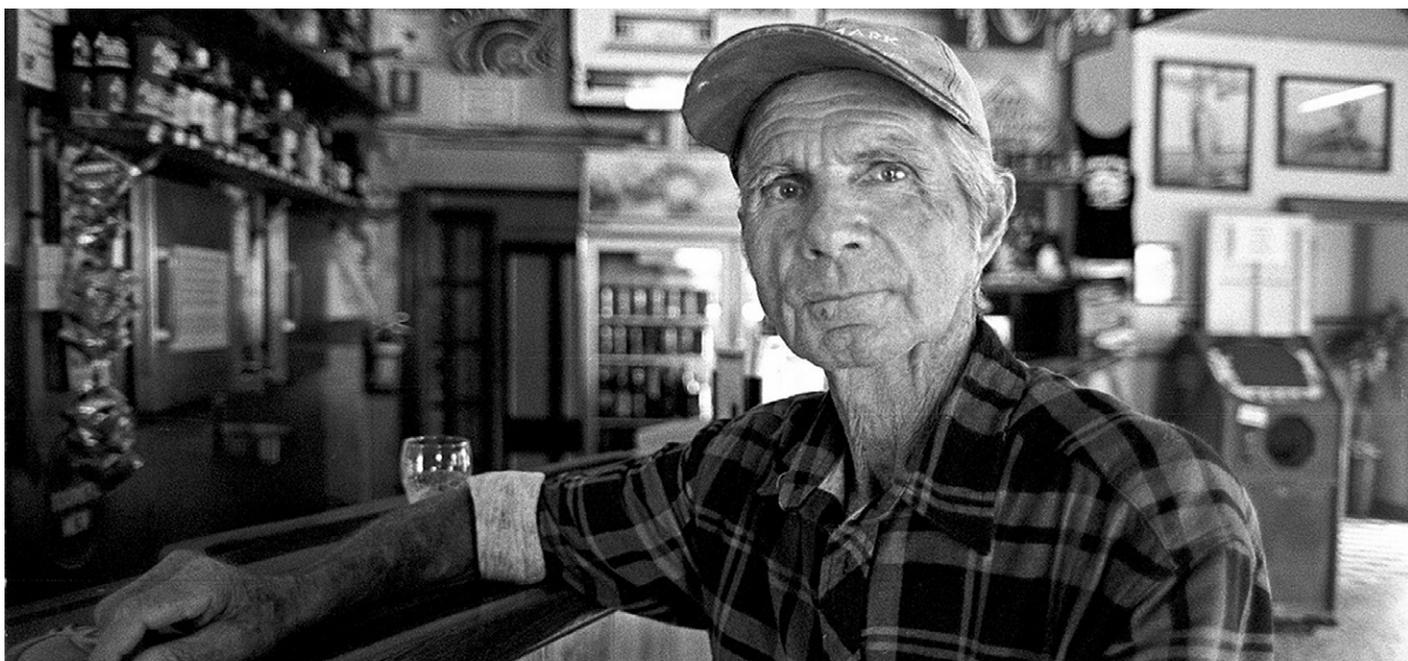


## Talking about suicide



In rural Australia suicide rates are more than double the national average.

In rural areas of Australia suicide rates are around double the national average. [Inverell Community College](#), one and a half hours from Armidale in rural New South Wales, recently hosted a free community based education program to help prevent suicide among farmers.

The program is known as SCARF which stands for Suspect, Connect, Ask, Refer and Follow Up. It's aimed at professionals and local business people who deal with farmers in their daily work. The Inverell course attracted around 40 people including vets, bankers, livestock agents, and local business people.

Course facilitator Meg Perceval, coordinator of the Farm-Link Suicide Prevention Project says the course aims to teach community members to recognise warning signs and develop the confidence and skills to initiate conversations about suicide or mental health problems with people they are concerned about.

The reasons for higher suicide rates in rural areas are complex, but Meg says some risk factors have been suggested. 'We know that people living in rural areas are less inclined to seek help for mental health problems, and may not only be geographically isolated but emotionally isolated too. ▶

### In this issue

Talking about suicide

Message from the CEO

Bookshelf – Building Self Sustaining Communities

Support and learning for young mums

Bookshelf – Men Learning Through Life

Obituary - Professor Gordon Barclay

Tips and trends: Attracting skilled volunteers

Hospitality class puts food on the table



Like Us On  
Facebook



## Message from the CEO

This past month, along with representatives from a number of groups, I took part in a round table discussion in Canberra as part of the current Commonwealth review of Vocational Education and Training (VET). The focus of the review is 'quality, responsiveness to industry, funding and regulatory burden'. At ALA we try to advocate from the perspective of learners, so our starting point for a review of VET would be to ask:

- 1) who has access and who is missing out on access?
- and 2) what makes a high value outcome for learners?

Taking a learner-focussed approach would mean looking at who's outside the VET system as well as who's in it.

