



The mature-aged and skill
development activities:
A systematic review of
research – An update

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Publisher's note

Additional information relating to this research is available in *The mature-aged and skill development activities: A systematic review of research – An update, Support document*. It can be accessed from NCVER's website <<http://www.ncver.edu.au>>.

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A systematic review of research identifies, critically appraises and synthesises relevant research on a specific topic in order to find the answer to a given question.

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Introduction

The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) conducted the first systematic review of vocational education and training (VET) research in Australia in 2004.¹ NCVER conducted a second literature search² in September 2005 to update the original review. Of the 37 selected studies³, only two research studies were found in whose findings we can have confidence to answer the specific review question:

What evidence is there that skill development activities for the mature-aged (45 years and over) lead to:

- ✧ improved attachment to the labour market?
- ✧ improved productivity?

Original report: Key messages

- ✧ Through a systematic review of existing research, evidence has been found that skill development activities lead to improved labour market outcomes for some mature-aged people (in terms of higher employment rates or wages), especially for those who were previously unemployed, and for women.
- ✧ Evidence has been found that labour-market-related gains are greater for the mature-aged who complete higher-level qualifications. Gaining lower-level qualifications or incomplete qualifications may have a negative effect on labour-market-related gains for some older people.
- ✧ The specifics of which skill development activities work, when, and for which groups of mature-aged are sparse in this systematic review, as the included studies mostly focused on the level of ‘qualification’ acquired, or simply referred to ‘training’ as the skill development activity.
- ✧ Three main factors emerged as barriers to skills development of mature-aged people while providing ideas for facilitating this development. The factors leading to improved attachment to the labour market or improved productivity are:
 - i. attitudes and behaviours of employers and employees towards older people working and to learning new skills and knowledge
 - ii. individuals’ personal circumstances and attitude to learning
 - iii. public policy beyond vocational education and training, such as some aspects of superannuation and retirement income policies.
- ✧ Through this systematic review, the need for further research was revealed, especially to identify which skill development activities work, when, and for which groups of mature-aged. Evidence from such research would complement the large-scale data analyses already undertaken which have yielded the above results. It may also offer supporting evidence to promote lifelong education and training.
- ✧ It is proposed that this systematic review will be updated over the next 12 months.

¹ P Thomson, S Dawe, A Anlezark & K Bowman 2005, *The mature-aged and skill development activities: A systematic review of research*, NCVER, Adelaide.

² Further details of the review process may be found in the NCVER publication by A Anlezark, S Dawe & S Hayman 2005, *An aid to systematic reviews in vocational education and training in Australia*, NCVER, Adelaide.

³ The complete list of studies considered in this search is available in the support document to this update available on NCVER’s website <<http://www.ncver.edu.au>>.

2005 Update: Additional support for key messages

- ✧ Neither of the two new studies for the review provided evidence that skills development for the mature-aged leads to improved attachment to the labour market or improved productivity. However, the three main factors identified as barriers to skill development for mature-aged people were supported and an additional factor identified.
- ✧ A new factor—VET policy and practice—emerged with the potential to affect the likelihood of skills development of mature-aged people leading to improved attachment to the labour market. In one study, barriers to employment for disadvantaged older workers were identified as being caused by ‘deficiencies in the service system’. While some of these barriers relate to the third factor already identified—public policy outside of VET—others related to VET policy and practice. These barriers included:
 - ◆ employment support not targeted towards older disadvantaged workers
 - ◆ education and training options not targeted towards older disadvantaged workers
 - ◆ pathways to employment for older workers not clearly established or resourced
 - ◆ needs of the group unsuited to interventions delivered by a single service
 - ◆ few modes of training delivery specific to the group.
- ✧ The need for further research to provide evidence for which skill development activities work, when, and for which groups of mature-aged was supported by one of the new studies included in the review. The author of the report recommended careful evaluation of the new training interventions for older workers in Australia, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands.

Summary of additional included studies

Furthering success: Education, training and employment transitions for disadvantaged older workers, Jones, E, Rolland, L, Brooke, L, Biggs, N, Hartley, R, Humphries, S, McCarthy, J & Topple, C 2004, report by Business, Work and Ageing, Swinburne University of Technology, for Department of Education, Science and Training, Canberra

The study

The study focused on people aged 45 and over who are disadvantaged in the labour market. This group included people who were:

- ✧ unemployed and who were not officially in the labour market, but who wanted to work, but have attained no formal education or no education past Year 10
- ✧ currently employed but were under-employed and low-skilled
- ✧ at potential risk of unemployment because they were in an unskilled job and have low educational attainment.

