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Ageing and Learning in Australia: Arguing an Evidence Base for Informed and Equitable Policy

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Abstract: Given Australia's population ageing and predicted impacts related to health, productivity, equity and enhancing quality of life outcomes for senior Australians, lifelong learning has been identified as a pathway for addressing the risks associated with an ageing population. To date Australian governments have paid little attention to addressing these needs and thus, there is an urgent need for policy development for lifelong learning as a national priority. The purpose of this article is to explore the current lifelong learning context in Australia and to propose a set of factors that are most likely to impact learning in later years.

Keywords: Ageing, learning, Australia, older adults, policy.

1. INTRODUCTION

THE CONTEXT FOR AGEING AND LEARNING IN AUSTRALIA

Adult Learning Australia [1] argues the accumulative skills and knowledge developed over a lifetime that older people have is extremely beneficial:

...a population skewed towards more skilled and knowledgeable workers and community members should have enormous pay-offs in productivity and in its ability to manage ongoing societal challenges. (p4)

Harnessing this potential through provision of appropriate learning opportunities for seniors offers clear health, social and economic benefits, and provides a pathway for addressing the risks associated with an ageing population [2-6]. The concept of lifelong learning provides a framework for exploring this opportunity. Thus the purpose of this article is to explore the current lifelong learning context in Australia and to propose a set of factors that are most likely to impact learning in later years.

Lifelong learning, including learning in later years, addresses four key elements, which includes: a) the entire lifespan, from 'cradle to grave'; b) aims to improve understanding, knowledge and skills; c) formal and informal learning – through education, as a citizen, at work and at leisure; and d) a broad scope for the purpose of learning which incorporates economic, social and other individual outcomes [3, 7-9].

Tikkanen and Nyhan [10] argue that, in responding to support for seniors' learning, "... society, work organisations and individuals must think of ageing as a lifelong learning and developmental process in which one continuously takes on new challenges in line with one's interests, opportunities and limitations" (p3). However, while governments direct ongoing and explicit attention to supporting learning opportunities for younger and middle age groups, there remains a general and ongoing lack of understanding of, and investment to support appropriate learning opportunities for older Australians [11-14].

Clearly, the stereotypical perception of ageing as a process of 'decline' [15] or 'disengagement' [16] is no longer valid. Advances in health, communications, education, and technology mean Australians can now live longer, healthier and more productive lives [2]. As the Australian Government [2] has argued, "The challenge is to re-shape workplaces, communities and society to facilitate the contribution of senior Australians rather than to reinforce outdated approaches that create barriers to their participation and lead to disengagement and social isolation" (p1). In responding to this challenge, over recent years, there has been an emerging policy and sectoral dialogue related to ageing and learning in Australia [e.g. 2, 5, 9, 14, 16]. However, there remains an ongoing absence of any overriding national policy to support and direct learning for all Australians across their life course [8, 17-19].

The current situation sits at odds with the view of the Australian Productivity Commission [5] who argue that, "The preferable time to contemplate the policy implications of these developments is while these near-inescapable trends ... [associated with an ageing population] ... are still in their infancy" (p19). The contemporary context of an ageing

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population, especially in regards to health, productivity, equity and enhancing quality of life outcomes for senior Australians, underpins the need for policy development as a priority area of focus [20].

However, in Australia, at government policy and operational levels, there has been an ongoing lack of attention to broad concepts of lifelong learning [17]. Lifelong learning is described as the continuous development of skills and knowledge, which “...not only enhances social inclusion, active citizenship and personal development, but also competitiveness and employability” (p399) [21]. These learning opportunities can be separated into three reasonably discreet (but sometimes overlapping) settings – formal, work and community based [8, 22-23], thus highlighting the need for a broad approach to seniors’ learning rather than an emphasis solely on formal education.

While various ageing initiatives have discussed ‘what’ factors might underpin healthy, active or productive ageing [e.g. 5, 7, 25-26], little direction has been provided in ‘how’ to operationalise the goals that have been identified [20]. The concept of lifelong learning presents clear opportunities in terms of addressing the challenges associated with the ageing population [5, 14]. However, there is a clear need to identify and integrate the perspectives of Australian seniors as key stakeholders within this policy discourse.