The recent [ABS survey on Work-Related Training and Adult Learning](#), released late last year has some

interesting insights. It found that in the previous 12 months roughly half of Australians aged 15 to 74 years were engaged in some form of formal or non-formal learning; that means that roughly half are not participating. Of those not participating, the stand-out group is adults 55 and above. Only 4.8 per cent of people in this age group were involved in formal education and training, compared to half of all 20 to 25 year olds. Access to workplace-related non-formal learning was also stacked towards the young, dropping off significantly for those aged 55 plus. Little wonder then, that the recent [PIAAC adult literacy survey](#) found adults over 55 had much lower literacy and numeracy levels than the younger cohorts.

Around the time that the ABS Work-Related Training and Adult Learning survey came out, the Productivity Commission produced a report suggesting that the retirement age be increased to 70. Unsurprisingly, the Productivity Commission failed to outline how workers could possibly remain in work from 55 to 70 when starting from such a low literacy

and numeracy base and with such limited access to workplace training or the formal VET system. Let's hope the review of VET takes up this important issue. It's certainly something for which ALA will be advocating.

Apart from older Australians the ABS survey found other vulnerable groups who were missing out on access to non-formal workplace training. For example only 16 per cent of those who left school early accessed training compared to more than half of those with university degrees. Part-time workers were less likely to access training than full-time workers. Of those who missed out on access to learning, one in four indicated that finance was the primary barrier. Nine out of ten participants in workplace training indicated that the primary purpose of doing so was to keep the job they are in now, rather than to pursue new or better-paid opportunities. Industry may be a strong driver of training, but it would appear that they are a less than ideal vehicle for equity in training or for preventing the most vulnerable adults from being left behind.

[continued page 4](#) ▶

(continued from page 1)

Add to that a culture of stoicism and the stigma associated with mental ill-health, possible financial pressures, and in some cases limited education and job opportunities – and it has a cumulative effect.'

The SCARF program takes participants through five steps to preventing suicide. The first is to suspect. 'Being alert to signs is the most important step. A lot of people react to news of suicide by saying they had no idea, they didn't see it coming. We aim to help people to become more aware of danger signals.'

Meg focuses on health and wellbeing and encourages participants to look at a broad definition of good health including diet, sleep, exercise, physical environment, having a sense of purpose and social connectedness. 'By helping people understand more fully what it means to be healthy, they are more able to recognise signs of ill-health, including mental ill-health,' says Meg.

Paying attention to signs of ill-health is critical. For example, in visiting a property Meg says you might notice that the farm or house looks unusually messy or uncared for, or that the farmer mentions in



A culture of stoicism can make it hard to seek help.

conversation that he works so hard but never seems to get anywhere. 'We teach people in our courses to hear the warning bells more clearly. Instead of responding by saying "That's no good," and moving the conversation on to another subject, we want people to take the next step which is to connect and show they care. In some instances, that may mean asking the person directly

and unambiguously if they have had thoughts of suicide.' This can be challenging, and participants are given the chance to practice asking these types of questions to build confidence.

Noticing that someone is struggling is one thing, but Meg says knowing what kinds of services and support are available is just as important. Participants are given extensive information about local and regional as well as 24 hour a day, 7 days a week services. And follow up is also vital. 'It's very important that people learn to check in with the person they had the conversation with to say "Hey did you see your doctor?" It shows you still care.'



Local professionals and business people have frequent contact with farmers.

Meg developed and piloted the half day community course in 2012 and by December 2013 she had trained more than 350 people. She has also developed a 3 hour clinical program for general practitioners and mental health service providers.

Meg says the reason the course has been so popular is because everyone in a small community is touched by a suicide. 'The vast majority of people coming along to our courses have been affected by a suicide, either directly or indirectly. And all of them have some experience with mental health problems in themselves or people close to them.' Meg says that the fact that the course is short means it's accessible for workplaces, farmers and community people.

The feedback so far has been 'amazing and really positive' Meg says. 'Some people do a complete backflip and say, "Wow! I now think completely differently about this!" 'Because the program presents



Meg Perceval coordinator of Farm-Link Suicide Prevention Project describes the importance of warning signs.

information in a series of simple steps people feel empowered and more confident. People are not only more knowledgeable but they are more aware and that helps to break down stigmas so often associated with seeking help.'

Program coordinator, Inverell Campus, Sally Walters says the Farm-Link course fits well with the College's commitment to community wellbeing. The College regularly runs Mental Health First Aid courses aimed at improving services to vulnerable groups.

Sally says working with organisations like Farm-Link is important in strengthening local communities. 'We're a small community and a course like this is terrific because people learn that they can take constructive and positive steps to improve our community's mental health.'

She expects they will run the course again for people who weren't able to make it first time round. 'The people who did the first one will spread the word about how wonderful it was and that is likely to get other people keen to come along.'

