

Skills development for a diverse older workforce

Fran Ferrier

Gerald Burke

Chris Selby Smith

Monash University–
ACER Centre for the
Economics of Education
and Training





Skills development for a diverse older workforce

Fran Ferrier

Gerald Burke

Chris Selby Smith

Monash University–ACER Centre for the Economics of Education and Training

The views and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author/project team
and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government,
state and territory governments or NCVER

© Australian Government, 2008

This work has been produced by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) on behalf of the Australian Government and state and territory governments, with funding provided through the Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. Apart from any use permitted under the *Copyright Act 1968*, no part of this publication may be reproduced by any process without written permission. Requests should be made to NCVER.

The views and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author/project team and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government, state and territory governments or NCVER.

The author/project team was funded to undertake this research via a grant under the National Vocational Education and Training Research and Evaluation (NVETRE) Program. These grants are awarded to organisations through a competitive process, in which NCVER does not participate.

The NVETRE program is coordinated and managed by NCVER on behalf of the Australian Government and state and territory governments, with funding provided through Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. This program is based upon priorities approved by ministers with responsibility for vocational education and training (VET). This research aims to improve policy and practice in the VET sector. For further information about the program go to the NCVER website <<http://www.ncver.edu.au>>.

ISBN 978 1 921412 00 4 print edition

ISBN 978 1 921412 01 1 web edition

TD/TNC 92.29

Published by NCVER

ABN 87 007 967 311

Level 11, 33 King William Street, Adelaide SA 5000
PO Box 8288 Station Arcade, Adelaide SA 5000, Australia

ph +61 8 8230 8400 fax +61 8 8212 3436

email ncver@ncver.edu.au

<<http://www.ncver.edu.au>>

<<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1984.html>>

About the research



Skills development for a diverse older workforce by Fran Ferrier, Gerald Burke and Chris Selby Smith

Australia's population is ageing rapidly, a result of declining fertility rates and rising life expectancy. Older people in the workforce are becoming more common. We are also likely to see many individuals adjust their retirement plans and stay in the workforce for longer than they had once anticipated.

These changes to the age mix of the workforce will have significant implications for the renewal and replenishment of skills. Even more than is the case currently, those aged 45 years or more and their employers will have to pay attention to strategies for effective skills development.

This may not be straightforward. Older working-age Australians are a very diverse group: in the types and levels of skills and qualifications they hold; in their workforce experience, including occupations and industries in which they work; in their retirement aspirations; and in their willingness and confidence to participate in learning and applying new skills.

This study, *Skills development for a diverse older workforce*, is based on a review of what we presently know about effective skills development for older workers and presents seven new case studies of the delivery of training to a primarily older workforce.

Given that people aged 45–64 years currently make up about one-third of the workforce and one-fifth of vocational education and training (VET) students, it is likely that the case studies will be of particular interest to those directly involved in the training of older workers.

Key messages

- As long as good practices for the teaching and learning of adults are in place—those based on a learner-centred and inclusive approach—only small adjustments to training programs and activities will be required to meet the needs of older participants.
- The differences among older workers, however, mean that skills development designed to support and encourage their participation in the workforce should be targeted to the needs and circumstances of specific sub-groups. In particular, different learning preferences, motivations and expectations should be considered when planning the type of training to be provided and how it is to be delivered.
- Trainers, as well as employers, also need to take account of the barriers (including age discrimination) affecting some older workers.
- The provision of effective skills development for older workers needs to go hand-in-hand with flexible arrangements which encourage continued working, such as semi-retirement circumstances that enable older workers to combine employment with increased leisure.

Readers interested in this topic should also see *Older workers' perspectives on training and retention of older workers* by David Lundberg and Zaniah Marshallsay (NCVER 2007).

Tom Karmel
Managing Director, NCVER

Contents

Tables and figures	6
Executive summary	7
Introduction	9
Scope of the project	9
Project methodology	10
Context: Australia's ageing population	13
Older people and work	16
Introduction	16
Labour force participation	16
Volunteer work	20
Summing up	20
Older people and learning for work	22
Introduction	22
Participation in skills development	22
Good practice in training older workers	28
Summing up	30
Effective skills development	31
Program drivers and developmental influences	31
Program achievements and benefits	35
Program success factors	36
Diversity issues	41
Summing up	43
Conclusions	45
Targeting skills development	45
Appropriate and effective skills development	47
References	49
Appendix: The case studies	51

Tables and figures

Tables

1	Students in VET courses in 2000 and 2005	23
2	Graduate outcomes 2005, qualifications by age group (%)	24
3	Summary of seven case studies	33
4	The main program success factors	36
5	Challenges for the design and delivery of skills development	53

Figures

1	Changes in the age structure of the Australian population	13
2	Proportion of people in full-time work by age and qualification, Australia, 2004	17

Executive summary

In the context of ageing populations, governments in Australia and in other Western nations fear that slower growth in the numbers of people of working age (15–64 years) will have a dampening effect on economic growth. They are thus considering how to encourage older workers to remain in the workforce beyond the point at which many currently retire.

Skills and qualifications are strongly related to workforce participation. For instance, those with higher levels of education attainment tend to participate in the labour force at higher rates and to stay in the workforce for longer. Providing older workers with opportunities to update and extend their skills and qualifications may thus enable and encourage them to continue working.

The number of people in the workforce aged 45–64 years has grown substantially over the past two decades. This is due to the larger number of people in this age group in the population, rising levels of educational attainment and greater participation by women in the workforce. However, there is still a dramatic decline in labour force participation from 55 years of age, and by age 70 years few people remain in employment.

Skill and qualification requirements vary across industries and occupations. Older people also differ in the types of industries and occupations they work in, with their participation shaped by factors such as their skills and qualifications, their gender, where they live and their cultural and language backgrounds. They vary also in their preferred hours of work, their experiences of unemployment and their retirement intentions. Older workers participate in work-related skills development to varying extents, with differences between men and women, between different age groups and between types of programs and educational settings.

Older workers face barriers to participation in skills development including: employer attitudes; lack of information about options; work and family commitments; financial difficulties; and their own attitudes to participation—including doubts about their ability to succeed. Some of these barriers have been identified as likely to affect some groups of older workers more than others. Family commitments and financial difficulties can be a problem for women more than men, while work commitments affect men more than women. Lack of employment reduces access to skills development for unemployed workers.

This project has investigated the forms of skill development most effective overall for people in the workforce aged 45 years or older and the implications of some aspects of people's diversity for effective skills development, such as in their skills, qualifications, workforce experience and employment status, and in characteristics such as their gender and cultural and language backgrounds.

An analysis of demographic and labour market data and a review of the literature and related studies were undertaken. In addition, seven case studies of training delivery were conducted; these aimed to identify the factors contributing to the effectiveness of skills development for older workers and to highlight any adjustments required in response to the diversity found within the group. Six of the case studies centred on a specific program: training in a 5-star hotel, training in a utility company, a program in retail/hospitality, a program in engineering skills, a career change program, and a program on building skills. The seventh case study explored programs offered by an adult and community education (ACE) centre in a large region of rural Victoria, with particular

attention paid to two of its programs: Community Skillsbank and a state government initiative known as Learning Towns.

Previous Australian and overseas studies have investigated the nature of good practice in skills development for older workers. From this work a range of practices have been recommended which address differences between younger and older people in motivations, objectives and ways of learning. The work indicates that, while some changes to skills development programs are required to accommodate the needs of older participants, these are generally small and can benefit participants in all age groups.

Positive outcomes could be identified from all the programs considered in the case studies for this project, with benefits flowing to enterprises, individuals and communities. Where participants were in employment, these benefits included increased efficiency, an enhanced capacity for self-supervision, a higher quality of work and the ability to take on new job roles. Where participants were not employed, positive outcomes included employment and access to further study. Increases in participants' self-esteem and confidence were common to both.

The success of the programs was attributable largely to organisational factors and the approaches to teaching and learning. Organisational factors included:

- ✧ cooperative arrangements for program development and delivery
- ✧ the integration of learning and work
- ✧ the creation of sympathetic learning environments
- ✧ attention to appropriate staffing.

There was substantial diversity among the program participants. Major aspects of diversity with implications for the programs encompassed those highlighted earlier. Where issues arose that were related to these aspects of diversity, they were addressed primarily by identifying and gaining an understanding of the needs of program participants and establishing appropriate responses. Responses demonstrated inclusive approaches to program development and delivery, consistent with good practice in the teaching and learning of adults.

Two major conclusions are drawn from the work conducted for this project:

- ✧ Differences among older workers mean that skills development which supports and encourages their participation in the workforce should be targeted to the needs and circumstances of specific sub-groups.

Variations among older workers; for example, skills development and learning needs; preferences, goals and motivations; and work experiences and expectations, require consideration when framing the types of skills development to be provided and how it is to be delivered. Particular account needs to be taken of gender-related differences and of the ways in which barriers to employment and participation in education and training affect different groups of older workers.

- ✧ Appropriate and effective skills development for older workers, in all their diversity, is built on good practices in the teaching and learning of adults.

Some adaptations may be required to programs, activities and other arrangements to meet the needs of older learners in general and some specific sub-groups and individuals, but where good practices and inclusive approaches are adopted, these will generally be small.

Introduction

Scope of the project

This project set out to investigate four main issues in relation to older workers:

- 1 Which forms of skill development are most effective overall for people aged 45 years or older?
- 2 To what extent does the diversity in the older workforce need to be considered in framing skills development that will encourage older workers to continue working?
- 3 What kinds of differences will be required in skills development if it is to be effective in encouraging older workers from different sub-groups of the population to remain in the workforce?
- 4 Which elements of skills development programs make them successful in meeting the needs of diverse groups of older workers and their employers?

The term *older workers* is used in this project to refer to people aged 45 years and over who are in paid employment, who seek paid employment or who are not currently employed or seeking employment, but who might return to the workforce if suitable opportunities were available.

In the context of an ageing population, the capacity to draw on their capabilities to fill employment opportunities may be important to ongoing economic and social wellbeing—both for the individuals concerned and for the wider community.

The term *skills development* includes formal training leading to a nationally recognised qualification, but it also encompasses informal programs and experiential learning, both outside and within the formal vocational education and training (VET) sector. Not all work-related learning is formalised, but it can occur in many different contexts and on diverse sites. *Effective skills development* is that which meets objectives for the various stakeholders and which leads to benefits for them. Note that this can occur in the short term or over longer periods of time.

The diversity among older workers and its implications for skills development are also important aspects of this project. The term *diversity* refers to differences in race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, culture, age, physical ability and religious, political and other beliefs.

Cully (2004) emphasises that the broad category of *older workers* is far from homogeneous. Similarly, a recent report by the Australian Industry Group (2007) notes the diversity in the broad group of older workers. Both studies conclude that diversity among older workers is important: in particular, the education, training and employment experiences of sub-groups of older workers vary substantially.

Major aspects of diversity among older workers aged 50 to 59 years are illustrated in a recent analysis by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2006d). Those aspects with the potential to influence access to, or participation in, skills development by this age group (and thus within the scope of this project) are:

- ✧ *Cultural and language background*: more than a third of 50 to 59-year-olds in the population in 2001 were born overseas, with the largest groups from mainland Europe, the United Kingdom/Ireland and Asia and smaller (but growing) proportions from Oceania, Africa and the Middle East.

- ✧ *Educational attainment:* in 2005 just over half (52%) of 50 to 59-year-olds had a non-school qualification. Less than a fifth of women (17%) and a slightly larger proportion of men (20%) held a bachelor's degree as their highest qualification.
- ✧ *Employment status:* in 2004, 71% of 50 to 59-year-olds were in the workforce—62% of women and 80% of men. Three per cent were unemployed and 42% of unemployed men were long-term unemployed.
- ✧ *Place of residence:* in 2001, more than a third of 50 to 59-year-olds lived outside the capital cities.
- ✧ *Family responsibilities:* in 2003, 21% of people aged 50–59 years were carers, with almost one-quarter of them the primary carer of a person with a disability (who was usually a family member). Just over a third of 50 to 59-year-olds lived in a couple family with children.
- ✧ *Income and income sources:* among 50 to 59-year-olds in 2003–04, employment earnings were the principal source of income for 53% of women and 70% of men, but 17% of men and 26% of women relied principally on a government allowance. Among those not in the labour force, only 8% relied on superannuation as their principal source of household income. The majority of males were concentrated in the two highest income quintiles and the majority of women in the two lowest.
- ✧ *Disability:* about 20% of the Australian population has a disability. The rate of profound or severe core-activity limitation was 6%. The incidence rises with age. In 2003 about half of all those aged over 60 reported a disability, and about 20% had a profound or severe core-activity limitation (ABS 2003).

In addition, previous overseas and Australian studies reveal that variations in the employment status and retirement intentions of older workers impact on their skills development needs, intentions and participation. Older workers can be classified as:

- ✧ older workers already in employment:
 - ◆ those aiming for early retirement/those intending to remain at work
 - ◆ those motivated to work by job satisfaction/those motivated by financial necessity (for example, financial responsibilities and/or lack of retirement savings)
 - ◆ those in jobs requiring high/medium/low-level skills
- ✧ older people seeking work or more work:
 - ◆ unemployed/long-term unemployed workers
 - ◆ under-employed workers (for example, part-time workers seeking full-time work)
 - ◆ workers displaced by economic restructuring
 - ◆ retrenched workers
- ✧ discouraged older workers:
 - ◆ older people who have been unable to obtain employment and have left the workforce, but would return if they could
 - ◆ older people who have been unable to obtain employment, who have left the workforce and do not intend to return
- ✧ older workers who have voluntarily retired.

Project methodology

Work for this project has comprised three main activities:

- ✧ an analysis of demographic and labour market data

Data were obtained from Australian and international sources and analysed to identify the patterns of participation by older people and, where possible, sub-groups of older people, in work, education and training, and the factors shaping these patterns. The work was limited by the availability of data and particularly by the availability of disaggregated data for sub-groups of older workers. Results are presented in the following three chapters of this report.

✧ a review of the literature and related studies

A search was conducted to identify published reports of relevant research and relevant non-research material, such as policy documents and submissions to governments by authoritative bodies. Issues were identified for further investigation in the case studies. As the project progressed, further material came to light through additional searching, referrals from other researchers, conference presentations and other sources. Material identified through these processes has been incorporated into this project report where appropriate.

✧ case studies

Seven case studies of skills development programs were undertaken with the aim of identifying the factors contributing to their effectiveness for diverse groups of older workers. Case study programs were selected based on internet searching and recommendations from the VET community. In selecting the case studies care was taken to include a variety of program types and delivery locations.

Six case studies centred on specific training programs: in a 5-star hotel, in a utility company, a retail/hospitality program, a program in engineering skills, a career change program and a program on building skills. The seventh case study explored programs offered by an adult and community education (ACE) centre in a large region of rural Victoria, with particular attention on two of its programs: Community Skillsbank and a state government initiative known as Learning Towns.