While the Australia Government [2] acknowledges lifelong learning for seniors as a difficult policy challenge, as Kearns [17] states, there is none-the-less a need for “... more comprehensive and coherent policies to support learning throughout life in many contexts ... [and this] ... should be seen as a necessary strategic investment in Australia’s future ...” (viii). From both economic and equity perspectives, seniors need to be included in helping build the future Australia. It has been argued that the current top down approach to the ageing population has resulted in a “... disjuncture in the eyes of stakeholders between what older Australians want and the implementation of policy and practice” (p772) [27].

CONCEPTUALISING AGEING AND LEARNING IN AUSTRALIA

The United Nations (UN) argues that ‘participation’ is a basic right for older people, and calls for the “Empowerment of older persons to fully and effectively participate in the economic, political and social lives of their societies, including through income generation and voluntary work” [24] (2:Part 1 section 12c). Internationally, interrelated ageing frameworks, such as age friendly communities and active ageing have echoed the UN call for development of policies and services in response to the needs and aspirations of older people. For example, the World Health Organisation [26] describe the notion of ‘active ageing’ as, “... the process of optimising opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance the quality of life as people age” (p12). Echoing this line, an ‘age friendly community’ is one that supports active social and economic participation in the community, and provision of appropriate services and infrastructure for seniors [28].

A focus on seniors’ engagement in social and economic life forms a key focus within such frameworks [9, 29]. This is an important focus as seniors are identified as a population

group increasingly at risk of social and economic exclusion [30]. One opportunity for operationalising seniors’ engagement which is receiving increasing attention, is the provision of appropriate learning opportunities. In our conceptual framework, we argue that seniors’ engagement, processed through appropriate learning opportunities, can help drive active ageing (Fig. 1).

Fig. (1). Lifelong learning and active ageing.

Seniors’ engagement, through lifelong learning, contrasts with the more traditional view of a three stage life course where learning is primarily the domain of younger people, work is the domain of middle age and retirement is the domain of seniors. The concept of learning across the ages and the opportunities it offers has resulted in widespread endorsement internationally of the value of learning for seniors [1, 7, 25, 26, 31]. However, currently, we have a limited understanding of what ‘appropriate seniors’ learning opportunities’ might be [20] and a number of questions must first be addressed to inform policy development in this area.

For example,

1. What knowledge and skills does an older Australian need to survive and thrive in the 21st Century?
2. Where and how are these knowledge and skills acquired, particularly if you come from a background of socioeconomic disadvantage?
3. Why, despite the imperative to stay current and well-informed, do Australian seniors continue to have very participation rates in learning?

As Thompson *et. el.* [16] suggest, “Older Australians want to learn, but they don’t necessarily want to learn in the same way as younger Australians” (p14). However, it is concerning that so little is known about seniors’ learning experiences and the factors underpinning their involvement in later-life learning [20, 32]. Development of appropriate policy and operational responses requires better understanding of these factors [27]. Working from the three questions listed above, the following sections of this paper begin a dialogue as a basis for an ageing and learning research framework.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PROVIDING APPROPRIATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR SENIORS' LEARNING

A fundamental premise, widely documented in an extensive and diverse set of government, sectoral and research literature, is that investment in appropriate learning opportunities for seniors facilitates health, social and economic outcomes [3, 7, 8, 21, 26, 33-38] (Fig. 2).

Fig. (2). Appropriate seniors' learning opportunities as the driver for health, social and economic outcomes.

The promise of such outcomes has resulted in widespread attention to lifelong learning across the world [34]. Overall, as Schuller and Watson [3] argue in their comprehensive and wide ranging *UK Independent Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning*, "... the case is compelling. We have no doubt that lifelong learning already makes a major contribution to sustaining economic and social wellbeing, to enabling people to understand, adapt to and shape change, and to promoting social justice ..." (p21). Of course, the concept of lifelong learning includes older persons, indicating that the outcomes listed above are equally relevant to seniors' engagement in learning as to all other age cohorts [2, 9, 20, 29, 39-41]. The following paragraphs provide an initial description of this relevance.

Perhaps garnering the most headline interest in Australia currently, in light of both the present tight economic climate and the anticipated costs of an ageing population, is the opportunity for "... turning grey into gold" (p1) [6]. This report suggests that development and utilisation of seniors' human capital presents enormous economic potential. This potential is highlighted through recent research showing that increasing education attainment and learning opportunities by one percentage point across all age levels in each of the 51 largest metropolitan areas in the USA, generates an additional \$124 billion in aggregate annual personal income, as well as contributing to better social and well-being outcomes [4].