The [Farm-Link project](#) is funded under the Department of Health's National Suicide Prevention Program. It provides SCARF training free for people in the New England North West region. Farm-Link is managed by the [University of Newcastle's Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health](#).

Photo credit (page 1) "Cane farmer, Qld" by [Mark Roy](#) / [CC-BY 2.0](#)

### Would you like to advertise in Quest?

Quest has a readership of over 5000 subscribers, all interested in adult and community education.

Half, quarter and full page spaces are available.

Email ALA for further details at [info@ala.asn.au](mailto:info@ala.asn.au) or call us on 03 9652 0861.



Literacy develops through contact with literate friends, family and colleagues.

Speaking of those outside the system, I recently had the opportunity to attend the [ESREA conference in Berlin](#). I was particularly interested in a number of research projects showcased that looked at adults with low literacy and numeracy who were outside the formal education and training system. A stand out was a research paper by German researchers Wibke Riekmann and Klaus Buddeberg titled [Functional Illiterates and their Confidantes](#) who sought to understand the reasons people with low literacy don't seek a course or class. The research was conducted not by interviewing the people with low literacy themselves, but by interviewing friends, employers and other trusted people who assist people with their everyday literacy activities in work and out. It provided a fascinating picture of the way literacy is developed informally through engagement

with and support from more literate friends, family and colleagues. It also teased out the complex factors that allow some workplaces to accommodate and support adults with low literacy.

A French Canadian researcher, Virginie Thériault, presented an [ethnographic study of literacy and numeracy activities in youth centres](#). I particularly liked this paper because it made visible the enormous amount of valuable literacy work with adults with low skills that occurs in community based organisations outside formal courses and classes.

Which brings me to the second starting question for a learner-centred view of VET: what makes a high value outcome for learners? Aligned with our mission, ALA would like to see adults given access to ways to develop the types of skills that will allow them to participate effectively across a lifetime of work in an increasingly volatile labour market and to manage the inevitable transitions between full time, part time and casual employment, underemployment and unemployment. We would like to see the generic skills included that will support adults to balance their work with caring and community responsibilities and to manage

their health and wellbeing including active retirement.

In terms of methodologies that produce these outcomes, Quest tries to answer this question with every issue, by shining a light on good programs that are well run and by giving voice to learners when we can. Suffice to say, quality outcomes can't be met by the hollowed-out, tick a box, teacherless training that has always lived at the edges of VET but which the rush to marketisation has put centre stage in many states. We share the concerns expressed by so many different groups who have taken part in the VET review so far that marketised VET is bedeviled by both over regulation and poor quality learning experiences.

Many of ALA's members are community based RTOs, who are finding it increasingly difficult to continue operating in a 'market' that pits high volume, often online training targeted at cherry picked demographics, against small group, largely face-to-face locally focused learning targeted at low skilled learners with high needs. Giving the same funding to both these models of delivery, when one is so much less expensive than the other to deliver, is a waste of taxpayers' dollars and sets poor quality delivery as the standard. It also puts the onus on community based and public providers to carry the load for the state's obligations to its most vulnerable citizens.

I hope you enjoy the stories of good adult learning across the country in this edition of Quest.

**Photo credits**  
[Literacy photo](#) by [State Library of Austria](#) /CC-BY-SA 2.0  
[Workers photo](#) by [Melbourne Water](#)/CC BY-NC-ND 2.0



Older workers need better access to workplace training.

## Bookshelf – Building Self Sustaining Communities

*Professor Glen Postle AM talks about the ideas and inspiration for a new book on community capacity building.*

On the face of it, you'd think that Toowoomba was doing well. It's poised to undergo an economic boom with coal seam gas mining. But Professor Glen Postle warns economic progress can often be at the cost of community connection. Regional and rural towns need strong and vibrant communities now more than ever.

When it comes to diagnosing the health of a town or region, the health of relationships between people often gets ignored in favour of how well the area is doing economically. Professor Postle argues that this preoccupation with material gain over social connectedness is responsible for many of the changes and threats to communities.

'I don't want to pathologise prosperity, but over the last five to 10 years the focus on economic growth has produced a kind of aggressive individualism that's changed the way we think about ourselves and how we think about each other.'

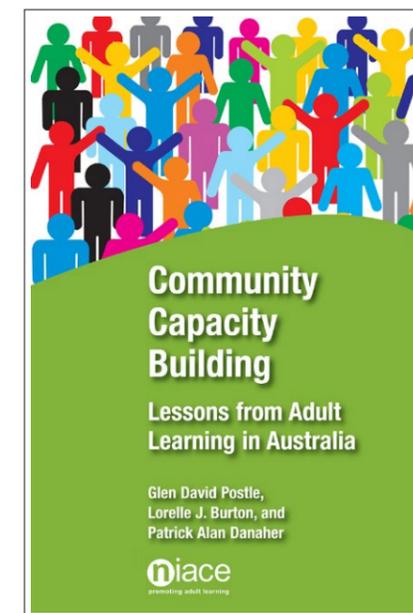
Changes to the workforce also contribute to a sense of dislocation. Highly mobile workforces like 'fly-in, fly-out' employees and the replacement of permanent staff with casuals create feelings of instability, transience and a sense of social disconnection.