Two of the case studies targeted older people only: the retail/hospitality program and the career change program. The engineering skills program targeted both mature-age unemployed people and recent migrants. Other case studies were included because of a high level of participation by older people and/or attention to the needs of this age group.

Case studies comprised face-to-face interviews and document analysis. The work was limited by the inability to interview program participants in all but two cases. However, in several additional cases, program evaluations by participants were made available to the researchers.

In investigating each individual case an approach was adopted which began by identifying the major characteristics of the program and then working backwards to identify how the program had arrived at its distinctive form and the factors that had influenced the program development (a backward-mapping approach). This approach was adopted to uncover and highlight factors required to support the development of successful programs.

Further information about the case study methodology is provided in the appendix and the findings are discussed in the chapter entitled 'Effective skills development'.

This report

The next chapter of this report provides an overview of changes in Australia's population in an international context.

The following chapter, 'Older people and work', is based on the data analysis and the review of literature and related studies. It focuses on the following questions:

- ✧ What proportion of workers is currently aged 45 years or older? What proportion works part-time or full-time? In what occupations, industries, locations? On what basis are they employed?
- ✧ What are the skills and qualifications of older workers? Of sub-groups of older workers?
- ✧ What factors explain these patterns of workforce participation? What education/training related factors? What employment-related factors? What social factors or characteristics? What other kinds of factors?

The next chapter, 'Older people and learning for work', focuses on the question:

- ✧ In what forms of skills development do older workers currently participate? What factors affect participation? What differences are apparent between sub-groups of older workers?

The chapter, 'Effective skills development', is based on the project's case studies, and is informed by the data analysis and review of previous studies. It seeks to answer the following questions:

- ✧ What makes some skills development programs more effective than others for older workers?
To what extent is attention to diversity a factor in their success?
- ✧ What changes are required to skills development programs to ensure that they effectively address the skill development needs of diverse older adults?

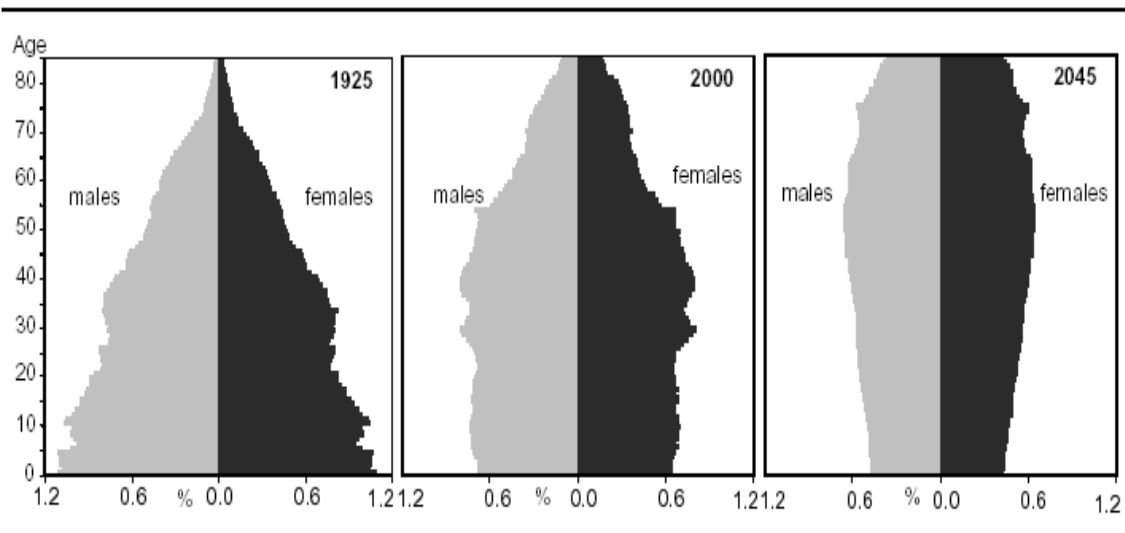
The final chapter draws on the findings to address the main issues underpinning the project.

Context: Australia's ageing population

This section briefly outlines the extent to which Australia's population can be said to be 'ageing', some of the social and economic challenges this phenomenon raises and policy responses to them.

Figure 1 illustrates the changing age structure of the Australian population. It shows that the structure is changing in shape from a pyramid to a 'coffin', as the largest population group—the 'middle age bulge'—moves toward retirement age.

Figure 1 Changes in the age structure of the Australian population



Source: Productivity Commission (2005).

The ageing of the population is the result of many Australians living longer, but having fewer children. At the end of the nineteenth century only 34% of men and less than 43% of women lived to be 70 years old. By the end of the 1990s, about three-quarters of all men (76%) lived to this age, and even more women (85%). A woman born now can expect to live well into her 80s, a man slightly less. Although births jumped 6% in 2005 to the highest level since 1971 and increased slightly in 2006, it is in the context of a declining fertility rate. In 1961, at the height of the 'baby boom', it peaked at 3.5 babies per woman. Since then, fertility has declined, falling sharply during the early 1960s, stabilising in the 1980s, and again declining gradually during the 1990s. Since 1997 the fertility rate has been relatively stable, varying between 1.73 and 1.78 babies per woman (ABS 2002, 2005a, 2006b, 2007a).

Internationally, and in Australia, there are mixed views about the extent to which the ageing of populations is problematic. On the one side are those who suggest that it presents serious challenges—perhaps constituting a 'crisis'. They express concerns, for instance, about the implications for national budgets of stronger demand for health services and pensions. On the other side are those who talk about a 'transition' rather than a crisis and point to the potential for action to deal with any difficulties.

In Australia, while concerns have been raised, the latter view appears to have gained ground. Australia's Productivity Commission has argued that, in itself, population ageing should not be seen as a problem. Rather it will give rise to economic and fiscal impacts that pose significant policy challenges (Productivity Commission 2005). Australia's National Seniors' Association (NSA) has also argued that predictions of the future costs of health and age pensions are inaccurate when based on negative stereotypes of older people as 'dependent, burdensome and frail'.

Among the expected impacts of the ageing population is that there will be a decline in the number of people in and available to the labour force as more workers move toward retirement and that this will have a dampening effect on economic growth. Concerns about this issue have drawn the attention of policy-makers and employers to a need to find ways to encourage 'mature' or 'older' workers to remain in the workforce for longer—beyond the point at which many currently begin to consider retirement.

However, it has been argued that older workers may be in danger of 'being relegated primarily to the lower end of the employment spectrum'—in a contingent workforce with few prospects for training, limited job security, job challenge, work-life balance or other conditions more often associated with full-time work. This is because their skills are, or are more likely to become, obsolete than those of younger people; they are more likely to lack the technological skills increasingly required for work; and they face stereotyped views about the capabilities of older people in work, their capacity for training, and consequently the likelihood of poor returns to employer investment in training them (Beatty & Visser 2005).

In Australia and many other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, average effective retirement ages are well below official retirement ages and have declined over the past three decades. The provision and encouragement of skills development opportunities for older workers is only one of a number of government policies that have been implemented, or are being considered, to promote the retention of older people in the workforce. Much policy attention has been devoted to public pension systems and other social transfer programs which, the OECD argues, have provided incentives to early retirement and 'have played a major role in depressing employment at older ages'. In the OECD's view, public policies and workplace practices that discourage older people from continuing in paid employment are 'relics of a bygone era' and unsustainable in the context of ageing populations. Governments need to ensure that pension and other welfare arrangements encourage rather than discourage work at older ages (OECD 2004, 2005b).

Age-friendly employment policies which could encourage older people to remain longer in the workforce include:

- ✧ governments providing resources to assist older job seekers to find a new job
- ✧ employers ending discrimination and adapting work practices to an age-diverse workforce
- ✧ the questioning of mandatory retirement ages
- ✧ older workers themselves changing their attitudes towards working longer and acquiring new skills (OECD 2005b).

Policy development in Australia is ongoing. Age discrimination legislation has been introduced at federal, state and territory levels and the age at which women can access the age pension has been increased. There have been increases to the minimum age for accessing superannuation benefits, and incentives have been introduced for workers who stay on in employment beyond the age pension age (for example, the Pension Bonus Scheme) (ABS 2005b). Most recently, further changes have been made to eligibility requirements for disability support to promote participation in work where possible, and superannuation arrangements have been amended to provide further incentives for older people to remain at work until they are at least 60 years of age. Some funding has been made available by the federal and state governments to support training programs for older workers.

The most recent of these developments have responded to arguments by the OECD (2005a) that Australia needed 'a co-ordinated and comprehensive package of measures' that would:

- ✧ facilitate later retirement while removing incentives to early retirement, for example, reducing penalties for combining a pension with income from work and limiting the ability (and taxation incentives) to draw superannuation benefits as a lump sum
- ✧ prevent disability benefits being used as a pathway to early retirement, while broadening eligibility for the Workplace Modifications Scheme to cover more workers with special needs or injuries
- ✧ enhance the effectiveness of age discrimination legislation by increasing public awareness of rights and responsibilities under the legislation and raising the penalty for engaging in age discrimination
- ✧ strengthen older workers' employability, for example, improve training opportunities for older low-skilled and non-regular workers; address the lack of motivation among these groups to participate in training; extend job-search assistance to those who are unemployed or inactive with no income support and who want to work; strengthen and align job-search requirements for older job seekers with those in other age groups, while providing better targeted assistance to older job seekers.

Older people and work

Introduction

This section focuses on the following questions:

- ✧ What proportion of workers is currently aged 45 years or older? How does this vary by qualification levels? What proportion works part-time or full-time? In what occupations, industries, locations? On what basis are they employed?
- ✧ What factors explain these patterns of workforce participation? What education/training-related factors? What employment-related factors? What social factors or characteristics? What other kinds of factors?

Labour force participation

Workers aged 45–64 years made up just under a quarter of the total labour force in 1983–84, but nearly a third by 2003–04. This was due to the faster increase in the population aged 45–64 years relative to that aged 15–44 years and to the growth in the labour force participation of the population aged 45–64 years. The labour force participation rate for women aged 45–64 years increased from 36% to 60%. Among men the participation rate remained at 77%, with declines among those aged under 60 years, but with increases among those over this age (ABS 2005b).

As more people move into older age groups, the number of people leaving the workforce is expected to accelerate. Two factors are slowing the speed at which this is happening: increases in women's participation in paid employment; and rising levels of education among both male and female workers.

Qualification levels and participation

People with higher levels of education attainment tend to participate in the labour force at higher rates and also tend to stay in the workforce for longer, at least until age 55 years. These effects are particularly noticeable among women.

Figure 2 shows participation in full-time work by qualification levels. Males with educational qualifications at bachelor's degree level or higher (likely to be associate professionals and professionals) and at certificate III/IV level (likely to be tradespersons) are proportionately slightly more engaged in full-time work than those with other types of qualifications, or no qualification. Between the ages of 40 and 54 years there is very little movement of males out of the full-time workforce, regardless of their level of educational attainment. This changes once they reach 55 years of age, when there is a decline in participation for all groups.¹

In the case of women, the gap between the participation in full-time work of those with bachelor's degrees or higher and other types of qualifications or no qualification is much wider—and the proportion of degree holders in full-time work actually increases up to the age of 54 years, while it

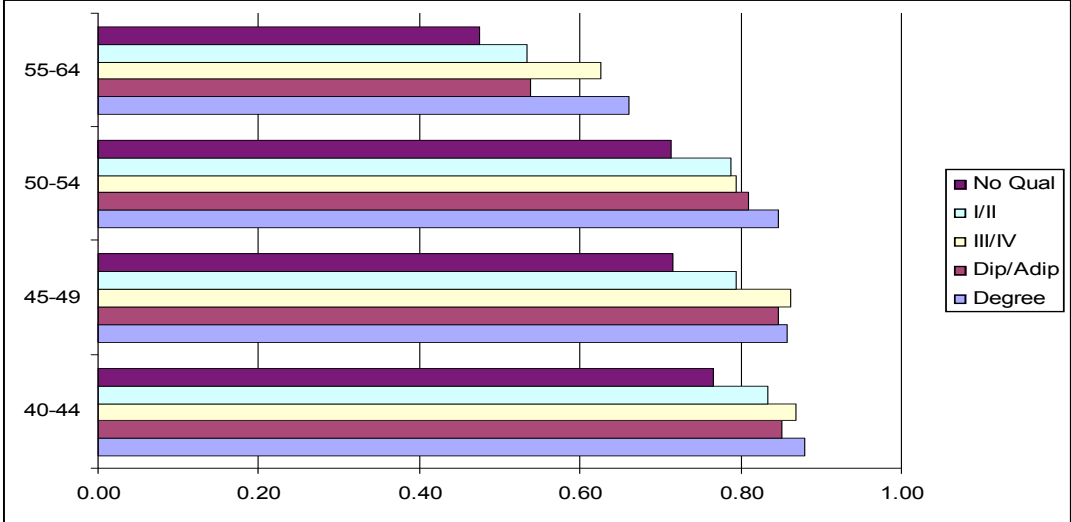
¹ This is notably for those with qualifications at diploma or advanced diploma level. This may be associated with particular occupations such as teaching.

declines or changes very little for women with other levels of educational attainment. However, there is a similar dramatic decline in workforce participation from 55 years of age.

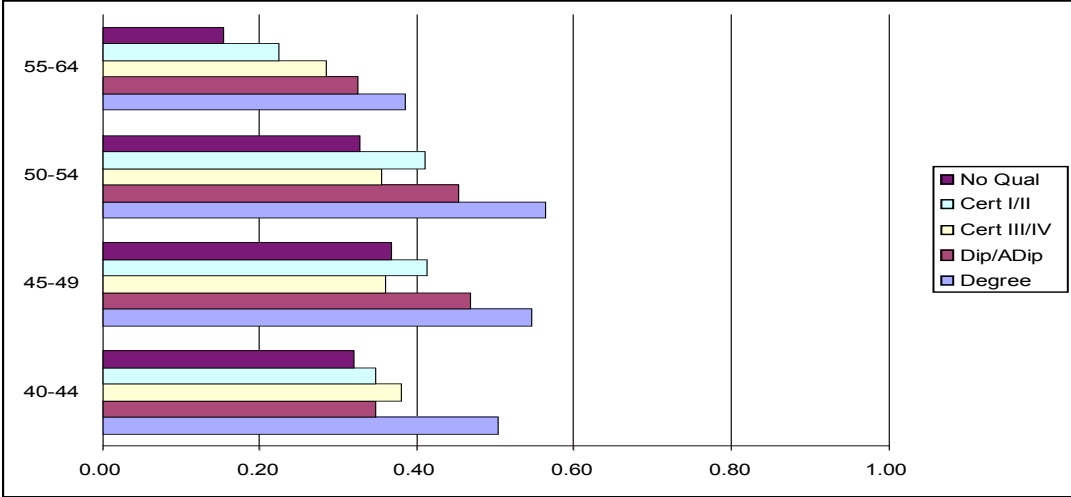
From figure 2 it can be seen that more men aged 45–69 years than women hold qualifications. Over half of the men have a qualification at level III or higher, but only a little over a third of the women. A much larger number of men hold VET qualifications than do women. The number of men and women holding degrees or diplomas is approximately the same (ABS 2004b, 2006c).