Consideration of the strong link between seniors' learning and enhanced economic outcomes is essential in terms of

a knowledge-based economy, particularly so in light of an ageing population and their ongoing productivity [36]. As Adult Learning Australia [1] argue, the provision of appropriate learning opportunities for seniors has the potential "... to extend working life, to assist in career transitions into more senior friendly job roles and to maintain health and wellbeing" (p10). Presentation of such opportunities should be seen as a good investment in both economic and equity terms.

However, as the *Australian Human Rights Commission* [42] note, "Currently, older Australians are underrepresented in paid work. Underemployment is often symptomatic of other forms of exclusion including participation in the community. Social exclusion and isolation, in turn, have significant impacts on physical and emotional wellbeing" (p18). Equity considerations appear to be receiving little attention in the dialogue around harnessing seniors' productivity. Older people from low socio-economic backgrounds (and this includes a large percentage of Australian elders), seniors with mobility and health issues, and those with limited capacity for formal learning will likely be further disadvantaged if social equity is not a key consideration within productivity discussions. Attention is required to the provision of appropriate learning opportunities that support equity in seniors' economic engagement, what Jackson [31] describes as "... a critically focused lifelong learning, that has a concern for social justice at its core" (p289). Clearly, a seniors' perspective on learning, which is currently missing from policy debates, must form the basis for equity in lifelong learning.

Social benefits, relating to seniors' learning, are perhaps less tangible than economic outcomes. However, there are strong arguments that seniors' learning can result in, for example, reduced crime and safer neighbourhoods [43], enhanced social capital, and stronger cross-cultural and inter-generational links [44], and community innovation and adaptation to change [23]. Other researchers have studied seniors' involvement in local governance (see [45] and [46]) with the implication that seniors have much to contribute towards a fair and democratic society. This topic is of increasing relevance as seniors gradually gain a proportionally larger voice in democratic decision making processes.

Another example of social benefit is seniors' volunteering, a key example of informal learning through knowledge sharing. This topic has been virtually ignored by Australian governments in the current dialogue on ageing. Seniors' provide, for example, inter-generational childcare, volunteering services, and through various forms of mentoring, pass on their skills, knowledge and experience to others. More research is required to better understand the social and economic value of seniors' volunteering. In particular, there is little understanding of the benefit/cost equation if seniors are encouraged to move from current voluntary roles towards employment.

In terms of individual outcomes, an extensive body of literature has argued that engagement in learning can facilitate positive health and wellbeing outcomes for seniors [26, 38, 47-49]. For example, Tam [50], working from a review of relevant literature, describes how engaging in learning in later life can increase life satisfaction, self-esteem levels and

instill a sense of independence. Furthermore, Laal [22] suggests lifelong learning can boost focus and concentration, increase confidence and social skills. Such outcomes are well articulated through specific case studies, such as by Aldridge [51] who found that seniors' engagement in learning in care homes increased quality of life and reduced health costs. Benefits to the individual sit on top of the potential economic savings of having good health later in life, thereby placing less pressure on the public health system.

It is apparent that seniors' engagement in learning activity benefits themselves, the community, and the nation. However, while the multiple benefits from seniors' learning are evident, as Tam [20] states "... few studies have shed light on what older people themselves have to say about what they want and need to learn" (p291). This key knowledge gap constrains equitable and informed policy development and operational responses. An evidence base which responds to the three questions listed at the start of this paper is required.

Identification of a need to acknowledge and describe seniors' diversity as a key starting point for research leads our discussion. For example, in discussing the *Economic Potential of Senior Australians*, the Department of Treasury and Finance [6] identify seniors' diversity in terms of "... cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and different life experiences, lifestyles and aspirations ..." (p1). They continue on to identify the need for longer-term policies which take seniors' diversity into account. Taking the view that 'one size fits all seniors' does not address demographic characteristics, such as generational age cohorts, gender, education levels, cultural background, life experiences and economic status which impact seniors' social and economic development.