The study aimed to describe the effectiveness of current employment pathways taken by this group, and the role of the system, including participation in vocational education and training, in supporting these pathways.

The study was based on the incorporation of empirical research findings and practical insight drawn from the experience of older disadvantaged workers, employers and employment, education, training and other providers, and included:

- ✧ literature review
- ✧ case studies of ten locations around Australia
- ✧ national survey of older disadvantaged workers

- ✧ survey of service providers in case study locations
- ✧ interviews of older disadvantaged workers.

The study report acknowledges that analysis suffered from poor response rates to the surveys.

One of the objectives of the study was to identify the key factors associated with the successful entry of older workers into formal education and training, their participation in it, and their transition to employment.

Around two-thirds of respondents to the older worker survey were training for a new area of work or to update their existing skills, confirming that the primary motivation was to secure employment. The study reported that education and training programs which include a link to employment through work experience or workplace training can ‘enhance employment outcomes for older workers since exposure to the capacities of older workers can help break down the “age bound” perspectives held by many employers’ (p.38). (See example, BEST Employment, a Victorian Job Network provider and labour hire company partnership on p.39.) However, there is no quantitative evidence in the report that skills development leads to improved attachment to the labour market or increased productivity.

The study also attempted to arrive at a better understanding of the barriers and opportunities (facilitators) to employment faced by disadvantaged older workers and the key role that vocational education and training can play in enhancing their ability to gain access to viable employment.

Nature and extent of the barriers and facilitators

These related to:

- ✧ attitudes and behaviours of employers:
 - ◆ small-to-medium-sized enterprise ignorance of the links between population ageing and business sustainability
 - ◆ age stereotypes held by employers
- ✧ individuals’ personal circumstances and attitude to learning:
 - ◆ narrow skill base of older disadvantaged workers
 - ◆ low levels of education attainment, and a lack of recent education attainment, due to poor literacy and numeracy skills
 - ◆ lack of awareness of support services
 - ◆ lack of exposure to work-based technologies, limiting development of computer skills
 - ◆ cost of education and training
 - ◆ health issues
 - ◆ lack of incentive to seek insecure and low paid work
 - ◆ unwillingness to depend on the system
- ✧ deficiencies in the service systems:
 - ◆ employment support not targeted towards older disadvantaged workers
 - ◆ education and training options not targeted towards older disadvantaged workers
 - ◆ pathways to employment for older workers not clearly established or resourced
 - ◆ needs of the group unsuited to interventions delivered by a single service
 - ◆ few modes of training delivery specific to the group.

This study concludes that the barriers to the employment opportunities of older disadvantaged workers can be overcome through improvements to the service system.

[OVERALL WEIGHTINGS: Relevance : Medium Quality: Medium]

‘The role of training in preventing labour market exclusion of older workers’, O’Connell, M 2005, refereed paper for *Transitions & risk: New directions in social policy*, International Social Policy Conference (23–25 February 2005 Melbourne), University of Melbourne, Centre for Public Policy, Melbourne

This is a secondary analysis of the different types of training interventions which could be employed to prevent labour market exclusion of older (mature-aged) workers in Australia. In particular, pilots and programs of various types of interventions implemented in Sweden, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands are investigated. This study concludes that the training interventions need to be carefully evaluated to determine whether they have an impact on re-skilling older workers, thus increasing older workers’ labour market attachment. The author refers to Schmid and Schomann (2003) who draw on the East German transition economy of the early 1990s to show that employment prospects of job-related training are highest when pursued on the job, even if this job is scheduled to be terminated in the near future⁴ (p.22). Although it is difficult for governments to identify future skill needs, these authors argued that early intervention approaches are cost-effective models of skills provision since they reduce unemployment and associated social costs, and equalise access to training. O’Connell concludes that there is a lack of information around which types of training interventions should be employed or how these interventions should be funded.

[OVERALL WEIGHTINGS Relevance : Medium Quality: Medium minus]

⁴ Schmid, G & Schomann, K October 2003, The concept of transitional labour markets and some policy conclusions: The state of the art, TLM.NET working paper no. 2003-01 < <http://www.siswo.uva.nl/tlm/workingpapers.htm> > Accessed 12 December 2005. This document may also be found on the University of Melbourne, Centre for Public Policy website at: http://www.public-policy.unimelb.edu.au/conference2005/Schmid_Ref2.pdf (accessed 12 December 2005)



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A systematic review of research is a decision-making tool for policy and practice. It aims to identify, critically appraise and synthesise relevant research on a specific topic in order to find the answer to a given question.

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