Figure 2 Proportion of people in full-time work by age and qualification, Australia, 2004

Males



Females



Source: ABS (2004b); unpublished data from the Survey of Education and Work.

Industries and occupations

In 2003–04 the industries with the largest proportions of workers aged 45–64 years were (ABS 2005b):

- ✧ education (47%)
- ✧ health and community services (42%)
- ✧ electricity, gas and water supply; government administration and defence; and agriculture, forestry and fishing industries (each 41%).

In 2003, the industries with the highest proportions of male workers aged 45–64 years were:

- ✧ education (49%)
- ✧ government, administration and defence (46%)
- ✧ electricity, gas and water supply (44%).

For women in the same age groups notably high proportions were in:

- ✧ education (46%)
- ✧ health and community services (42%).

As many older workers hold the same job for many years, patterns of employment by age and industry reflect long-term changes in the structure of the Australian economy. The lowest proportions of older workers are in industries such as ‘retail trade’ and ‘accommodation, cafes and restaurants’, which have experienced high rates of job growth in recent years (Weller 2004).

Reflecting the earlier retirement of workers with lower-level skills, the largest proportions of older workers tend to be in occupations requiring higher skill levels. In 2003–04 the occupation groups with the largest proportion of workers aged 45–64 years were:

- ✧ managers and administrators (47%)
- ✧ advanced clerical and service workers (38%)
- ✧ professionals (37%).

However, there are also considerable numbers of older workers in intermediate and low-skill occupations, including intermediate clerical, sales and service workers, intermediate production and transport workers, and labourers and related workers (ABS 2006d, ABS 2004a).

Geographic location and country of birth

Employment opportunities in Australia are subject to regional differences. This has implications for older workers, who tend to be less mobile and thus more reliant on local labour markets than younger people. Different regional areas have developed specialised economic strengths and older workers who have lived in one region for many years are likely to possess skills and work experiences that reflect historical industry and labour market profiles. When new jobs are created in these places, they are unlikely to be in ‘old economy’ industry and occupational specialisations (Weller 2004). There can thus be a mismatch between the skills that older workers possess and those required within their region.

Participation in the labour force, including among older workers, also varies according to country of birth. Particular migrant groups may experience labour market disadvantage arising primarily from lack of qualifications and inadequate language skills. In addition, participation can reflect the cultural traditions of different community groups, the lower acceptance of women’s labour force participation among some ethnic communities, and the effects of labour market discrimination (Weller 2004).

Part-time work

In 2003–04, 11% of male workers aged 45–64 years and 45% of females of the same age were employed part-time (ABS 2005b). Part-time employment is most common among young people and workers in the oldest age groups. It is also much more common among women than men. Between the ages of 25 and 54 years the vast majority of male workers are in full-time employment and, while the proportion declines slightly among older age groups, full-time employment is still the norm for workers in the very oldest age groups.

While some older workers prefer part-time employment, others would like to work longer hours. In 2003, almost a quarter (24%) of those aged 45–54 years and about 16% of those aged 55–64 years working part-time wanted to work more hours (ABS 2004a).

Part-time workers who are dissatisfied with their working arrangements are also frequently dissatisfied with their hours of work, occupation and industry. They tend to be workers who have been displaced by structural changes in the economy and have subsequently been relegated to lesser positions (Weller 2004).

Unemployment

Older people who are unemployed tend to remain so for longer. In September 2003, 43% of unemployed people aged 55–64 years had been unemployed for 12 months or longer, compared with 33% of 45 to 54-year-olds and 23% of 25 to 44-year-olds. Unemployed men were more likely to be in long-term unemployment than unemployed women. Long-term unemployment may discourage older workers and cause them to consider leaving the workforce (ABS 2004a).

Of older workers in 2003 who wanted to work and were available to work but did not actively look for work, 51% said they had become discouraged because employers considered them too old, while 22% felt there were no jobs in their locality or in their line of work. Importantly, nearly a fifth (18%) indicated that they lacked the necessary schooling, training, skills or experience (ABS 2004a).

Across all working-age groups, about a fifth of people available and looking for work or for more hours of work indicate that their main difficulty is a lack of required training, qualifications and experience. Providing appropriate opportunities to develop their skills may thus assist them to find employment. However, by itself, skills development will not necessarily solve the difficulties that some older workers face in finding suitable employment. Many older males especially believe that employers consider them too old to employ (ABS 2006e).

In the context of the difficulties that some older people face in gaining employment, such as discouraging employer attitudes, Cully (2004) underlines the inability of skills development on its own to assist them. Training, he suggests, should be seen as only one element in a suite of active labour market assistance measures to help older workers return to work.

Retirement

The overwhelming majority of Australian workers expect to retire—most of them before they reach 70 years. Among those who retired in the last five years, the average retirement age was 60 years, with a small difference between males (61.5 years) and females (58.3 years) (ABS 2006e).

Decisions about retirement depend on many different factors including: access to adequate retirement income; the age at which workers become eligible for government age pensions; health; interests and capabilities; competing responsibilities; redundancy; and the ability of workers to find appropriate work. Among retirees whose last job was fewer than 20 years ago, the main reasons for ceasing work were ‘reaching retirement age/being eligible to receive superannuation or the pension’ (34%), ‘sickness, injury or ill health’ (26%) and ‘being retrenched, dismissed or no work available’ (11%) (ABS 2006e).

Three social changes since the 1970s—delayed parenting, re-formed ‘second’ families, and prolonged ‘childhood’ as children stay at school longer—are also influencing retirement intentions. The current generation of older workers can expect to have responsibility for dependents for many years to come. Those with family responsibilities are thus likely to continue to seek work, regardless of the incentives and disincentives created by federal and state governments. The parenting role of older Australians is being prolonged by HECS (Higher Education Contribution Scheme) debts, barriers to home ownership and limited full-time job opportunities for young people (Weller 2004).

The rate at which older people leave the workforce varies according to occupation and is lowest at opposite ends of the occupational hierarchy. Managers and administrators, and labourers and elementary clerical, sales and service workers are the most likely to remain at work after 55 years of age (Weller 2004).

Those remaining at work tend to be engaged in either highly autonomous or relatively menial work and can thus be divided into two groups: ‘stayers’ who are working for satisfaction; and those who are working out of financial necessity (Weller 2004). Differences such as these may be important in framing incentives and work arrangements to support and encourage those in specific groups who wish to remain at work and in providing the additional education, training and experience they may require if they are to do so successfully. Similarly, those choosing to leave the workforce may do so for many different reasons and the framing of incentives and work arrangements to encourage them to delay their retirement or to return to the workforce is also likely to require different approaches.

Volunteer work

Many older people participate in volunteer work informally within their communities or formally through community organisations. Consequently, there is evidence of some concern that incentives to encourage older people to remain in paid work for longer, or to work more hours, might have the unintended consequence of reducing their ability to participate in community work. This could have serious consequences, since many valuable community activities depend heavily on volunteers.

The number of hours that older people devote to volunteer activities in a year is high compared with the average for all age groups. In 2004, the average number of hours given by formal volunteers (all age groups) was 132 hours for the year, but was 178 hours for those aged 55–65 years. Interestingly, participation in formal volunteering is highest among 35 to 44-year-olds, followed by 45 to 54-year-olds (Volunteering Australia 2006).

Patterns of volunteering differ among various social groups and according to location, gender and life stage. Overall, women volunteer at a slightly higher rate than men, but the opposite is true for older age groups, where men volunteer more often. Those most likely to volunteer are those in paid employment, particularly people with higher-level skills. However, those not in paid employment contribute the greatest number of hours to volunteering. Most people choose volunteer activities that relate to their employment—this is where they can use their skills. Those living outside capital cities also participate more often than those living in metropolitan areas, reflecting closer connections with their communities and, perhaps, some differences in community requirements, for example, volunteer fire brigades (ABS 2000).

A problem with data on volunteering is that much informal activity is not captured and thus its true extent remains a mystery. Many people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds participate in informal activities through their communities; their participation is often understated.

Flexible arrangements that enable older workers to combine paid and volunteer work may help to overcome fears about the potential loss of the contribution of these people to community activities. As both kinds of work are often related, the provision of skills development opportunities for one type of work may thus also have pay-offs for the other.

Summing up

This section has looked at variations in the labour force participation of older people. It has found the following.

- ✧ The number of older people in the workforce has grown substantially over the past two decades, due to the increase in the number of older people and the higher rates of participation among women.

- ✧ People with higher levels of education attainment tend to participate in the labour force at higher rates and also tend to stay in the workforce for longer. However, there is a dramatic decline in participation after age 55 years, regardless of qualification level.
- ✧ Older workers are not evenly spread across industries and occupations. People tend to stay on to higher ages in occupations requiring higher skill levels, associated with higher levels of qualifications.
- ✧ Labour force participation among older workers varies according to country of birth. Relative labour market disadvantage contributes to their rate of participation, as does a range of social and cultural factors and possible discrimination.
- ✧ Older workers tend to be less mobile than their younger counterparts. Consequently, they are more reliant on local labour markets.
- ✧ About 10% of males aged 45 to 64 years and 45% of females are employed part-time, with proportions higher among women. Some part-time workers would prefer more hours of work. They tend to be those displaced by structural changes in the economy and subsequently relegated to lesser positions (Weller 2004).
- ✧ Older people who are unemployed tend to remain so for longer. The difficulties they experience in gaining employment, such as employer attitudes, mean that skills development alone will be inadequate to assist them.
- ✧ The average age of retirement is 60 years, but is higher for men (61.5) than women (58.3). Retirement varies according to occupation. Retirement decisions are influenced by factors including: access to adequate retirement income; health; interests and capabilities; competing responsibilities; redundancy; and the ability to find work. Managers and administrators, and labourers and elementary clerical, sales and service workers are the most likely to remain at work after 55 years of age.
- ✧ Those most likely to remain at work after age 55 years can be divided into ‘stayers’, who work for satisfaction and those working out of financial necessity (Weller 2004). This difference may be important in framing incentives and work arrangements to support and encourage labour force participation.
- ✧ As older people devote more hours to volunteer activities than do other age groups, encouraging them to remain in paid employment may have implications for the work of community organisations.

Older people and learning for work

Introduction

This section focuses on participation by older workers in work-related skills development programs and activities. It asks: What factors affect participation? What differences are apparent between sub-groups of older workers?

Also examined is the nature of good practice in skills development for older workers.

Participation in skills development

Formal VET

Older students are about a fifth of all VET students and this proportion has not changed since 2000. The vast majority of VET students are thus less than 45 years of age. The majority of older students are between the ages of 45 and 54 years and there are many fewer students in older age groups. Thus the proportion of all VET students who are 55+ years is very small (7% in 2005) (table 1).

Published National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) VET statistics on students and courses identify older students only by gender. Among all VET students, females are fewer than half and declined in proportion from 2000 to 2005, from 49% to 48%. The gap between the number of male and female students has also widened. In 2000 there were 29 000 more male VET students than females in total, but in 2005 males outnumbered females by 58 200. However, among older students, females outnumbered males (table 1).

Comparing age groups by gender highlights different patterns of participation among women and men. While just under a quarter of all female students were aged over 45 years (23% in 2005), less than one-fifth of male students were in this age group (18% in 2005). This difference indicates that men tend to participate in VET at a younger age, in association with workforce entry, while more women participate at a later age, consistent with entry/re-entry to the workforce after child rearing (table 1).

Table 1 Students in VET courses in 2000 and 2005¹

Year	2000		2005	
	No. ('000)	%	No. ('000)	%
All students				
All males	865.2	50.7	847.7	51.6
All females	836.2	49.0	789.5	48.1
All students	1707.9		1641.3	
Older students²				
Male students	No. ('000)	% all males	No. ('000)	% all males
45–49 years	55.2	6.3	54.3	6.4
50–54 years	43.6	5.0	42.0	4.9
55–59 years	26.9	3.1	31.0	3.6
60–64 years	15.6	1.8	15.8	1.8
65 years or over	16.5	1.9	13.1	1.5
Total older males	157.8	18.2	156.2	18.4
Female students	No. ('000)	% all females	No. ('000)	% all females
45–49 years	70.5	8.4	69.0	8.7
50–54 years	53.3	6.3	49.9	6.3
55–59 years	29.6	3.5	33.3	4.2
60–64 years	15.5	1.8	15.7	1.9
65 years or over	15.9	1.9	15.3	1.9
Total older females	184.9	22.1	183.3	23.2
All older students	No. ('000)	% all students	No. ('000)	% all students
45–49 years	126.0	7.3	123.5	7.5
50–54 years	97.1	5.6	92.1	5.6
55–59 years	56.6	3.3	64.4	3.9
60–64 years	31.2	1.8	31.6	1.9
65 years or over	32.4	1.9	28.5	1.7
Total older students	343.3	20.1	340.1	20.7

Notes: 1 This table contains data for 2000 and 2005 as it was reported in 2006. Since that time, there have been some changes in data-reporting for 2006. As a result of these changes, data for previous years have been recast. Consequently, the data contained in this report may not necessarily match the data currently available. For further information see <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/statistic/publications/1792.html>>.

2 Data reported in this table for older students do not include the 'not known' responses.

Source: NCVER (2006).

NCVER data on VET graduate outcomes for 2005 show that across all age groups the most frequently obtained qualification was a certificate III. However, the proportion of older students obtaining this qualification was lower than for all other age groups (table 2).

Older students differed from all students in three further ways:

- ✧ a larger proportion obtained a qualification at certificate I level (11% compared with 7%)
- ✧ a smaller proportion obtained a diploma or above (9% compared with 12% of all students)
- ✧ a larger proportion obtained a certificate IV (24% compared with 20%).

Reasons for these differences are unclear, but they may reflect the higher proportion of females among the older students. The proportion of older students obtaining a certificate I also suggests that, before commencing their VET course, a larger proportion had a low level (or no) qualification. This reflects VET's important role for people whose prior formal educational achievements (either in Australia or overseas) are limited.

Table 2 Graduate outcomes 2005, qualifications by age group (%)

Qualification	All %	15–24years	25–44	45+
Diplomas and above	12	13	13	9
Certificate IV	20	11	26	24
Certificate III	36	38	36	33
Certificate II	25	30	20	23
Certificate I	7	7	5	11
Total	100	100	100	100

Source: NCVET (2005).

There are some further differences between younger and older students in the type of training they undertake. The NCVET Student Outcomes Survey (2005) shows the proportion of older students who reported that their training was part of a traineeship or apprenticeship was lower than for other age groups (12%, compared with 24% for all students). Consistent with the data on older workers in particular occupations and industries, larger proportions of older than all VET students reported completing training in:

- ✧ education (9% compared with 5% of all students; and 1% of 15 to 24-year-olds)
- ✧ agriculture, environmental and related studies (9% compared with 7% of all students)
- ✧ society and culture (15% compared with 13% of all students).

