturbing evidence of the ongoing and debilitating effects of negative experiences at school on involvement in lifelong learning and community activity for men of all ages. On a large number of criteria, men who did not 'really enjoy learning at school' not only had significantly less positive attitudes to adult learning but were much less actively involved in community organisations. They participated significantly less frequently, were less interested in more learning, regarded public speaking skills less highly and rated their computer skills lower. Men who did not enjoy school learning were significantly less likely to be active or hold leadership roles in organisation or to have recently been involved in formal learning programs. In order for them to participate in ACE, courses would need to be shorter and their general attitude that they are 'too old' as adults to be involved in learning - would also need to be addressed.

Attitudes toward school – and many other learning-related criteria were found to be significantly related to completion of higher year levels at school. Men who left school earlier (particularly older men) had significantly lower internet skills. These differences flow through into significant differences in men's post-school education. Men with any form of education or training completed post-school had significantly more opportunities for learning through their community involvement than men with no formal post-school experience. Men with limited post-school education completions also had significantly lower internet skills, were more likely to regard their age as a barrier to learning and to be attracted by learning opportunities in smaller organisations.

Conclusions and implications

All five organisations surveyed play critical roles as learning organisations for men in small rural towns. For the men surveyed, adult and community education's (ACE's) importance as a learning organisation is different from but significantly less valuable than for the four other community organisations surveyed.

This research confirms the critical and positive role played by active and frequent involvement in volunteer community activity through service and leisure

organisations. It highlights the current problems ACE has attracting men as learners - despite the value they clearly place on learning and the expressed needs of men of all ages to keep learning. While 90 per cent of men value learning in some form, ACE falls well short of providing opportunities to meet the expressed learning needs of the majority of rural men in small Victorian towns.

Overall, most men express a keen desire to learn by being actively involved in an activity rather than passively learning 'about' something. Men particularly value learning that allows them to stay fit, healthy and safe, but also to take on responsible positions in community organisations including speaking skills and interpersonal communication. Men's preferences were for learning through practical, hands-on experiences, by doing, and wherever possible, in outdoor settings. A minority of men prefer to learn in a classroom setting and for four out of ten men, learning from books, via the computer or the internet are also inappropriate.

Two thirds of men who are interested in more learning want the learning facilitated in a local situation where the organisation that they are already part of normally meets. Given that a significant minority of men express an aversion to the local ACE provider as a place essentially for women, the provision of men's learning in contexts and settings than in an ACE provider or classroom – as it is currently configured – would appear be more appropriate.

Men generally, and particularly younger men, have a limited knowledge of the local ACE provider. Around one in four men don't know enough about the local ACE provider to use it, and those that do use it appear to be only marginally attached to the organisation. In order to better meet the needs of men, there is an expressed request, from around three quarters of men surveyed, for ACE to provide more practical, hands-on learning and more programs specifically for men. Around six out of ten men requested more flexible opening hours and for more males to be involved as ACE teachers or on the ACE committee.

The most negative attitudes towards adult learning, including towards ACE, come from men whose previous experiences of school or formal learning are limited or negative. While younger men have a significantly better grasp of ICT skills, they have fewer opportunities to learn through leadership roles in organisations and more negative perceptions of ACE.

If local rural ACE providers are to more effectively meet rural men's learning needs as expressed through this survey, they may need to create more learning situations in which men are already 'at home' – in fire or emergency service organisations, in sporting clubs or via practical, hands-on activity. The research confirms the need for ACE providers in these settings to recognise and break down the perceived and persistent barriers that lack of enjoyment and limited early experiences of learning at (and also beyond) school can and do create for many men over a lifetime.

Changes in ICT pose new and bigger barriers particularly for older men who have limited access to new technologies through work or through community involvement as volunteers. Men of all ages, particularly younger rural men with higher levels of ICT skill, tend to have more dismissive, uninformed or negative attitudes towards ACE. Though ACE is recognised an important potential resource by most men, four out of ten men don't know enough about the local ACE provider to use it, and one in five men don't feel comfortable going there.

In summary, being an active member of a community organisation plays a key role in men's learning and provides critical opportunities for further learning. Though relatively few men 'really enjoyed' learning at school and around one in five men are limited in their ability to engage in learning by their limited literacy skills, most claim and share a desire to learn. However most men express a clear preference for learning in less formal, practical, group settings. Most men learning delivered locally – preferably through their own organisation, and generally not through the local ACE providers in rural towns - as they are currently configured.

There is evidence of a need, in the light of the research evidence and men's expressed learning preferences, to examine and reconsider the arguably gendered nature of many adult and VET learning organisations in order to better accommodate the learning preferences of a wider range of men and women. The research identifies particular problems for men in rural towns where a TAFE is often not accessible and where an adult and community education (ACE) provider becomes the primary public site for adults undertaking local, formal learning and for accessing services including the internet.

The implications of the general reluctance of men to learn in formal and structured settings is contrasted with the many other ways in which men access learning in community-based, volunteer and service organisations. The research identifies a need to ensure that learning contexts and policies are configured to more closely match the needs of older men as well as for the majority of rural men with negative previous experiences at school. The research has important implications for appropriate teaching and learning contexts for boys, as well as for re-engaging later learners and breaking the cycle of intergenerational reluctance to learn by some men.

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