The social costs of economic development in a community can strain community ties and worsen social, physical and mental health problems especially among groups that feel outside of the mainstream: older people; new migrants; young people who are on the margins.

For Glen Postle, Lorelle Burton and Patrick Danaher, all academics from the University of Southern Queensland, community capacity building is a way to restore the balance between individualism and the community.

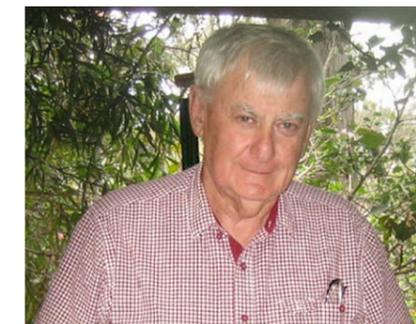
Their book 'Community Capacity Building. Lessons from Adult Learning in Australia' draws on local and international examples to identify how regional and rural communities can sustain themselves and how community members and university academics can create useful knowledge together.

In the case of Toowoomba, they document the development and impact of partnerships – between higher education, government, industry and community groups and agencies – on people who feel marginalised, invisible or undervalued such as disadvantaged youth, older men, and refugees.



'By teaming up with other local organisations you bring together an alliance of people and your collective impact is that you bring a whole lot of knowledge and experience to bear on a problem.'

The authors believe that universities have an important role in contributing to the health of their community when communities are fragmenting and relationships are fraying. Professor Postle says he'd like to see university research embrace the concept of civic



Glen Postle

mindedness in new ways. 'Research in the social sciences should be measured not by the number of academic articles an academic publishes but by the impact of his or her research in the community and on the building of social capital.'

Community Capacity Building tells the stories of collaborative community project partnerships. Each chapter is written by an academic and a community member and describes what they learnt from each project. Case studies include:

- Working with disadvantaged youth – Toowoomba Flexi School
- Participation of older men in the community – Toowoomba Older Men's Network (TOMNET)
- Inter-generational mentoring
- Resettlement of Sudanese people from refugee backgrounds
- Online communities: GraniteNet

### Community Capacity Building: Lessons from Adult Learning in Australia

Glen David Postle, Lorelle J Burton and Patrick Alan Danaher is available from [Footprint Books](#). See the ad for Footprint Books on page 9.

# Support and learning for young mums

On Wednesday mornings the young mums start arriving around 9am, pushing prams, or carrying their babies into the Milligan Community Learning and Resource Centre in Bunbury, 180kms south of Perth.

Kate Kelly, coordinator of Nixi Teen and Young Mum's Group is there to greet them. By ten past nine, after some singing and stories with their children in the free crèche, the mothers move to a room next door.

Nixi is a support group for teenage and young mothers and mums-to-be, who are under 23 years old. The group meets for three hours a week during school term for 12 months.

Nixi provides the opportunity for young mums to meet together informally to share information and get to know other young mums who are in a similar situation. Each year a new group of ten to eighteen young women are referred by community health services, youth workers or link up via social media.

Nixi began in 2005 and around 150 young women have taken part in the program since it began.

'Meeting and making new friends is a very important part of the program,' Kate says. 'It's important because young mothers are often isolated, often feel judged and have lost connection with school friends and groups. They don't know anyone else their age having babies

so it can be really hard.' Loneliness isn't helped by poor public transport. Kate organises cabs to the centre for some young women who don't have access to transport.

The educative part of the program covers topics to do with parenting, self-care, managing your money, education, employment and training and more.



Nixi Mums

Meeting each young mother before the program starts helps Kate get a sense of what the young mums need. Some have a lot of support; others very little. Accommodation is a huge problem. Eighty per cent of them

**Katherine Brown was very nervous when she arrived for her first morning at Nixi back in 2011 with her two month old baby. Katherine, 16, had read about the program in a pamphlet at the hospital after the birth of her son Ethan.**

live with their own or their partner's family. Or it might be the problem of a baby that doesn't sleep.' Kate plans a program that offers practical information as well as personal development. 'We do a lot of work on healthy communication and healthy relationships as well as the

practicalities of, for example, finding stable rental accommodation.'

Kate says the main goals of the program are developing friendships, bonding with babies, developing effective parenting skills and learning how to live on a low income. This is particularly important for mothers under 16 who aren't eligible for Centrelink allowances or old enough to work.

The first week is always nerve wracking, Kate says. The young women are often very nervous at first and arrive uncertain about what to expect. 'There's still a lot of stigma around young mums and they often feel judged.'