The most popular field of study among older students was management and commerce (25%), followed by engineering and related technologies (17%). These were also the most popular fields among younger students. Fewer older students than younger students completed training in food, hospitality and personal services (8% compared with 10% of all students, and with 14% of 15 to 24-year-olds).

Like other students, most older VET students undertook training for employment-related reasons (76% compared with 78% for all students). Fewer sought further study outcomes, but slightly more participated for personal development reasons (22% compared with 17% for all students).

Since most older students undertake a VET course for employment-related reasons, employment outcomes are important. These are potentially of three kinds: employment for those who were not employed when they began the course; a new job for those who were employed prior to the course; or a promotion.

The graduate outcomes data provide information about outcomes of only the first kind and show that older students fare poorly in this respect when compared with younger students. Three-quarters of older students were in employment before commencing their training, only slightly more than the proportion of all students (73%) and less than the proportion of 25 to 44-year-olds (78%). After completing their VET training, only 8% of older graduates who were not employed when they commenced the course of study obtained employment afterwards (compared with 18% for 15 to 24-year-olds and 13% for all students). Such poor employment outcomes may reflect the level of VET qualification they obtained, but possibly also reflect employer hiring decisions. However, on a brighter note, 13% of older students obtained their first job after finishing their training.

Consistent with data on motivations, only 22% of older students enrolled for further study after they completed their training, compared with 32% of all students and 40% of 15 to 24-year-olds. For many younger students, completing a VET course can lead to either employment or further study, or a combination of the two, but for most older students, further formal study is an option rarely taken up. Of those who do go on to further study, the vast majority choose another VET program.

Employer-supported skills development

Data on engagement in skills development by full-time wage and salary earners indicate that, overall, proportionately fewer full-time employed workers in older age groups participate than do younger workers. One of the reasons for this is a decline with age in employer support for training.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Survey of Education and Training in 2005 (ABS 2006c) showed that participation in work-related training² increased in the early 2000s among older workers. Between 2001 and 2005 the number of people aged 45–64 years completing a training course grew by 21%, with little difference between males and females. Growth was particularly marked among 55 to 64-year-olds (47% compared with 12% for those aged 45–54 years).

However, participation is strongly related to employment status and to full-time employment, in particular. In 2005, 96% of those aged 45–64 years who completed a training course were in the labour force (86% of men and 55% of women in full-time employment). The proportions in full-time employment were also higher in the younger age group: 92% of men and 58% of women aged 45–54 years completing training were employed full-time, compared with 80% of men and 46% of women aged 55–64 years.

According to the ABS survey, employers appear to support training for younger workers. In 2005, 35% of men aged 55–64 years received no financial support for training from their employer, compared with 26% of the 45 to 54-year-olds and 21% of those aged 25–44 years. In all age groups larger proportions of men than women received employer support for training. This is probably linked to the greater frequency of part-time employment among women. Nevertheless, in 2005 a larger proportion of women than men completed more than one training course (63% compared with 56%).

According to a study by Karmel and Woods, older people in employment who have undertaken training are more likely to retain their employment status, relative to their employed peers not receiving training (Karmel & Woods 2004).

There are some differences between men and women, consistent with males engaging in more front-end training and more women participating later—perhaps due to changes in their family responsibilities. Participation by women is highest in the two middle-age groups (35–44 and 45–54). The main findings are the following.

- ✧ Enrolment in study declined with age, but in each age group the proportion of women engaged was larger than the proportion of men.
- ✧ Employer-supported study declined with age for both men and women. Similar proportions of men and women aged 45–64 years receive this support in all age groups, except for 55 to 64-year-olds, where 3% of women, but only 1% of men received employer support.
- ✧ In-house training for men increased from age 25 to 54 years, but then declined sharply. In all age groups proportionately more women than men engaged in in-house training. There is also less variation in participation by women across age groups. Women aged 35–44 years participated most frequently, but there was little difference between them and those aged 25–34 and 45–54 years. The decline in participation after age 54 years was much less marked among women than men.
- ✧ External training was most common among males aged 25–34 years (24%) and women aged 35–44 years (26%). In the oldest age groups, larger proportions of women than men participated in external training.

² Defined by the ABS as structured learning activities undertaken primarily to obtain, maintain or improve employment-related skills or competencies.

- ✧ With the exception of women aged 25–34 years, less than a fifth of workers were engaged in employer-supported external training. Among males the proportion declined from age 44 years, while among females there was a similar decline, but it was sharper from age 54 years.
- ✧ Women of all ages were much more engaged in informal on-the-job learning than men and, while their participation declined with age, the reduction was more gradual.
- ✧ ‘Teaching self’ was the most important form of training for males in all age groups, but even this declined substantially after age 55 years. It was even more substantial among females—at all ages, but especially for those aged 55–64 years.

Adult and community education

The adult and community education (ACE) sector offers both vocational and non-vocational programs. Vocational programs include both formal programs leading to a certificate or diploma and non-formal programs, which do not lead to a qualification but which still aim to assist participants to gain a vocational skill.

Many more older people participate in ACE than in VET. In 2001 approximately 30% of all ACE participants were aged 45–64 years, compared with around one-fifth of VET students. However, published data do not indicate the types of programs in which they enrolled. About half of all ACE participants were engaged in vocational programs in 2001 (NCVER 2003).

The majority of ACE participants are women (70% in 2001), who comprise an even larger majority of participants in non-vocational programs (74%), but are under-represented in vocational programs (67%) (NCVER 2003). Men are typically only occasional users and marginally attached to ACE—they don’t relate positively to ACE or know enough about ACE to use it and consequently don’t feel comfortable going there. Older men are among those most likely to be ‘put off’ by ACE (Golding, Harvey & Echter 2005).

Barriers to participation

Previous studies (for example, National Institute of Labour Studies 2001; Gelade, Catts & Gerber 2003) have identified a range of barriers to the participation of older workers in skills development. But how, why, and to what extent the barriers work against different groups of older workers are yet to be fully explored.

Employer attitudes towards older workers are among the main barriers that have been identified. These attitudes are based on concern about older workers’ retirement intentions and thus the length of time the employer will have to recoup their investment in skills development for these workers; views about older people’s capacity to learn; a preference for recruiting younger workers; and doubts about the effectiveness and usefulness of skills development in general. While it seems likely that employers’ attitudes towards older workers may be affected by the occupation and educational attainment of these workers, with possibly more positive attitudes towards those with higher-level skills, as yet, research has not addressed this issue in any depth.

A study exploring managers’ views about the productivity of older workers which asked them to rate workers in six different age groups on the extent to which training in a range of skills would result in a return on the investment found that, while the managers viewed investment in training as worthwhile for all age groups, they expected the return on that investment to decline with age. They did not believe that the skills of older workers would increase after training as much as those of younger workers and they expected that older workers would not remain with the firm for as long. They appeared to hold the view that it was more sensible economically to train younger workers than their older colleagues (Ranzijn 2005).

These attitudes may help to explain why employer compliance with age anti-discrimination legislation is uneven (Chappell et al. 2003).

Recent case studies of five organisations in the United Kingdom (Newton et al. 2005) suggest two ways in which employer preferences for training younger workers can be neutralised, so that access to training for older workers is increased.

- ✧ Organisations should require all employees to develop personal development plans.
- ✧ Training should be linked to job competencies and role matrices, so that workers can identify what training is required to progress through the grades.

The attitudes of some older people themselves towards education and training also act as a barrier to participation in work-related learning. At least in part these attitudes may be indicative of or linked to a lack of information and guidance about skill requirements, career opportunities and learning options. In part, it may also reflect previous (poor) experiences of education and training and doubts about their own ability to learn successfully at an older age. Dawe and Elvins (2006) note that within the VET sector there are few modes of training delivery specific to older people.

Older workers have been found to be often haphazard and ill informed in selecting training, lacking information about options and future skill demands and with inadequate knowledge about how specific programs articulate to build competencies and qualifications. The advice given by providers on issues such as recognition of prior learning and credit transfer can also be inconsistent and ad hoc (Jones et al. 2004). In addition, many older workers do not understand that the contemporary world of work requires them, more than in the past, to manage their own career and life pathways. Thus a need has been identified for a stronger culture of career development, with a focus on all age groups, and which includes encouraging older adults to give greater consideration to career and learning options (Beddie, Lorey & Pamphilon 2005).

While older workers who are unemployed or marginally attached to the labour force generally recognise the value of training, they have concerns about a lack of suitable training and feelings of uncertainty about employment possibilities. When they do undertake skills development, they tend to do this outside rather than within the VET system (Chappell et al. 2003).

Other barriers to participation by older people in work-related learning include:

- ✧ the absence of paid work—unemployment and under-employment
- ✧ having ‘too much work’ (particularly for men)
- ✧ particular educational and occupational characteristics of the current older age cohort (for example, low level of educational attainment and concentration in low-skilled jobs)
- ✧ the public policy environment, which, in the past, has encouraged and supported early retirement
- ✧ financial reasons (particularly for women)
- ✧ family and personal reasons (particularly for women) (National Institute of Labour Studies 2001; Thomson et al. 2005; Dawe & Elvins 2006; ABS 2007b).

A number of initiatives have already been introduced that address some of these barriers, such as age discrimination legislation and changes to pension and superannuation arrangements to reduce incentives to early retirement, as noted earlier. However, many difficulties remain, and ways to overcome them are still being sought.

These barriers are not unique to Australia. International studies indicate that similar factors are common to many developed nations. However, what is unique to Australia is the system providing and supporting learning for work—the VET system. Specific barriers related to VET policy and practice that affect older people have been identified as:

- ✧ 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 older age group unsuited to interventions delivered by a single service
- ✧ few modes of training delivery specific to the group (Dawe & Elvins 2006).

Good practice in training older workers

Understandings of the nature of adult learning support a ‘learner-centred’ approach to teaching adults, in which teachers act as facilitators, draw on the expertise among the learners and allow learners to set their own pace (Jarvis 1995). This approach recognises the following.

- ✧ Adults tend to be self-directing.
- ✧ Adults’ readiness to learn is frequently affected by their need to know or do something, so that they tend to have a life-, task-, or problem-centred orientation to learning as opposed to a subject-matter orientation.
- ✧ Adults have a rich reservoir of experience that can serve as a resource for learning.
- ✧ Adults are generally motivated to learn by internal or intrinsic factors (such as helping their child with homework), as opposed to external or extrinsic forces (such as an increase in salary) (Imel 1994).

While the capacity of older workers for retraining may be disputed, a review of recent studies in the United States (Simpson 2005) notes that there is no solid evidence that workers who are less than 70 years of age suffer from deficits in cognitive functioning that limit their capacity for retraining. The most credible finding in the literature, Simpson notes, is that ageing results in only modest declines in working memory and information-processing speed. Other studies confirm that these can be accommodated at little or no additional cost through the redesign of programs to address the special learning needs of older workers.

Favored training strategies include (1) a slower pace of instruction with ample discussion time; (2) the incorporation of hands-on exercises and experiential techniques; (3) less required reading material; (4) self-paced instruction, including the innovative use of computers.

(Simpson 2005, p.69)

Simpson’s review of the United States studies finds also that older workers ‘do better’ when they are trained separately from younger workers as this can overcome the ‘frustrations and distractions’ that older workers feel when younger people master tasks and material more quickly. However, separate training for older and younger workers is not always economically feasible. In addition, ‘with only minor adjustments to training design, older workers learn just as well as younger workers’. Simpson points to numerous case studies in the United States of skills development programs for older workers where training techniques have been successfully adapted for this group. In some cases, the techniques adopted (such as self-paced computer-based instruction) have later been extended successfully to other workers.

Also drawing on United States studies, Dunn (2005) finds that older people can be trained or retrained as effectively as others if programs are appropriately age-tailored. Older learners differ from younger learners in their psychological needs, physical limitations and learning styles. They experience difficulties in processing information when it is presented at a fast pace, when contextual clues are not given and when they are not given opportunities to consider competing information simultaneously. Based on these studies, Dunn has identified 12 good practices in training older adults (box 1).

Differences between older and younger workers in learning needs and capabilities may help to explain why, as Simpson (2005) notes, studies have found that older workers prefer non-traditional adult education training options. In Australia also, studies have indicated a preference among older workers for skills development options in the ACE sector. Older job seekers in particular have

been found to prefer courses offered in an environment they believe to be sympathetic to older learners (Chappell et al. 2003; Jones et al. 2004).

Box 1 Good practice in training older workers

- 1 Create a learning environment that encourages self-confidence.
- 2 Use modular training programs, breaking skills into small tasks. Use a building-block approach to learning, presenting one idea at a time and summarising frequently.
- 3 Use easy-to-read printed training materials.
- 4 If using video-based materials, first make sure the learners are comfortable with using the equipment.
- 5 If using computer-based materials, ensure that learners are comfortable with the computer and can navigate the program successfully.
- 6 Include activities that acknowledge and draw upon participants' life experiences.
- 7 Ensure that the purpose and relevance of all activities is clear.
- 8 Use peer mentoring and coaching, encourage team and small group work and provide many opportunities for discussion and questions.
- 9 Use a variety of delivery methods to accommodate a variety of learning style preferences.
- 10 Provide assistance with study skills, for example, note-taking and organising materials.
- 11 Create a supportive learning environment that allows success, provides positive and immediate feedback and encourages personal goal-setting and planning.
- 12 Ensure that the training environment is free of distractions and provides opportunities for frequent breaks and social interaction.

Source: Adapted from Dunn (2005).

Some previous studies recognise that, within the broad category of 'older workers', there are sub-groups of individuals who share characteristics, backgrounds or experiences that influence their need and motivation for skills development. However, whether such sub-groups require further attention beyond the tailoring of programs required for older workers generally is a question that few previous studies have addressed.

Two recent Australian studies which investigated skills development for older workers who are disadvantaged in the labour market through unemployment and low prior education (Jones et al. 2004; Gelade, Catts & Gerber 2003) touched on this question and support a conclusion that some further specific additional attention may be required for at least this sub-group of older workers. Jones et al. (2004) identify that the needs of disadvantaged older workers are complex and diverse and thus require a multi-faceted response. The vocational advice available to the group has been inadequate and they have continued to target a narrow range of jobs, often in declining occupations. Consequently, there is a need for targeted support and training options for this group. Gelade, Stehlik and Willis (2006) identify a range of good practices which they suggest should be adopted in this training. These are broadly consistent with the practices identified by Dunn (2005) and are organised into five themes, summarised below:

- ❖ *Creating a safe, non-threatening environment:* welcoming new learners, calming their fears and making efforts to understand and account for their feelings of inadequacy and concern about education and training. Using alternatives to formal assessment.
- ❖ *Negotiating the processes of learning:* negotiating the curriculum with the learners in a process of 'respectful engagement'. Identifying learners' needs and interests and beginning with these. Assessing existing skills and providing guidance where needed.

