WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT

Lifelong learning for the ageing population

Australia, like most countries in the western world, has a rapidly ageing population. In 2017, 1 in 7 Australians was aged over 65. The 'baby boomer' generation is now moving through retirement with a life expectancy much higher than that of their parents. But older Australians face pressure to remain in the workforce for longer and to maintain their independence and well-being in their later life years.

WORKERS AND RETIREES

The proportion of older Australians in the workforce doubled between 2000 and 2018 – from 6% to 13% – but Australia's participation rate is still low compared to; for example, the United States (at 19.3%).

Older Australians are not just leaving the workforce through choice. Some take voluntary retirement, others take an "early exit" from the workforce due poor health and age discrimination. The increasing demand in the workplace for higher levels of literacy, numeracy and computer skills puts added pressure on older workers whose overall skill levels in these key areas tend to be lower. However for older workers wanting to upskill, opportunities for work-related learning and formal education reduce significantly beyond age 55, leaving them vulnerable to involuntary retirement.

HEALTH AND WELLBEING

The increasing numbers of older people in Australia constitute a resource of talents, skills and experience which is of great benefit to society. By enabling older people to extend their years of healthy life we can realise this benefit.

Healthy ageing allows older Australians:

- the choice of spending longer in paid work
- more opportunities for contributing to the community
- more social interaction and engagement with others
- more years of independence in their own homes.

THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Around 17% of Australians aged 55–64 years have not used the Internet and this increases to over 45% for those aged 65+. Older people need basic online skills to access a range of products and services in areas such as health, finance, government, banking and public transport. The Internet is an important tool that enables older people to overcome some of the physical, psychological and social barriers that can accompany ageing, and help them to take a more active role in managing their lives.

The digital divide is narrowing in Australia but divisions persist for older people who are poor, unemployed, have low educational attainment, have a disability, are Indigenous, were born in non-English speaking countries and/or live in rural and regional areas.

Other factors that discourage digital participation amongst older Australians include:

- the perception that the Internet is not relevant to their lives
- a lack of confidence or knowledge about technologies
- the costs associated with being online
- online security concerns
- declines in physical and cognitive health
- social isolation.

Digital participation enables older Australians to:

- remain in or re-enter the modern workforce
- access a range of information, goods and services
- communicate effectively with businesses and governments
- stay in touch with family and friends, pursue interests and participate in communities.

LIFELONG LEARNING AND OLDER AUSTRALIANS

Lifelong learning is at the heart of meeting the challenge of Australia's ageing population and adult and community education (ACE) organisations have an important role to play in enabling older Australians to:

- keep skills and competencies relevant, so that they can better handle transitions during their working lives
- remain adaptive and resilient in dealing with change
- improve management of health and wellbeing
- provide access to diverse range of social interactions.

ADULT AND COMMUNITY EDUCATION

Older people are often more interested in acquiring skills than qualifications and in participating in shorter and more holistic training. The ACE sector with its emphasis on non formal and experiential learning and its focus on developing digital literacy and social connections and its model of small, local classes is ideally placed to meet these needs.

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Inclusive learning culture

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