It's important, Kate says, that Nixi is a relaxed environment. 'Last year's group was much younger than usual with many more in the 15 to 17 year old age bracket so we replaced the chairs and tables in the meeting room so the room would be less reminiscent of school.'

Kate invites guest speakers to help the young women learn about local services and to meet people who can help. 'It's easier for them if they've seen a doctor at

Nixi who's come to talk about baby health. The mum might think that the doctor seemed nice so it's easier for her to make the move to make an appointment.' The same goes for other professionals within the community from real estate agents to occupational therapists.

On a typical morning Kate begins with any information or announcements such as upcoming pram walks that she thinks the young women will find useful. In the second hour a guest speaker or Kate will present information about a specific topic and the final hour is devoted to having coffee, talking or journal writing.

Checking in with the young mums to make sure the program is giving them what they expected is important, Kate says. Between meetings Kate keeps in touch via a Facebook group and follows up any young mum who hasn't shown up. 'I'll just let her know we missed her.' Occasionally a young mum will drop out. 'If she says "I don't think it's for me" I always say tell me why so I can improve it.'

Over the course of the year Kate sees big changes in the young mothers. 'I can see them maturing, getting much better at problem solving and much more able to talk things through and negotiate.'

By the end of the year Kate says most of them have gotten what they need and are ready to move on although the friendships continue. 'They move on to playgroup and stay in touch that way.'

Kate's full of admiration for them. 'So many of them have potential and have gone back to school or on to uni and each of them is doing a fantastic job. It's so rewarding to see them go from being shy and unsure of themselves to being more confident and realising their own capabilities.'

Katherine Brown was very nervous when she arrived for her first morning at Nixi back in 2011 with her two month old baby. Katherine, 16, had read about the program in a pamphlet at the hospital after the

birth of her son Ethan. 'I was so nervous but I had to get out of the house. I thought I'm going to go and try it - just give it a shot.'

Katherine was living at home with her family who were very supportive. Still she felt cut off from her friends.



Kate Kelly and Katherine Brown.

'You go in different ways from your friends when you become a parent; you don't have as much in common and you have less to talk about.'

She was conscious of being judged both on the street and in social media. 'Social media offers the easiest forms of bullying. When you're out and about too you get the looks and the comments. You have to build up a tolerance to it and not let it get to you.'

Initially she expected that at Nixi any new friendships would be of more benefit to Ethan than herself. 'I thought I'd make new acquaintances and we'd set up playdates with our children. I never expected to make such close friends as I have. My best friend now is another mum and we understand

each other and what each of us is going through. It's fantastic.'

Katherine says she is 'passionate' about Nixi. She says it's so important because it offers connections and friendships. 'I felt so safe coming along to Nixi. It is a safe zone where no one judges you.'

She also came out of the program much better informed. 'It definitely built up my knowledge and helped me improve my situation.'

Katherine resumed her schooling during her time at Nixi. She completed Year 11 English and Maths by distance education and is currently enrolled in a TAFE Community Services Certificate III. And she's been employed under a traineeship as a peer support worker for Nixi.

Kate Kelly, Nixi coordinator says that Katherine is 'fantastic' to have as part of the program team. 'She

can relate to the young mums who are part of Nixi but she's also very professional.'

Katherine says she's definitely more confident. 'I found I can really relate to and communicate with people, especially other young mums and I really enjoy being able to make a contribution.'

Katherine also shares what she's learnt by giving school talks to Year 10 students where she talks about the way young mothers are treated.

Her long term goal is to become a social worker, but that's still a way off. 'I won't rush it. I want to get Ethan set up at school first.'

[Nixi Teen and Young Mum's Group](#) is funded by WA's Department of Social Services.

# Bookshelf – Men Learning Through Life

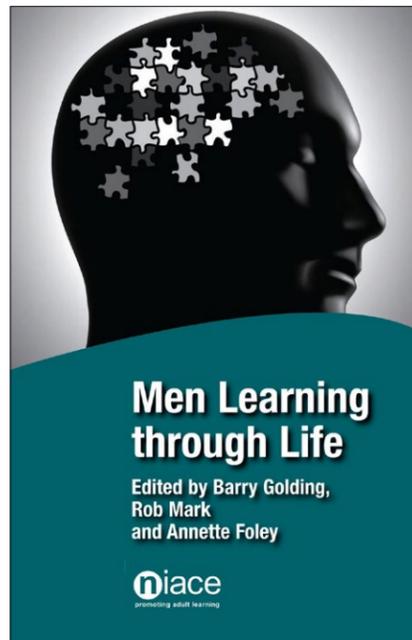
Professor Barry Golding, President of Adult Learning Australia and well known for his work in the Men's Shed movement, has had a long interest in men and lifelong learning. It's an interest sparked by UK researcher [Veronica McGivney's landmark studies](#) which identified that some groups of men are particularly disadvantaged when it comes to adult learning.