- ✧ *Motivating learners*: through achievement, socialisation and participation in a learning community staff help learners to become self-motivated and to increase their self-confidence.
- ✧ *A different approach to learning*: adopting a learner-centred approach in which learners engage in practical, hands-on applications and learn and achieve in small incremental steps, with opportunities for repetition and without time limits; drawing heavily on the experiences of the participants and using peer mentoring and coaching.
- ✧ *Organisational innovation and outcomes*: organisational flexibility and innovation such as offering small and specialised classes geared to requests from learners or local community organisations or industry.

In addition Gelade, Stehlik and Willis (2006) find that disadvantaged older workers experience barriers to learning that require some special attention. At least initially, many in the group need personalised support to overcome these barriers. However, once these initial needs have been met, 'most people are able to take advantage of the broad range of opportunities for continued learning'. Their findings thus suggest that, if good practice for older workers generally is adopted, most of the needs of this sub-group will be met and only small further adjustments will be required.

In a comprehensive study of education for older adults ('educational gerontology'), Findsen (2005) cautions against this form of a 'quick-fix' approach that focuses narrowly on the specific needs of sub-groups. He argues that more useful is a deeper, more holistic understanding of the lives of older adults:

... there is no substitute for gaining more in-depth knowledge of individuals' social lives and of groups or institutions to which they belong. Essentially human beings are social animals, not freed from prevailing political and cultural configurations of which they are part.

(Findsen 2005, p.142)

The implications of the heterogeneity among older workers for effective skills development are discussed further in the following section, which presents the findings of the case studies conducted for this project.

Summing up

- ✧ Participation in skills development varies between younger and older workers and between different groups of older workers. While participation by older workers in VET has remained stable, participation in work-related training has increased considerably. However, it is strongly related to full-time employment. Overall, women tend to participate more than men, although employers tend to support training for men more than for women. This may be because a larger proportion of women are in part-time employment. Employer support for training declines with age for both women and men.
- ✧ Older workers are affected by barriers to their participation in skills development, with some barriers affecting some groups of older workers more than others. However, the effects of the barriers on different groups are not yet fully understood.
- ✧ Some changes to skills development programs are required to accommodate the different motivations, objectives and ways of learning of older workers. However, these are usually small and can benefit all participants.

Effective skills development

Seven case studies conducted for this project aimed to identify the factors contributing to the effectiveness of skills development overall for older workers and to highlight any adjustments required in response to the diversity within the group.

The case studies are summarised in table 3 with further information in the appendix.

Six case studies centred on specific training programs in: a 5-star hotel, a utility company, a retail/hospitality program, a program in engineering skills, a career change program and a program on building skills. The seventh case study explored programs offered by an ACE centre in a large region of rural Victoria, with particular attention paid to two of its programs: Community Skillsbank and a state government initiative known as Learning Towns.

Two of the case studies investigated targeted older people only: the retail/hospitality program and the career change program. The engineering skills program targeted both mature-age unemployed people and recent migrants. Other cases were included because there was a high level of participation by older people and/or attention to the needs of this age group.

Case study findings are based on interviews with key individuals in each case, consultations with program participants, where possible, and examination of available documents (including program outlines and participant feedback reports).

The discussion addresses three issues:

- ✧ factors driving the development of the programs and shaping their content and delivery
- ✧ factors contributing to the success of the programs and particularly to their effectiveness for older learners
- ✧ diversity issues—what kinds of issues arose in each program and how they were addressed.

Program drivers and developmental influences

The case study investigations began by exploring the origins of the programs and their subsequent development, with the aim of uncovering the factors that drove and shaped them. This process created a unique story about each program, while highlighting two common influences: concerns about retaining older workers in the labour force in the context of an ageing population; and changes in the types of skills required for employment.

In both the hotel and the utility company the needs of the enterprise were paramount in driving and shaping the programs and strategies explored in the case studies. With a high proportion of its workers over 45 years of age (43%), the utility company faced a potential loss of key skills, experience and corporate knowledge. It responded by introducing a new human resource strategy, knowledge management and diverse work arrangements. Phased retirement arrangements were adopted which enabled older workers to continue at a reduced level, while new roles, with associated training, were offered to those no longer able to cope with the physical tasks required in their previous jobs.

In the hotel a competitive business environment was driving ongoing efforts for greater efficiency. A program for room attendants was introduced with the aim of recognising the existing skills of these workers and rewarding them for their long service, while also increasing their efficiency and the quality of their work. Based on an existing training package, a program was tailored by a carefully selected (private) provider to the particular needs of the group, who comprised mainly mature women from diverse cultural and language backgrounds. This tailoring enabled participants to gain extra assistance where needed, to work collaboratively, to combine their participation with their work, and to use the new skills they were learning immediately in their work.

The availability of government funding to support skills development programs for unemployed older workers was a key factor behind the establishment of the retail/hospitality program and the engineering skills program. In both cases, training providers had responded to calls for tender by government departments, submitting program proposals and winning support. Similarly, in the regional ACE centres, a number of programs were the result of successful applications for government funding, including the 'Community Skillsbank' initiative. Interviews confirmed that without this support it was unlikely that these programs would have been developed.

In the retail/hospitality case, funding was obtained initially from both Commonwealth and state sources—an indicator of attention to issues associated with the ageing of the workforce by both levels of government. However, combining funding from two sources was ultimately untenable for the provider, as the funding bodies sought slightly different outcomes and imposed different reporting requirements. When reconciliation of these proved too difficult within the short term of the program, staff decided that they would not seek further funding from the federal source. The program they wanted to deliver more closely aligned with state policies and priorities. They were able to make up much of the shortfall by negotiating a new state-level agreement.

There were similar influences on the development of both programs, although they attracted different groups of participants. Most of those undertaking the retail and hospitality programs were women from non-English speaking backgrounds, while most of those undertaking the engineering skills programs were males, some of whom were Australian-born, some were migrants, and some were from non-English speaking backgrounds. As both programs targeted unemployed people and aimed to achieve employment outcomes, the skills required by employers in the relevant industries was a major influence on the content of the programs. Both also included work experience and this raised issues that needed to be addressed, such as a lack of understanding by participants of appropriate workplace behaviours and presentation. In both cases, participants were selected through an interview process which aimed to identify applicants with the skills essential for completing the program successfully, including literacy skills. In addition, in both cases, flexibility was incorporated so that program content could be altered to meet any specific needs of participants that might arise during the program.

Table 3 Summary of seven case studies

Case study	Location	Program	Participants	Industry	Skills development delivery	Funding
5-star hotel	Capital city	Certification of existing skills and upskilling for new responsibilities	Existing staff of the hotel employed as room attendants; mainly mature females from a variety of non-English speaking backgrounds	Hospitality	Delivered within the enterprise by a contracted private registered training organisation	State govt
Utility company	Capital city	Mature-age staff retention and phased retirement strategy, within a broader HR strategy	The company has adopted a new HR strategy for all employees, differentiating between age groups. The strategy for the oldest age group recognises that they may need to change job roles and responsibilities as they become no longer able to continue with some physical tasks. It also seeks to retain the valued skills and knowledge of older employees while enabling them to prepare for retirement. It thus includes job re-assignment with some training and increased work flexibilities	Power	Delivered within the enterprise	Enterprise
Retail/hospitality	Capital city and regional centres	Basic skills for employment in the retail and hospitality industries	The program targets mature-age unemployed people. Participants are mainly females, many from diverse non-English speaking backgrounds	Retail & hospitality	Industry registered training organisation	State government
Engineering skills	Capital city and regional centres	Basic skills for employment in engineering	The program targets mature-age unemployed people and recent migrants. Participants are mainly males, many from diverse non-English speaking backgrounds	Engineering	Industry group—contracted for delivery through TAFE	State and federal
Career change	Capital city	Skills to plan and achieve a career change	The program targeted workers seeking a career change; participants were mainly mature-age males	Various	TAFE within a dual-sector institution	State government
Building skills	Capital city	Basic skills for employment for males in the construction industry	Males—unemployed males and those seeking a career change	Construction	TAFE and local government partnership	State and local government
Region	Regional centre	Various: employment, personal enrichment, community development and leadership; Community Skillsbank; Learning Towns	Various depending on program, mix of ages and backgrounds	Various	ACE and partnerships	Various, including Victorian Government and fee-for-service

Similar influences were apparent in the case of the career change program, which aimed to assist older people who were looking for work, whose careers had stalled, or who were seeking a career change. Before proceeding with the program, the provider gauged the degree of interest among potential participants by conducting open public forums. The response exceeded expectations and led to registration of the first group of students. Time pressures meant that much of the program was put together quickly, but the varied skills of the team brought together to develop and conduct the program ensured that the content was diverse, innovative and of high quality. As the course progressed and participants' goals and preferences became more apparent, the need for a number of adaptations became clear and these were subsequently addressed.

Although feedback from participants at the end of the program was positive, considerable modifications were being considered at the time the case study was conducted with the aim of delivering a rather different second program. Among concerns was that the course was not reaching the group of people being given priority in state government policy and funding—the majority of participants were already highly skilled and in employment (many had university degrees), while policy and funding favoured those with fewer or lower-level skills and the unemployed. The course was also very broad; programs targeting particular industries were preferred.

The concerns of local government had a strong influence in driving and shaping the program Building Skills for Men. The local government area concerned has a higher-than-average rate of unemployment (11%), particularly among males (13%), a high proportion of long-term unemployed, lower-than-average levels of education attainment and poor educational aspirations.

As part of its development of a social plan for the city the local government conducted consultations with local service providers, identifying a need to: establish work experience programs for people no longer at school; liaise with training providers to develop local courses; increase the scope of training provided to ensure that residents were work-ready (for example, conflict resolution, interpersonal skills); increase the flexibility of training programs offered locally to meet the diverse needs of residents; and to make the involvement in training more attractive. One group which was identified as suffering considerable disadvantage were 25 to 45-year-olds, particularly males, who were over-represented among the unemployed in the district.

The local government joined with the local technical and further education (TAFE) institute to seek funding from the state training agency, initially for a pilot accredited general educational program targeting this group. Following this first course the two partners decided to focus further programs on the construction industry. This was partly because it was thought likely to be of interest to the target group; partly because it could enhance various community assets in the district; and partly because it could draw on competent and interested staff appropriate for teaching this particular group. Also, the TAFE staff noted 'we could satisfy all the necessary learning and assessment stuff'.

The new program that was developed thus mixed specific construction skills with generic employability skills and included practical projects in the community. In response to local concerns, it was also offered to a broader group, including males over 50 years of age. Fifteen programs were subsequently conducted over three years. Participants have included many older males, including some from refugee backgrounds and/or with overseas qualifications not recognised in Australia. The program has received support from a number of local employers, who have supplied materials for the practical community projects.

Local concerns were also among the important influences shaping the programs provided in the regional activity delivered through the ACE centre, which was the subject of the seventh case study. The centre provides programs for a large geographical area around this regional city. Demographics show that regional communities are ageing faster than metropolitan ones and interviews indicated that a shortage of young labour is already beginning to hit hard but, until recently, employers have been reluctant to employ older people, believing that they come with 'baggage'. However, this is beginning to change.

Among the many programs offered through the centre was one work-related program which specifically targeted older workers. This was conducted by the centre as a member of Job Futures and was a VET Priority Places Program, a federal government-funded initiative providing vocational training for people over 45 years of age and on low incomes with a disability or returning to work. The courses offered were at Certificate II level in Community Services Support Work, Information Technology, Business and Hospitality. This program was regarded as highly successful; the centre received a Job Futures national award.

In addition, the centre offered a number of other work-related programs in which many older people have participated.³ One was developed and delivered in partnership with a state-level employer body. This was similarly regarded as highly successful, the partnership with the employer body having ensured that the program would meet employer needs; many of the program participants achieved employment outcomes.

An important influence on the centre's decision to seek funding for a Community Skillsbank initiative—a program which partners older mentors with younger people to enhance skills for community organisations—was a consciousness of the skills and knowledge of older people as resources that could be harnessed for wider community benefit. Community Skillsbank aims to provide the region with improved skills for local governance, including local boards and committees. It enables those in the region who have the required skills to share them with others without these skills. Many of the mentors who have been involved in the project are older people—including some still in employment, as well as retirees.

Similar concerns to draw on the skills and knowledge of older people were part of projects conducted within the region under the Learning Towns initiative. This state-funded initiative aimed to develop collaborative learning partnerships between ACE organisations, TAFE/educational institutions, industry, local government and community activity (Carolane 2003). Older people were involved primarily as mentors to younger community leaders or leadership aspirants and they contributed to careers advice and workplace experience for younger people.

An evaluation of the initiative concluded that 'collaborative learning partnerships were found to be occurring', as was 'the integration of economic and social development, the fostering and support of lifelong learning and contributions to the development of a learning culture' (Carolane 2003).

Program achievements and benefits

The programs investigated in the case studies had a range of positive outcomes, including benefits to individual participants, their employers (where applicable) and communities. These included the following.

- ✧ Many participants who were previously unemployed were able to gain job-seeking skills and employment. For example, by mid-May 2006, 150 out of 168 people who commenced the retail program had completed it and 101 had gained employment. In the engineering program, of 90 people completing, 57 gained employment soon after, and anecdotal information suggested others did later.
- ✧ Participants already in employment were able to take on new roles and responsibilities. For example in the hotel program, participants indicated that they had become more proficient in performing their existing work and had been able to take on a range of new tasks and responsibilities. Following completion of their training, some participants were promoted and others received a pay rise.
- ✧ Many participants gained in self-esteem, confidence and life skills. For example, participants in the career change program commented that, as a result of the program, they felt 'better

³ The majority of those taking courses within the centre were of mature age. Fewer than 30% were aged 25 years or less.

equipped' to undertake job-seeking, had 'overcome inertia and feelings of worthlessness', and had gained knowledge and skills that raised their confidence to pursue job opportunities.

- ✧ Individuals gained access to further study. Across almost all of the programs, some participants had chosen to go on to further study after completing their initial training. This was assisted by the certification of their existing skills, as well as the new skills they acquired through the program (for example, the participants in the hotel study).
- ✧ In the regional study, many participants in employment programs had moved into work or further training.

Benefits to communities were particularly tangible in the building skills case, with participants contributing to the renovation of many public facilities: a viewing deck at a bowls club; playground equipment in child care centres; painting the exterior of a Guides' hall and better hearing centre; refurbishment of a youth centre opportunity shop; and building a carport at a community house. Another project, repairing a women's refuge, according to project leaders, had 'opened the guys' eyes' and 'led to a discussion of a range of hidden issues'.

Other benefits to communities demonstrated in a range of cases included enhanced volunteer work (more volunteers with useful skills), greater mutual understanding and support among community members across ages and cultures, and enhanced opportunities for learning and social activities.

Benefits to the enterprise were apparent in both the hotel and the utility company. In the hotel the training enabled the participants to become self-checking, that is, to work with less supervision. This reduced costs by decreasing the need for supervisors. It also increased operational efficiency by improving communication and cooperation across the organisation, including between the individual room attendants and hotel management. Room attendants were also able to take a greater role in induction and mentoring for new staff. Managers indicated that 'the training more than paid for itself', including by lowering insurance premiums due to improved manual handling skills and fewer occupational health and safety problems. Managers also commented that the training had contributed to the hotel's reputation as a good employer, which 'has been valuable in attracting and retaining good staff'.

In the utility company, the new human resources strategy with its initiatives focusing on older workers, such as a phased retirement strategy and job re-assignments, together with broader initiatives such as knowledge management, were contributing to the retention of older staff and the better use of their capabilities, with consequent lessening of concerns about the high proportion of older people in the enterprise's workforce.

Program success factors

The main factors emerging from the case studies as important to the success of the programs explored fall into two main groups: factors relating to the organisation of the program; and approaches that were adopted to teaching and learning (table 4).

Table 4 The main program success factors

Organisational factors	Approaches to teaching and learning
Cooperative arrangements (for example, partnerships) for program development and delivery	Identifying the learning needs of participants
Integrating learning and work	Flexibility and responsiveness
Appropriate staffing	Cooperative learning
Creating sympathetic learning environments	Providing guidance and support

The two are closely linked. Organisational factors were critical to or played a role in enabling the approaches to teaching and learning that were adopted in each case. For instance, the willingness of

staff to make adaptations so that programs would better meet the learning needs of participants as these became clearer was an essential ingredient in flexible and responsive approaches to teaching and learning. Staff attitudes were also key elements in cooperative learning.

Organisational factors

Cooperative arrangements

Cooperative arrangements between organisations including VET providers, enterprises, employer and industry bodies, local governments and ACE providers underpinned aspects of many programs. These arrangements aimed to draw on the unique strengths and expertise of each participating organisation to enhance and extend the skills development delivered.⁴ The following provide examples of this.

- ✧ The building skills program was built on a supportive partnership between local government, the state training agency and a TAFE institution. The three worked closely together to initiate the course, develop a suitable program and implement it effectively. The city council was instrumental in identifying the needs of unemployed males within the community. It liaised with the state training agency to obtain funding and with the TAFE institute to develop a suitable course. It also reported regularly to the community on the progress of the program through the local press. In interviews TAFE staff stressed the value of the links with the local government and community which the course (especially practical projects in the community undertaken by the participants) had engendered and the desirability of continuing to develop such partnerships.
- ✧ Partnerships were a major element in a number of the programs provided through the regional ACE centre. For instance, a relationship with the state-based chamber of commerce and industry had enabled the expansion of business programs, including industrial relations training, leadership programs, building effective teams, negotiation skills, effective workplace communication and improved customer service.
- ✧ Cooperative arrangements also enabled the provision of tailored training, additional skills development opportunities and work experience placements. For instance, in the hotel, a cooperative arrangement between the enterprise and a (private) training provider enabled the tailoring of a training package to better meet the needs of both the enterprise (more flexible and efficient work arrangements) and the room attendants (improve efficiency, capability and self-supervision). In the engineering program, cooperative arrangements between providers enabled the program to be delivered on multiple sites, opening up participation to people living in regional areas. Cooperation also enabled information about programs to be disseminated to a broader range of communities. Local councils actively promoted the retail program in their area, enabling information about the program to reach cultural and language groups, who the course developer believed would have been unlikely to gain information from advertising in the mainstream media.

Integrating learning and work

Previous studies have identified that the integration of training and work is an important element in skills development for older people. For those in employment this means training that is tied to their immediate work needs and is located where possible in workplaces rather than in institutional settings (Chappell et al. 2003). For those who are not in employment or who are employed in an unrelated area, work placements can substitute. In either case, the organisation of work and the design of jobs need to take account of learning possibilities. Chappell et al. suggest that training for unemployed older workers should be tied to employer placements and liaison with employment agencies.

⁴ Governments increasingly favour partnership models for both policy development and the delivery of social programs. This is based on a recognition that single-agency responses to a range of social issues can be inadequate and thus the preference for whole-of-government cross-sectoral approaches (Wickert & McGuirk 2005). For instance, some ACE and VET organisations work together to expand their delivery capabilities and provide further benefits to their communities (Gelade, Stehlik & Willis 2006).

The integration of learning and work was apparent in all of the case studies. Work placements, or practical projects that imitated work, were a feature of the programs for unemployed people in the retail program, the engineering program and the building skills program. In the hotel, the utility company and Community Skillsbank programs, participants were able to apply immediately the new skills they were learning.

Accurate and up-to-date knowledge of the kinds of skills and behaviours sought by employers and organisations and preferred in workplaces was essential in all cases to ensure that programs would assist participants to gain employment, do their jobs better, or be successful in changing jobs. Methods that were used to gain and disseminate this knowledge included:

- ✧ engaging trainers with recent industry experience; for instance, the hotel sought and engaged a trainer with a thorough knowledge of and recent experience in the hospitality industry who could command the respect of and empathise with staff engaged in the program
- ✧ bringing in external experts to contribute to programs; for instance, in the career change program external experts were brought in to present labour market information.

Staffing

Case study interviews revealed the importance of having the 'right' staff for different aspects of each program's development and delivery. In general there was a concern that staff would have necessary and appropriate expertise, positive attitudes to older workers/learners, a commitment to addressing any problems that might arise and the ability to motivate learners, overcoming any reluctance or self-doubt among learners. They needed to be flexible and able to operate in a different environment from institutionally based colleagues (with implications for their work, their management, their relationships with supervisors and colleagues, and their performance measures).

Staff who could act as champions for the program, securing funding and other essential support and overcoming obstacles such as the attitudes of powerful others were critical in several cases. For instance, in the hotel program, the human resources manager played a key role in the success of the program for room attendants. Her willingness and ability to champion the program to senior management ensured that it won their support and was able to proceed.

Also important were staff able to win the respect of participants and to build a rapport that would motivate and support them. In the building skills program, for instance, discussions revealed that the supervisor was deeply supportive of the participants, but at the same time was firmly focused on achieving satisfactory outcomes and thus encouraged and motivated participants, who noted that she was also 'good with blokes'. The trainer was also much appreciated by the participants for supporting and encouraging cooperative learning and enabling a combination of practical and theoretical work.

Staff who were attentive to the needs of participants and willing to adapt to meet them were essential. Much of the success of the retail/hospitality program, for instance, reflected the efforts of key staff, whose commitment to meeting the needs of both the learners and employers in these industries led to and supported the ongoing program's development and refinement. The commitment of the staff was apparent also in successful efforts to secure long-term funding for the program and in the adoption of a fairly rigorous participant-selection process. In addition, the staff sought to bring in external experts to expand the program content, enhance learning and increase the success of participants in gaining employment.

In the hotel, the human resources manager's close knowledge of the abilities of the room attendants and of their skill gaps, together with her ability to secure funding, led to the provision of additional assistance for those needing help with literacy and language skills. Her commitment to high-quality appropriate training for this group of culturally and linguistically diverse mature women led to a pilot process, for example, in which the women were involved in trialling potential training providers in order to identify the one best able to meet the needs of the group.

The ability of staff to work together effectively in teams was also important in several cases. In the career change program, for instance, the expertise and creativity of a number of different people were brought together to develop and deliver the program, with each individual contributing a unique strength to the program. This was true also for the building skills program and at the utility company. The engineering program's delivery on multiple sites at some distance from each other required a team of people, all capable of delivering at the same level of quality, but enhanced by knowledge of the local context and how this impacted on participants, for example, local patterns of employment/unemployment, local employers willing to host work placements etc. The strategies adopted by the company required a joint effort from management and other staff to create initiatives that would meet the needs of both the enterprise and its older workers and which would provide benefits for both.

Sympathetic learning environments

Previous research has indicated that older adults prefer to learn in environments that are sympathetic to older learners (Chappell et al. 2003; Jones et al. 2004). These environments accommodate differences between older and younger learners in: the ways they learn; what motivates their learning; and the outcomes they seek from learning. Sympathetic environments are seen as those which allow older learners to progress at their own pace; to draw on their existing knowledge and experience to support their learning; and to work together to support and assist each other, rather than competing. Informality is also important; a relaxing and supportive environment can assist those who lack confidence, or who are apprehensive about participating in a formal program.

The case studies provided evidence of some attention to the creation of learning environments sympathetic to older learners. Cooperative learning in particular was common. In addition were:

- ✧ *Mixed age groups*: while mixed age groups of adults participated in most programs, generally this meant younger and older adults—younger people seeking skills to begin work were not usually part of the mix. On the rare occasions when older people participated alongside some very young learners, they did so as mentors rather than as peers (for example, Community Skillsbank)
- ✧ *Informality*: in several cases this was clearly used to put participants at ease. For example, in the hotel program the trainer engaged to deliver the program used humour to encourage participants to enjoy what could have been stressful or alienating situations. This practice helped to overcome any reticence among participants, many of whom had experienced no education or training since secondary school many years previously. 'To us it was fun; there was a lot of laughing', said one participant. Similarly in the building skills program laughter and banter among participants (some of whom were recent migrants and refugees) and leaders were seen as an important part of learning how to fit in on an Aussie worksite.

Approaches to teaching and learning

Within the case studies the adoption of a 'learner-centred' approach to teaching and learning, based on understandings of good practice for adult learners, was evident particularly in ongoing efforts to identify and understand the needs of learners, as were flexibility and responsiveness to these needs and the adoption of cooperative approaches to learning and the provision of guidance and support.

Identifying the learning needs of participants

The case studies indicated that efforts to gain a greater understanding of the learning needs of participants were in most cases substantial, taking a number of different forms at various stages of the program. Examples include: interviews with learners before programs commenced; assessments of the skills and knowledge of learners during the program; and the collection of feedback from participants, staff and employers both during and after the program.

In several programs, interviews were conducted as part of the process of selecting participants. These aimed to identify those with the necessary skills and motivation to undertake the program successfully (the hotel program, the retail/hospitality program and the engineering program). Discussions indicated a concern among those developing and delivering programs to ensure that individuals were not 'set up for failure'. They were aware of the damaging effects this could have, particularly if an individual was already lacking in confidence or motivation. It was thus important to ensure that all the participants had the skills they would need to succeed and the motivation and commitment to get them through the program. Interviews were conducted sometimes with individuals, but more commonly in small groups, so that participants would feel comfortable, without the reticence more likely to arise in a one-to-one situation. Discussions indicated also that interviews were sometimes successful in highlighting negative attitudes, which could be harmful to the progress of the group and that this enabled early intervention to counter their affects.

Assessments to identify where participants might require extra assistance, such as with English language, literacy or numeracy (for example, in the hotel program) and to uncover other skill and knowledge gaps were features of many programs. Such assessments were not necessarily formal: they also included informal discussions with participants, employers and staff about day-to-day aspects of the program, course content, teaching and learning approaches and work experience. Such assessments played a role also in uncovering where participants' experiences could be a useful learning resource for others, such as experience in a particular industry or occupation (for example, the career change program).

In several cases formal feedback was sought from participants at the conclusion of programs through surveys or exit interviews. Discussions indicated that the information obtained in this way had been useful in guiding amendments to subsequent programs (for example, the building skills and career change programs). Feedback was also sought during programs from both employers and learners when work placements concluded, or through more informal discussions with staff, learners and employers, where applicable. Feedback was used to make changes such as adding content to address areas where learners' knowledge and skills were proving to be inadequate, or amending broader aspects of the program to focus more closely on a particular industry, occupation or set of skills (for example, the career change and building skills programs).

Flexibility and responsiveness

Flexibility and responsiveness were indicated in the case studies by the many modifications that were made to programs as the needs of participants became clearer. The following are examples.

- ✧ In the hotel program, the trainer who was brought in to conduct the training after a rigorous selection process adapted a workbook so that it was more suitable for women from a variety of non-English speaking backgrounds.
- ✧ In the engineering program assessment requirements were changed from written to oral form when it was realised that some participants did not have the literacy skills to cope with the written assessments but could display their knowledge, understanding and skills orally.

In some cases modifications were also made in response to external factors.

- ✧ In the building skills program participants engaged in practical projects to assist the local community. These changed in line with community needs and priorities.
- ✧ In the retail program an additional element was introduced into the course when a large major retailer indicated that participants on work placement did not meet the required level of presentation skills.

Cooperative learning

Learning from each other through the sharing of experiences was an integral element of many programs. In the career change program, for instance, personal histories were shared in learning circles. This 'storytelling' not only gave participants an insight into others in the group, but gave

them an opportunity to compare personal and employment histories and to share ideas about future career possibilities and opportunities. Staff were also able to gain insights into the backgrounds and needs of program participants.

In the hotel program, the women worked together to complete tasks and activities. This was seen as particularly helpful to those whose language and literacy skills were at a slightly lower level or who had some uncertainties about their capacity to complete the training.

Peer mentoring was also a feature of many programs. In both the engineering and building skills programs recent migrants were paired with experienced Australian workers. There were mutual benefits, but for the migrants this provided an opportunity to learn the culture of Australian workplaces. As a TAFE supervisor said, this ‘gives them the opportunity to learn “Australian” while they are working, rather than in the classroom ... Those with limited English are paired up with Australians on the job and they work in teams. It builds up their confidence and familiarises them with a typical Australian work environment’ (*Glenorchy Gazette*, June 2003).

Guidance and support

Previous research has indicated that older adults seeking to re-enter the workforce or to change jobs may not know where to start and may ‘stumble into’ a course without a clear idea of where it will take them. This is problematic, because going down the wrong path can reinforce a sense of failure, decrease self-esteem and increase anxiety and pessimism about the ability to make a new start—and thus make this new start harder to achieve (Beddie, Lorey & Pamphilon 2005).

It has also been suggested that older workers may need to be proactive about their professional development because of the difficulties they encounter in the workplace, such as stereotypical views about their capacity to learn and apply new skills (Beatty & Visser 2005).

There was a reasonably common view among those interviewed for the case studies that guidance and support are important, for similar reasons. There was also evidence that these views were acted on. The following provide examples.

- ✧ Selection processes for several of the case study programs ruled out applicants who were assessed as not having the skills and attributes required to succeed—such as English language skills. Such applicants were given advice about options available to them, for example, where to access programs to assist new migrants to improve their English language skills or to gain assistance with literacy and numeracy.
- ✧ In the career change program participants were offered, or directed to, a number of different sources of information about labour market conditions and options, including expert advice and peer experience.
- ✧ In the programs for unemployed people, assistance was provided with job search and interview skills, including in some cases for a period after program completion.
- ✧ The ACE centre offered guidance in relation to a number of different learning and employment options. For instance, in partnership with Volunteering Australia, the ACE centre was assisting people in the region with advice, training and referral to a wide variety of volunteering opportunities.