But, Barry says men's learning has received less attention from scholars than has women's learning and that the topic often generates outright hostility.

'The research field of men and lifelong learning is a minefield. Many academics aren't happy to talk about men's disadvantage. Men tend to get left behind in re-thinking about gender. And yet men can be as trapped in stereotypes and expectations as women. Why is it that neighbourhood centres are filled with women and not with men? When I started writing about the Men's Shed movement in Australia I thought 'Why is it just me writing about this.'

Over the course of the last nine years Barry has sought out researchers and academics across the globe with an interest in men's participation in lifelong learning. Together with co-editors Annette Foley, Deputy Dean, School of Education & Arts, Federation University (formerly known as the University of Ballarat) and Rob Mark, Head of the Centre for Lifelong Learning at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, he has put together a book that presents a snapshot from round the world.

In countries around the world, rising unemployment, the impact of the Global Financial Crisis, ageing populations and men retiring at younger ages are increasing the pressure to find ways of increasing men's participation in learning.



The book brings together international researchers from Ireland, Greece, Portugal, China, Australia, New Zealand and the UK who reflect on men's participation and attitudes to lifelong education and describe the policy and practices that promote or discourage men's aversion to learning in each country.



L to R: Barry Golding; George Kelly, Irish Men's Shed Association Chair; Dr Rob Mark, John Evoy (CEO IMSA), Dr Lucia Carragher.

'Our book argues the case for more education. Learning is one of the few things that set you up for life. We have an education system that is reasonably good at getting people into work but not one that helps us handle changes in our lives, particularly post work. So learning opportunities in our adult lives are even more important.'

And there are clear gender differences when it comes to formal

and accredited learning that need examining too, Barry says. 'Take the case of country boys in Victoria. City girls go on to post year 12 education at four times the rate that country boys do. You can argue that's because more boys go into work and more girls go on to post-secondary education. But why is that? The fact that younger men are steering clear of adult learning is a worrying trend. It's a trend that needs reversing if we want to break the cycle of intergenerational aversion to learning.'

'We know the benefits that accrue from adult learning – improvements in confidence, health and wellbeing, the social benefits of interacting with others and feeling part of a community. And the costs of not participating are paid for by the entire community.'

'Our book is a way of saying 'There's something going on – here's the evidence outlining the size and the scope of the problem and its implications. Now let's talk about what we're going to do about it.'

*Men Learning Through Life* by Barry Golding, Rob Mark and Annette Foley. NIACE publications.

*Men Learning Through Life* will be launched in Ballarat by The Hon Steve Bracks, former Premier of Victoria, at

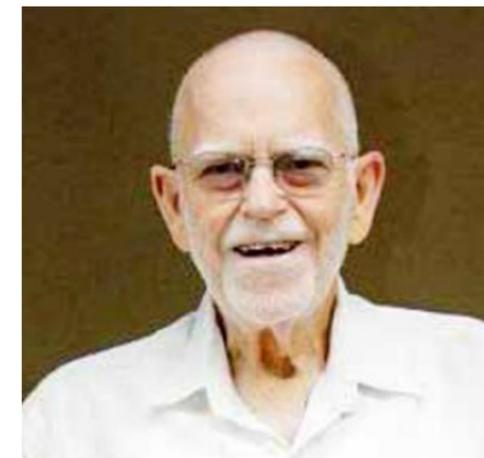
5pm Wednesday 23 April 2014 at the Post Office Gallery, corner Sturt and Lydiard Streets, Ballarat.

The Melbourne launch of *Men Learning Through Life* will take place as part of the 'Learning and wellbeing across the generations forum' in Father Tucker's Room, Brotherhood of St Laurence, 49 Brunswick Street Brunswick, 1.30-5.00pm on Thursday 24 April 2014.

# Obituary – Professor Gordon Barclay

We were saddened to hear of the death of Professor Gordon 'Blue' Barclay, formerly President of the Australian Association for Adult Continuing Education which later became Adult Learning Australia.

Professor Barclay was a founding professor and foundation head in the School of Chemistry at Macquarie University from 1965 to 1992. In addition to his distinguished career in chemistry, Professor Barclay had a long involvement and commitment to adult and continuing education.



Professor Gordon 'Blue' Barclay, AM

He was involved in establishing community radio stations 2SER 107.3 in the 1970s, and was the chair of Sydney Educational Broadcasting in 1979 and 1980. He was also involved as a consultant in Science Curriculum Development in Thailand.

Professor Barclay was awarded a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in the 2013 Australia Day Honours.

You can read [Professor Barclay's obituary at the Sydney Morning Herald](#).



NIACE, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, is a leading UK-based publisher of adult education resources with national and international appeal, across a wide range of subjects, for teachers, researchers, students, policy makers, managers and more.

[Footprint Books](#), the exclusive Australasian distributor of NIACE publications, is offering ALA members a 20% discount and free freight on all books on the Footprint website.

Contact Jacqui at ALA for the discount code at [info@ala.asn.au](mailto:info@ala.asn.au).

You can view the full NIACE list [here](#).



## 7th Australian Vocational Education and Training Research Association (AVETRA) Conference

This international AVETRA Conference will be held from 22 to 24 April, 2014, at Outrigger Surfers Paradise, Queensland, Australia.

The conference theme is 'Informing changes in VET policy and practice: The central role of research.'

This year, Adult Learning Australia is partnering with AVETRA to provide an adult learning stream within the conference. Our aim is to showcase new research in Adult and Community Education as well as research that sits at the interface of ACE and VET.

For registration and more conference information go to <http://avetra.org.au/>.

# Attracting skilled volunteers

Need legal advice, graphic design skills, fundraising expertise, training and HR advice? Sometimes finding the right volunteers for the work that needs to be done in your organisation can be a challenge.

Some of your volunteers are likely to be giving time to your organisation because they want

to develop their own skills. Others might be highly skilled but may not have the specific qualifications or professional expertise that you need.

Here are some tips on how to attract qualified and experienced people who are willing to give their time and expertise free of charge.



Finding volunteers with specialist professional skills can be a challenge.

- 1.** Identify the skills you need. Look to your organisation's goals and the skills required for your organisation to grow and develop. For example, if you plan to offer childcare, you might need help with business planning and legislative requirements. If your goals include extending the reach of your program, you might need the help of someone skilled in marketing, communication and design.
- 2.** Make a list of the experience and qualifications your volunteer staff already have. Understanding what assets you already have will help you identify any gaps as well as look at ways of developing your current volunteer base.
- 3.** Write a detailed job description. Be specific about the responsibilities involved in the position you have in mind. Put yourself in a potential volunteer's shoes and describe:
  - the likely time commitment. Does this work involve an ongoing commitment or is it a short term, one off project?
  - the degree of flexibility. For example, can the volunteer work from home, or from a distance?
  - the expected outcomes of the work.

- 4.** Identify likely candidates. You can do this by:
  - using a volunteer matching service
  - asking organisations similar to your own for recommendations
  - identifying tertiary level courses in your field of interest to explore internship opportunities.

**5.** Describe what you see as the benefits for potential volunteers for donating their time and professional expertise to your organisation, especially if they are busy professionals. Perhaps it's the networks they will be able to access as a result of the experience, or that the project you have in mind will offer a broader experience than they might be used to, or it offers a challenge in some other way.

**6.** Include time for mentoring in the project. Build in processes so that less skilled or experienced staff have an opportunity to learn from those volunteers with particular expertise.

**7.** Advertise and promote the skills of your volunteers as a way both of rewarding their involvement and contribution and promoting your organisation as a great place to donate time.

## Resources

Community Sector Workforce Capability Framework

<http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/for-business-and-community/not-for-profit-organisations/workforce-capability-tools>

I can do that. Victoria's volunteer portal.

<https://www.volunteer.vic.gov.au/>

Photo credits

["Photographer"](#) by Nicolás García / CC-BY-SA 2.5

# Hospitality class puts food on the table

Saucy Italian meatballs with vegetables, beef stirfry, hearty vegetable soup, lasagna. Take your pick from any one of 300 meals produced each week by Wodonga's Birallee Park Neighbourhood House. The Our Table To Yours (OTTY) program has been helping to feed the local community for the last five years.

Four days a week the large kitchen at Birallee Park Neighbourhood House (BPNH) is buzzing. On Mondays, it's students from the Murray Valley Centre for Adults with a Disability, Wednesdays it's VCAL students from a nearby high school who've come to learn hospitality skills and volunteer in their community, and on Thursday it's a dedicated band of volunteers lending a hand to produce anywhere from 80 to 120 meals a day.

Some local major employers send along corporate cooking groups, and have staff who volunteer their time. The number of meals they cook each week depends on what ingredients are available and how many volunteers have arrived to lend a hand but Sue says, 'We are never without an empty freezer'.

Humming alongside BPNH's hospitality classes are the other courses run at the centre which include Certificate III and IV in Aged Care, Work for the Dole programs, sewing classes, and community workshops on gardening and sustainability using the garden and greenhouse as a classroom. In the garden eight seven-metre long garden beds are planted mainly with tomatoes which will be cooked and pureed for use during the rest of the year, leeks, garlic, herbs, rhubarb and beans. In the greenhouse vegetable seedlings are being grown for disability support groups interested in growing and cooking their own food.



L to R: Sue Slater, Hilary and Max Gregurke and Di Mant in the Birallee Park vegetable patch. Photo courtesy Border Mail

Five years ago Sue Slater, then a member of BPNH's committee of management, saw an article in the paper that really bothered her. Local university students, the paper reported, were having trouble feeding themselves and were living on two minute noodles.