Diversity issues

The heterogeneity within the broad category ‘older workers’ was apparent both within some case studies and when comparing the characteristics of participants across the different programs. The characteristics of participants varied in many respects, but a number of these had particularly marked implications for the nature of the skills development delivered and for how it was delivered. These were:

- ✧ *Gender*: the gender segregation by occupations and industry that marks the Australian labour force was reflected in that, even where programs were not targeted to a particular gender, some attracted many more participants from one gender. Two of the programs were specifically developed for and delivered to unemployed males (the engineering program and the building skills program). These were born out of a concern for unemployed males rather than from a concern to fill vacancies in these industries. No comparable programs were identified for older women although, as it turned out, a program for unemployed older people aimed at developing skills for employment in the retail industry attracted almost all female participants. Where a large majority of participants were from one particular gender, special care was required to ensure that potential participants from the other gender were not deterred from effective participation.
- ✧ *Diversity in the cultural and language backgrounds of participants*: participants came from a wide range of cultural and language backgrounds. In almost all cases it was noted that some participants had a first language other than English. Varying levels of proficiency in spoken and written English therefore needed to be taken into consideration in the design and delivery of programs. In certain cases, participation was facilitated when the emphasis wherever possible was on oral rather than written communication.
- ✧ *Diversity in the current workforce status of participants*: the employment status of participants varied both within and across programs. In two cases (the hotel and the utility company) all participants were employed and in four others all were unemployed (building skills, the retail, hospitality and engineering programs). In the other case the employment status of participants varied. Some were employed, either full-time or part-time; some were currently unemployed and seeking work; or they were currently not in employment and considering looking for work. There were also some retirees. Employment status was an issue, particularly in the provision of appropriate guidance and in integrating learning and work.
- ✧ *Diversity in the workforce experience of participants*: in addition to variations in employment status there were variations among program participants in workforce experience. A surprise was that participants in the retail and hospitality programs included some older women who had not previously been employed. Consequently, program content needed to be amended to ensure that they were able to gain an understanding of contemporary workplace requirements and practices. In addition, participants in several programs included migrants whose previous work, education and training experiences were outside Australia. Peer mentoring was found useful in assisting these participants to learn about practices in Australian workplaces. In both cases, work placements were an important element of programs, allowing participants to experience and adapt to work environments.
- ✧ *Diversity in motives for, and attitudes to, skills development*: while the majority of the programs examined had employment objectives, interviewees indicated that participants were not necessarily motivated by employment-related factors. Nor did they all seek similar employment outcomes. While some sought full-time paid employment, others looked for part-time work or skills they could use in voluntary or community work. Some aimed to continue to further education or training; some were motivated by curiosity or interest and the potential for employment, should they decide this was what they wanted. Such variations in aspirations and intentions influenced participants' approaches to different aspects of program content, tasks and assessment, including work placements.

Nor were program participants always enthusiastic about their participation. In the utility company, for instance, participation in skills development was motivated by an inability to continue in a particular job role, coupled with the enterprise's concern to retain the knowledge and skills of the worker for as long as possible. Some individuals were reluctant about a change in employment, but were not ready to retire. In the engineering program participants were generally focused on gaining employment after they had completed. However, some negativity was displayed by participants who had been displaced from occupations requiring higher-level skills. This required careful handling to ensure it did not spread to others in the group.

Where issues that were related to these aspects of diversity arose, they were addressed primarily by identifying and gaining an understanding of the needs of program participants and setting up

appropriate responses. Importantly, while program staff were clearly attentive and responsive, they did not seem to consider such issues especially difficult or taxing. Indeed the dominant view was that diversity can make a positive contribution to learning, such as by providing valuable opportunities for participants to learn from each other's knowledge and experience.

Responses to diversity-related issues were also built on inclusive approaches to program development and delivery, including inclusive approaches to teaching. Such approaches are considerate and inclusive of all groups in the community. They are also consistent with understandings of and approaches to adult learning, as discussed previously.

Elements of an inclusive approach (as outlined in Latrobe University's *Developing an inclusive curriculum*) apparent in the case studies encompassed:

- ✧ recognising that prior experiences inform learners' expectations and experiences of the program
- ✧ acknowledging and valuing the culture, background and experience of all learners
- ✧ including gender, cultural and socioeconomic background, age, sexuality, and differences related to ability and disability
- ✧ responding and giving expression to the knowledge base of the learners and staff
- ✧ making clear the goals and standards expected, including the key ideas or concepts
- ✧ incorporating different teaching techniques and strategies to accommodate the different ways students might process information in order to learn and then apply it
- ✧ promoting interaction, collaboration and shared reflection among students
- ✧ taking a flexible approach to teaching to increase the opportunities for students to access supportive resources

These were evident, for example, in:

- ✧ revising training materials to make them more user-friendly for all participants, regardless of language background
- ✧ providing additional assistance, where required, with literacy and numeracy skills
- ✧ allowing oral assessment where participants lacked the skills to complete written assessment tasks
- ✧ enabling participants to work together on tasks and to assist each other as required
- ✧ pairing recent migrants with Australian workers, or younger and older learners
- ✧ revising program content to include elements that would address specific skill or knowledge gaps.

Overall, the case studies indicate that, while it is important to recognise, acknowledge and respond to differences between individuals or sub-groups of older workers, the types of adjustments required to meet any specific needs will generally be small. They will not require substantial effort, nor will they affect the central integrity of the program design. In addition, they may yield benefits to the wider group.

Summing up

- ✧ In selecting case studies, difficulties were experienced in identifying more than a small number of programs specifically for older workers. However, it was possible to identify programs targeting older workers alongside another group, such as recent migrants, and other programs which included a large number of older participants.
- ✧ The programs explored in the case studies were driven and shaped variously by the concerns and goals of enterprises, individuals, communities and governments.

- ✧ Positive outcomes could be identified from all the programs, with benefits flowing to enterprises, individuals and communities. They included increased efficiency and self-supervision, a higher quality of work, employment, further study, increases in participants' self-esteem and confidence and improved community facilities.
- ✧ Organisational factors and the adoption of good practice in the teaching and learning of adults were the main factors contributing to the success of the programs.
- ✧ There was substantial diversity among the program participants. This was addressed primarily through flexibility and responsiveness and the use of inclusive practices. Changes required to programs to meet needs arising from this diversity were small.

Conclusions

This project has aimed to contribute to an understanding of the diverse characteristics of older workers and to the identification of the most appropriate and effective forms of skills development to support their continued participation in the workforce.

The three activities conducted for the project (data analysis, review of previous studies and case studies) have illuminated aspects of the diversity among older workers, such as educational attainment; labour force participation; types of employment; occupations and industries; workforce experience; participation in education and training; and retirement patterns and intentions. Some differences were also noted between women and men and between the youngest and oldest members of the group.

The case studies also highlighted some of the challenges raised by the diversity among older workers for the provision and delivery of appropriate and effective skills development—and some ways in which these challenges are being met.

There are two major conclusions from the project. The first is that the diversity among older workers means that assistance to support and encourage their participation in the workforce should be targeted to the specific needs and circumstances of sub-groups. Variations among older workers in aspects such as skills development needs; learning needs and preferences; goals and motivations; and work experiences and expectations require consideration in framing the types of skills development to be provided and how it is to be delivered. Particular account needs to be taken of gender-related differences and of the ways in which barriers to employment and participation in education and training affect some older workers more than others.

The second major conclusion is that appropriate and effective skills development for older workers—in all their diversity—is built on the adoption of good practices in the teaching and learning of adults, and incorporates an inclusive approach. Some adaptations may be required to programs, activities and other arrangements to meet the needs of diverse older learners, but where good practices and inclusive approaches are adopted, these will generally be small.

The rest of this section discusses these two major findings in more detail.

Targeting skills development

Which sub-groups of older workers?

The data analysis and review of previous studies found that, although the number of people aged over 45 years in the workforce has grown, there is still a marked decline in participation among those aged over 55 years. Those most likely to remain at work beyond this age are workers with high-level qualifications in professional and semi-professional occupations and workers with low-level skills in relatively menial occupations. While one group is believed to continue working largely for reasons of job satisfaction, the other is thought more likely to continue out of financial necessity (Weller 2004).

The reasons workers leave the workforce vary considerably. While there are some workers who retire voluntarily and who might be persuaded to delay retirement or return to work by the

provision of incentives, such as changes to work arrangements, there are others who leave involuntarily, for instance, due to retrenchment or long-term unemployment. For this latter group, participation incentives will have little meaning. More important will be the provision of opportunities to gain the skills required in the workforce. Without these skills, even those who are strongly motivated to return to work may face very limited opportunities to do so.

Opportunities to update and extend their skills are critical also for older people who remain employed, but whose skills are limited, redundant or at risk of becoming outdated; thus this group faces the possibility that they will not be able to continue working, or working at the same level, in the long term. These workers are not necessarily found only in low-level occupations; they are also located in some middle and high-level occupations—particularly those affected by the advancement of knowledge and the application of new technologies.

Skills development opportunities will also assist older workers who are willing to continue working, but not necessarily in the same industries and occupations. For instance, some may seek to change to a position with less responsibility and possibly shorter hours, enabling them to have a more relaxed lifestyle. Others may be interested in trying something new, including taking on new responsibilities or shifting to voluntary work in the community sector.

A further group of older workers who may be encouraged by skills development opportunities to continue working are those with no post-school qualifications. There are large groups of these workers among both older women and older men, but particularly among males. Some are found in low-level occupations and are already among those who continue in employment, arguably for reasons of financial necessity, but there is also a group who are willing to work but cannot secure employment. In addition to skills development, this group will require guidance in choosing between learning alternatives and will benefit from support in job seeking and in overcoming, where necessary, any employer resistance to the employment of older workers.

Opportunities for these workers to update and extend their skills are unlikely to be sufficient to encourage many of this group to continue working, although such opportunities are potentially important to those wanting to work but who are at risk of their skills becoming redundant or outdated. Additional incentives may be required, such as arrangements that enable a combination of work and leisure.

Gender differences

There are several differences among older workers with implications for the targeting of skill development opportunities and which arise from gender-related factors. First, there are differences between older men and women in qualifications and in the field of their highest level of educational attainment. While similar numbers have a degree or diploma, a very much smaller group of women has a certificate III/IV qualification. Among males the most common field of highest level of educational attainment is engineering and related technologies, while for women it is education.

Secondly, and related to this, male and female workers tend to be found in different industries and occupations. The skills they possess and the skills they will require if they are to continue working are thus likely to differ substantially. This was noticeable in the programs for unemployed older workers that were the subject of case studies for this project. Participants were almost all female when employment in the retail industry was the goal, while participants were almost entirely male when engineering skills were the objective.

Thirdly, older women and men differ in their participation in education and training and other forms of learning. The data analysis found that, among older workers, women tend to participate more than men in all kinds of skill development, from formal training courses to non-formal and informal learning. These differences are consistent with males undertaking their work-related learning when they are younger—at the beginning of their working lives—while females stop and start as family responsibilities permit. Gender-based differences in perceptions about career stage and consequently in retirement intentions may also be a factor. Among older workers some men may regard

themselves as closer to the end of their career/working life than women of the same age whose careers and participation in learning and work have been delayed by family responsibilities.

Older males may thus require a greater degree of encouragement to begin and possibly also to continue in a skills development program. This is supported by the case studies. Some negative attitudes toward participation were noted in the programs for unemployed males. These were attributed to discouraging work experiences, particularly retrenchment and long-term unemployment. They were noted also in the utility company where workers, again mostly males, were no longer able to perform physically demanding tasks and were resistant to or concerned about their re-assignment to new jobs.

Fourthly, there are some differences between women and men in the degree to which their participation in skills development is affected by factors such as work and family commitments. Previous studies have found that work commitments affect men more than women, and that family commitments affect women more than men. In the case studies, training delivery and work experience arrangements needed to take account of both, but particularly of the family commitments of women in the programs for unemployed older workers seeking employment in the retail field.

Addressing the barriers to employment and skills development

In targeting skills development attention is required to the barriers that older workers face in gaining and retaining employment and in participating in work and learning. Previous studies indicate that not all older workers experience the effects of these barriers to the same extent—some barriers affect some groups of older workers more than others. This is supported by the case studies for this project. For instance, as noted above, family commitments affected the participation of women in particular. In addition, workers who did not have the required levels of literacy and numeracy skills for participation were turned away from some programs.

Efforts to address these barriers wherever they exist are essential if skills development opportunities are to be taken up by those who will benefit from them. However, special effort will be required where they are experienced most widely and their effects are felt most strongly. Crucially, this will require an understanding—which does not currently exist—of how these barriers work and who they affect. The nature and impact of the barriers for sub-groups of older learners is an issue that was not investigated in any depth in this project. Thus it is an area where further research would be beneficial.

Appropriate and effective skills development

The review of previous studies for this project identified that older adults tend to differ from their younger counterparts in a number of ways that are important for the design and delivery of appropriate and effective skills development for this age group.

- ✧ Older learners tend to have learning styles and preferences different from those of younger people. They require a slower pace of instruction, with extended time for discussion and repetition. They prefer hands-on approaches to learning, incorporating experiential techniques. They benefit from self-paced instruction and from the replacement of reading materials with charts and drawings.
- ✧ Older learners seek acknowledgement of the skills and knowledge they already possess and their ability to use these as a resource for their further learning—and for the learning of others. They want time to digest new information and to be able to compare it with alternative ideas.
- ✧ Older learners require assurance that program content is relevant to the outcomes they seek. Thus for older workers the integration of learning and work is important, providing opportunities to apply newly acquired knowledge and skills.

- ✧ Older learners can also lack confidence in themselves and their abilities and can be discomfited by formal or competitive learning environments, especially when they can see that younger learners are able to learn and apply new skills more quickly. They prefer cooperative approaches to learning, such as group work and peer mentoring and coaching. They dislike formal assessments.
- ✧ More than younger people, older learners are motivated by a desire to do something better, or to understand better, or to be able to assist another person, more rather than by rewards such as a higher salary or a promotion.

The review also identified that a range of good practices in teaching and learning has been developed in recognition of these characteristics of older learners. There is a growing pool of resources about these practices to assist those designing and delivering skills development programs and activities for this age group.

An important issue that arose in the review was whether, due to the differences between them, it is best to provide separate programs for younger and older adults. Older learners can become discouraged when they see younger people picking up new ideas and skills quickly, thus separation may be desirable, but separation is not always possible—for economic and other reasons. However, if small adjustments are made to programs to accommodate older learners, then separation is not necessary. In fact such changes can benefit all participants—not only those who are older.

This was supported by the case studies. In most programs participants varied in age. In the building skills program, for instance, participants included both young men in their 20s and older men in their 50s. Similarly, in the engineering program older unemployed males participated alongside younger recent migrants. In both these and other cases, flexible, responsive and inclusive approaches to teaching and learning facilitated adjustments to meet the needs of participants—not only arising from differences in their ages but also from other differences among them. For instance, changes were made to assessment methods to enable participants with limited literacy skills to demonstrate their skills and knowledge, and to printed resources so that they were more suitable, for example, for use by participants with limited English language skills.