She went to BPNH coordinator Di Mant and said, 'Can't we do something to help?' Together with the rest of the committee they came up with the idea of supplying free healthy meals to students. Then a local church heard of their plans, and the idea grew to providing healthy meals for anyone in the local community who was having trouble cooking for themselves.

They called the project 'Our Table to Yours'. With a combination of food they bought with their own limited funds, and a small amount they grew themselves, the project produced around 25 meals a week. Five years later, they produce more than ten times that amount, distributing 300 meals a week to agencies and individuals across the region.

Wodonga, right on the border with New South Wales, has a population of around 39,000. For many people in Wodonga the inability to cook healthy fresh food for themselves or their family is a daily reality. 'It might be because of ill health,

unemployment, financial pressure, isolation or not living close by to fruit and veg shopping and having no access to public transport.'

And it doesn't just strike people in low socio economic groups. Sue says they distribute meals to people who are recently bereaved or too incapacitated by illness to cook.

Sue says the energy and enthusiasm of everyone at the House is the reason the project has been such a success.

There were large vegetable plots to establish, a greenhouse to build and the kitchen was not equipped for such large scale production.

'Di was a driving force in getting the program off the ground. She gave a talk at Rotary about the project and they donated two new ovens. Our chairperson Ed Foulston has donated not just tools and his time and energy but his knowledge was crucial particularly when we were building garden beds and installing a watering system and later running garden workshops, let alone helping me with all the administrative tasks involved.'

These days Sue is BPNH coordinator and the 'Our Table to Yours' program is a large one to manage. 'Ours is a 24/7, 365 day a year operation,' Sue says.

Foodbank Victoria supplies meat, dairy products and a range of processed foods and local donations of fresh produce add to food produced from their own garden.

A range of grants from the City of Wodonga, the Sidney Myer Fund, Anglicare Victoria, and the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs have enabled BPNH to buy new kitchen equipment including mixers, processors and a

(continued from page 11)

commercial freezer. A Climate Grant from Sustainability Victoria covered the installation of two 50,000 litre water tanks. BPNH's own fundraising efforts have enabled the establishment of a 15kW solar power system and a range of other capital improvements.

BPNH works as part of the Emergency Relief Network, and is part of a web of services offering help to people in the area who may be struggling to put food on the table.

Local agencies including Palliative Care at Albury Wodonga Health, Uniting Care and Ronald McDonald Family Room at Wodonga Hospital collect meals in bulk to distribute to their clients and their families. Around 20 people a week drop in to the House to pick up meals for themselves or their families.

Sue says while they are very proud of the program, it's a challenge. 'We are committed to sustainability, recycling and reuse. We keep our energy costs to a minimum through the use of solar panels and we use rainwater for the garden, and our cooks are all volunteers.'

The biggest cost for the program is not food but the packaging. 'We use microwaveable containers which cost us more than \$2000 a year.'

Sue says their approach to cooking is professional and systematic. 'All meals are labelled with the ingredients and date of preparation. We enter all that information into a database, along with volunteer hours. All supervisors

are trained in food safety and we are always conscious about food hygiene and handling.'



Sue particularly enjoys working with local VCAL students. 'It's great for kids to learn where food comes from; that it doesn't just come from supermarkets.'

Then there's the interaction with the volunteers. 'Our volunteers bring with them a wealth of experience from

their own culinary backgrounds. We have retired cooks and chefs on board, mothers and grandmothers, as well as our Chairperson, and their ability to devise a healthy nutritious menu from what is on hand often astounds me.'



VCAL students at work.

'Our program encourages social inclusion. We have volunteers who are new to the area, either because they've got a new job here or they have recently

resettled through the immigration program, and they all make strong friendships with a whole range of members of our community including the unemployed, the retired and the disabled.

'I must admit that after spending all day in the kitchen at the centre, and cleaning up afterwards, I don't always feel like cooking at home,' Sue laughs. 'But the most satisfying part of co-ordinating such a wonderful and exhausting program, apart from the assistance I know that we bring to many in our area, is the friendships I've made and the strong partnerships we've developed in the community.'



**Adult Learning Australia** INC

Lifelong and Lifewide Learning  
for All Australians

## About Quest

Quest is the national magazine for adult and community education. It is published four times a year by Adult Learning Australia.

## Chief Executive Officer

Sally Thompson

## Editor

Gina Perry  
g.perry@ala.asn.au

PO Box 298 Flinders Lane  
Melbourne VIC 8009  
Phone: 03 9652 0862

## 2014 ALA Executive and Board

### President

Dr Barry Golding (VIC)

### Treasurer

Dr Mark Brophy (VIC)

### Board

Tony Dreise (NSW)  
Dorothy Lucardie (VIC)  
Catherine Dunn (WA)  
Dr Rob Townsend (VIC)  
Dr Tracey Ollis (VIC)  
Dr Donna Rooney (NSW)  
Allan Cormack (VIC)

[www.ala.asn.au](http://www.ala.asn.au)