Further, in many of the case study programs, differences among participants, including but not limited to age were harnessed as a resource for learning. Peer mentoring and coaching, the sharing of stories and team-based activities were among activities used to encourage and enable participants to support and learn from each other. In the hotel women from different cultural and language backgrounds assisted one another to comprehend and complete program tasks. In the engineering program the older males assisted the recent migrants to gain an understanding of Australian workplace cultures and behaviours. In the career change program, storytelling enabled participants to learn about other occupations and workplaces. In the Community Skillsbank older people sought to share their skills with younger people seeking those skills.

Diversity, whether it is age or other characteristics of adults, is thus not necessarily problematic for skills development. Provided the design and delivery of programs and activities are based on good practices in adult teaching and learning and they are flexible and responsive to the needs of participants and inclusive of differences between them, this diversity can be easily accommodated with only small adjustments. In addition, diversity can make a positive contribution to learning.

References

- ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) 2000, *Survey of voluntary work, Australia*, cat.no.4441.0, ABS, Canberra.
- 2002, *Measuring Australia's progress*, cat.no.1370.0, ABS, Canberra.
- 2003, *Survey of disability, ageing and carers*, cat.no.4430.0, ABS, Canberra.
- 2004a, 'Mature age people and the labour force', *Australian labour market studies*, cat.no.6105.0, ABS, Canberra.
- 2004b, Unpublished data from the Survey of Education and Work, ABS, Canberra.
- 2005a, *Births Australia*, cat.no.3301.0, ABS, Canberra.
- 2005b, 'Mature age workers', *Year Book Australia*, cat.no.1301.0, ABS, Canberra.
- 2006a, *Barriers and incentives to labour force participation, Australia, August 2004 to June 2005*, cat.no.6239.0, ABS, Canberra.
- 2006b, *Births Australia*, cat.no.3301.0, ABS, Canberra.
- 2006c, *Education and training experience*, cat.no.6278.0, ABS, Canberra.
- 2006d, 'Labour force characteristics of people with a disability', *Year Book Australia*, cat.no.1301.0, ABS, Canberra.
- 2006d, *People in their 50s: Then and now, Australian social trends*, cat.no.4102.0, ABS, Canberra.
- 2006e, *Retirement and retirement intentions August 2004–June 2005*, cat.no.6238.0, ABS, Canberra.
- 2007a, *Recent increases in Australia's fertility, Australian social trends*, cat.no.4102.0, ABS, Canberra.
- 2007b, 'Skilling mature age Australians for work', *Year Book Australia*, cat.no.1301.0, ABS, Canberra.
- Australian Industry Group 2007, *Skilling the existing workforce: Background paper*, AiG, Melbourne.
- Beatty, P & Visser, R 2005, *Thriving on an aging workforce: Strategies for organizational and systemic change*, Krieger Publishing Company, Florida.
- Beddie, F, Lorey, B & Pamphilon, B 2005, *Enhancing career development: The role of community-based career guidance for disengaged adults*, NCVER, Adelaide.
- Carolane, R 2003, *Projects, partners and progress: An appraisal of the 9 ACFE Board funded learning towns*, Department of Education and Training, Melbourne.
- Chappell, C, Hawke, G, Rhodes, C & Solomon, N 2003, *Major research program on older workers: Stage 1 – The conceptual framework*, OVAL Research Centre, University of Technology, Sydney, viewed 14 December 2005, <<http://www.oval.uts.edu.au/papersdl/olderworkers.pdf#search='training older workers'>>.
- Cully, M 2004, 'Older workers', in *Equity in vocational education and training: Research readings*, ed. K Bowman, NCVER, Adelaide.
- Dawe, S & Elvins, R 2006, *The mature-aged and skill development activities: A systematic review of research – An update*, NCVER, Adelaide.
- Dunn, S 2005, 'Effective strategies for training older workers', in *Thriving on an aging workforce: Strategies for organisational and systemic change*, PT Beatty and RMS Visser, Krieger Publishing Company, Malabar, Florida.
- Findsen, B 2005, *Learning later*, Krieger Publishing Company, Malabar, Florida.
- Gelade, S, Catts, R & Gerber, R 2003, *Securing success: Good practice in training people aged 45 and over who are disadvantaged in the labour market*, Department of Education, Science and Training, Canberra.
- Gelade, S, Stehlik, T & Willis, P 2006, *Learning collaborations between ACE and VET providers: Good practice partnerships*, NCVER, Adelaide.
- Golding, B with Harvey, J & Echter, A 2005, *Men's learning through ACE and community involvement in small rural towns: Findings from a Victorian Survey*, final report to Adult, Community and Further Education Board, Melbourne.
- Imel, S 1994, *Guidelines for working with adult learners*, ERIC Digest no.154, Eric Clearinghouse on Adult Career and Vocational Education, Columbus, Ohio.
- Jarvis, P 1995, *Adult and continuing education*, Routledge, Falmer, London and New York.
- Jones, E, Rolland, L, Brooke, L, Biggs, N, Hartley, R, Humphries, S, McCarthy, J & Topple, C 2004, *Furthering success: Education, training and employment transitions for disadvantaged older workers*, Department of Education, Science and Training, Canberra.
- Karmel, T & Woods, D 2004, *Lifelong learning and older workers*, NCVER, Adelaide.
- Latrobe University, *Developing an inclusive curriculum*, viewed 6 June 2007, <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/adu/inc_curriculum.htm>.

- NCVER (National Centre for Vocational Education Research) 2003, *Australian vocational education and training statistics 2001: Adult and community education: An overview*, viewed 14 September 2007, <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/statistics/publications/942.html>>.
- 2005, *Student outcomes survey*, NCVER, Adelaide, viewed 14 September 2007, <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/statistic/21065.html>>.
- 2006, *Students and courses 2005*, NCVER, Adelaide, viewed 14 September 2007, <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/statistic/31252.html>>.
- National Institute of Labour Studies 2001, *Barriers to training for older workers and possible policy solutions*, report to the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Canberra.
- Newton, B, Hurstfield, J, Miller, L & Bates, R, 2005, *Training a mixed age workforce: Practical tips and guidance*, Institute of Employment Studies, Brighton, UK.
- OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) 2004, *The labour force participation of older workers: The effects of pension and early retirement schemes*, OECD Economics Department, Paris.
- 2005a, *Ageing and employment policies, Australia*, OECD, Paris.
- 2005b, 'Living longer must mean working longer', OECD High Level Policy Forum on Ageing and Employment Policies', Brussels, 17–18 October 2005, viewed 2 April 2008, <http://www.oecd.org/document/48/0,3343,en_21571361_35042830_35466736_1_1_1_1,00.html>.
- 2006, *Live longer, work longer, ageing and employment policies*, OECD, Paris
- Productivity Commission 2005, *Economic implications of an ageing Australia*, PC, Canberra.
- Ranzijn, R 2004, 'Discrimination against the older worker: Psychology and economics', presentation to a seminar on age discrimination in the workplace, viewed 14 September 2007, <<http://www.hreoc.gov.au/age/workingage/speeches/ranzijn.html>>.
- Simpson, P 2005, 'Academic perspectives on training older workers', in *Thriving on an aging workforce: Strategies for organisational and systemic change*, PT Beatty and RMS Visser, Krieger Publishing Company, Malabar, Florida.
- Thomson, P, Dawe, S, Anlezark, A & Bowman, K 2005, *The mature-aged and skill development activities. A systematic review of research*, NCVER, Adelaide.
- Volunteering Australia 2006, website, viewed 6 October 2006, <www.volunteeringaustralia.org>.
- Weller, S 2004, *Non-regulatory impediments to the employment of older workers*, Department of Treasury and Finance, Melbourne.
- Wickert, R & McGuirk, J 2005, *Using partnerships to build literacy and numeracy capabilities in communities*, NCVER, Adelaide.

Appendix: The case studies

The seven case studies were selected through internet searching and suggestions from the VET community. They were located in metropolitan and regional areas in three states.

All case studies were based on face-to face interviews with staff involved in the program/s under investigation. Depending on who was available, the interviews usually involved the person or persons responsible for some aspect of the program, such as designing and/or delivering it. Where possible, some program participants were also interviewed; however, this was not frequent and remains a shortcoming of the research. The difficulty was often related to the short-term nature of most programs but was also a matter of unlucky timing. Participants who had completed the program had often 'moved on' at the time of the research, while new participants were still to be recruited. However, in some cases, the findings of program evaluations by participants were made available and these helped, at least a little, to give a participant perspective.

In addition to the interviews, the case studies involved the examination of documentation on the web and in print, some of which was provided by interviewees (or access was temporarily granted).

Documents included:

- ✧ program outlines
- ✧ program evaluations
- ✧ program marketing material
- ✧ policy documents.

A backward-mapping approach was adopted throughout the studies. This aimed to begin from what existed (i.e. the programs) and to work backwards to identify how these had arrived in their current form. This approach was found to be useful: it served to highlight evolutionary steps along the way and the various roles and contributions of individuals involved in the process; and it enabled a view of ways in which some relevant policy initiatives, for example, the provision of funding for skills programs for mature-age people, are subsequently evident in new program implementation and subsequent revision.

Two case studies were enterprise-specific:

- ✧ a certificate III program for room attendants at a 5-star hotel, to recognise the staff's existing skills and enable them to do their jobs better, with greater satisfaction, and less supervision (Victoria, Melbourne)
- ✧ a strategy for all staff within a utility company with a very high proportion of older workers—43% are over 45 years of age. A range of human resource management policies have been introduced to manage individual workers effectively and meet overall labour force requirements. Initiatives to retain mature staff include work re-allocation, training and a phased retirement strategy (Tasmania, Hobart and regions).

One program focused on obtaining employment in two specific industries for unemployed:

- ✧ a program leading to a statement of attainment to assist older unemployed workers to obtain employment in the retail industry—and later expanded to include the hospitality industry (Queensland, Brisbane and regional centres).

Another aimed to assist learners into employment through the attainment of a basic skill set:

- ✧ a program to assist older unemployed workers and migrants to gain basic engineering skills for employment (Queensland, Brisbane and regional centres).

Two were initiatives of educational institutions, one in partnership with local government. The first was being offered for the first time:

- ✧ a program developed in the TAFE division of a dual-sector institution to assist people seeking a career change (Victoria, Melbourne, with participants also from other regions)
- ✧ a program developed by a TAFE institute in conjunction with a local government to provide employability and building skills for male residents of the local government area who were not in education or work. It combined general employability skills with basic skills for the construction industry (certificate II) (Tasmania, Hobart)

The seventh case study investigated aspects of skills development within a region and centred on the range of programs offered through the local ACE centre. It included the Learning Towns program in this area—a Victorian Government policy initiative incorporating a number of projects. Although it had a focus on employment for young people, older workers were used as mentors and sources of information. Also included was the Community Skillsbank project, which similarly drew on the expertise of older people in the community to mentor others sitting on boards or committees of management of community organisations. Other programs offered through the centre included a number of employment programs, some in conjunction with an industry association (Victorian Employers Chamber of Commerce and Industry) and many others aimed at meeting diverse needs across the region's community (Victoria, north-east). Most of the centre's employees and volunteer workers are also of mature age and some issues around their professional development were also discussed.

Table 5 highlights some of the challenges for the design and delivery of skills development that were evident in each case study.

These included, but were not limited to, issues arising from aspects of the diversity among participants. The case studies illustrate some different aspects of this diversity, especially in gender, age, and background.

- ✧ In the hotel and the retail/hospitality program, the participants were almost all mature-age women, from a variety of non-English speaking backgrounds and with varying levels of proficiency in spoken and written English.
- ✧ Participants in both the engineering skills program and the building skills program included both older males from diverse backgrounds and generally younger, recent migrants, both with varying levels and types of skills and workforce experience.
- ✧ In the program aimed to assist people seeking a career change participants were mainly aged 40–50+, mostly males with high levels of prior formal education but varied in their industry background, their information technology skills, their geographical locations and their expectations of future employment.
- ✧ While some participants were confident learners (for example, in the Planning for a Career Change program), many others had little or no recent experience of education and training and in some cases were doubtful of their capacity to succeed.
- ✧ While some participants had considerable current or recent workforce experience (for example, in the hotel and the utility company), others had not worked in Australia before (for example, migrants, or women seeking employment in retail) and thus had little knowledge of local work practices or requirements.
- ✧ Participants varied in their expectations of a work–life balance; for instance, some participants in programs for employment sought full-time work, while others had a preference for part-time work, which could be combined with other commitments such as child care or community work.

Table 5 Challenges for the design and delivery of skills development

Study	
Hotel	Securing support for the training from the hotel's senior management Fitting training activities around the work and family commitments of participants Ensuring that the development and delivery of the program took into account variations in the participants' English language and literacy skills Diverse levels of self-confidence/esteem among participants
Utility company	The company had a high proportion of older workers and expected increasing demand from them for more flexible work arrangements Some older employees were unable to continue to perform physical roles, but there was some resistance to/concerns about changing roles The company had identified differences between workers of different ages in values, view of authority, work and communication style and expectations of leadership and work environment
Retail/hospitality	Participants came from a variety of cultural and language backgrounds. Some had very limited previous education/training and workforce experience and consequently there were variations in work readiness Participants had a variety of work preferences and goals Availability for work placements was affected by family responsibilities Reaching potential participants with information about the program
Engineering skills	There was some disaffection with work and training among some older males (e.g. due to redundancy from previous employment or poor training experiences) Participants included migrants with no Australian work experience alongside older males with considerable work experience There were very diverse levels of existing engineering skills among participants
Career change	Participants were very diverse in work backgrounds and skills (for example, technological skills), career goals and expectations They had very limited knowledge of current labour markets and of career change options and associated training
Building skills	Participants included learners who had arrived in Australia as refugees and whose overseas qualifications were not recognised Difficulties in access to education and training within the local government area Varying levels of work readiness and interpersonal skills among participants Engaging with local community
The centre	Diverse learning interests and goals across the community coupled with diverse skill requirements for many different industries and occupations Varying levels of existing skills, including specific and interpersonal skills Meeting the learning and social needs of people with disabilities in the community



The National Vocational Education and Training Research and Evaluation (NVETRE) Program is coordinated and managed by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research, on behalf of the Australian Government and state and territory governments, with funding provided through the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

This program is based upon priorities approved by ministers with responsibility for vocational education and training (VET). This research aims to improve policy and practice in the VET sector.

Research funding is awarded to organisations via a competitive grants process.

**National Centre for Vocational
Education Research Ltd**

Level 11, 33 King William Street
Adelaide SA 5000

PO Box 8288 Station Arcade
South Australia 5000

Phone +61 8 8230 8400

Fax +61 8 8212 3436

Email ncver@ncver.edu.au

www.ncver.edu.au