ACKNOWLEDGING DIVERSITY WITHIN AN AGEING POPULATION: WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

Globally by 2050, seniors will constitute 22% of the world's population, or around two billion people [24]. Obviously, there is great diversity among these 'seniors'. Something more than simplistic or populist policy responses to diversity within ageing and learning is required if we are to achieve the potential health, social and economic outcomes. As Lui *et al.* [28] argued, after a comprehensive review of ageing frameworks, "... older people's lives and experiences should be used as a starting point to identify [their] desirable community services and support" (p119).

A recent large scale study across ten European countries found that older people are "... able to recognise and reflect on their learning experiences and to articulate direct benefits as well as the wider benefits and longer-term effects of their learning" (p9) [38]. Arguably, without input from older people any policy making process relating to an ageing population will result in ill-informed or inappropriate responses. Enhanced understanding of the experiences of older Australians is argued as crucial to the design and implementation of appropriate learning policies and strategies to support a productive, healthy and active ageing population [32].

As a starting point towards filling this knowledge gap, we propose a set of factors that are most likely to impact seniors' learning. These factors are based primarily on

Schuller and Watson [3] and our extensive literature review. These impact factors have not been empirically tested but provide a foundation for preliminary discussions and a context for further dialogue.

DIVERSITY ACROSS DIFFERENT STAGES OF A SENIORS' LIFESPAN

An Australian born in 2012 can expect to live 94 years for females and 92 years for males [16]. As such, seniors can be seen as comprising multiple generations, bought up in vastly different eras, with different life experiences, and as a result having different learning needs. It will become increasingly common for someone to 'be a senior' for 40+ years, or nearly half a lifetime. However, the ageing literature and policy statements have yet to agree on when a person becomes a 'senior'. Rather than debate this question, in the context of this paper ageing is viewed as a process, and we have adopted a segmented approach to enable appropriate policy responses to be directed to learning needs at different stages of ageing (adapted from [3]; see also [9]). In our approach, seniors are grouped into three cohorts: *Emerging seniors* (45-60 age cohort); *Traditional retirees* (61-80 age cohort); and *Elders* (81+ age cohort).

Diversity across these three age cohorts is also viewed as a lead variable when considering ageing and learning, and specific policy and operational responses are required to cater to each age cohort. In addition, a preliminary set of secondary and perhaps less visible factors including cultural background, marital status, appropriate learning environments, literacies, gender, mobility, health, geographic location, and socio-economic status that potentially impact on seniors' learning must be considered (Fig. 3).

Fig. (3). Interrelated factors impacting on seniors' learning.

Enhanced understanding of how these interrelated and overlapping factors relate to seniors' learning opportunities, preferences, needs and constraints, across each of the three age cohorts, may provide a context to inform ageing and learning policy development and operational initiatives in

Australia. A summary of key characteristics within each of these impact factors is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Key characteristics of impact factors.

Impact factor	Key characteristics
Cultural background	Recognition of the specific needs of seniors from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, and Indigenous communities, who "... typically suffer from higher levels of socio-economic disadvantage ... is crucial to the success of any age-related policies" [40].
Learning environments	While most policy attention is directed to formal learning environments, little attention has been paid to important alternative learning needs (social, health, leisure, etc). Currently, we have little understanding of the community based learning context for seniors.
Literacies	There are a range of literacies, including digital, English language, information, that are required as foundations for accessing knowledge and information
Gender	Females are more likely to be involved with learning activities in later life.
Mobility	Mobility refers to a range of constraints including physical mobility and transport options [52].
Health	Health refers to both cognitive and physical limitations to learning.
Geographic location	Locational disadvantage for seniors living in regional/urban/remote communities [41].
Socio-economic status	Limited/bad experience with learning environments, lacking aspiration, lacking relevant information regarding pathways for learning, lack of financial/family support.

CONCLUSION

As the United Nations [24] suggest "A society for all ages encompasses the goal of providing older persons with the opportunity to continue contributing to society" [2:Part 2, para. 19]. Responding to this goal requires evidence based policy that understands and incorporates what knowledge and skills seniors require to contribute to society, and how those knowledge and skills might be acquired. Despite a broad dialogue in Australia, relating to the ageing population, and general acknowledgment that lifelong learning supports diverse health, social and economic outcomes, few studies have explored older people's perspectives on what, how or why they want to learn [20, 53]. The interface between seniors and learning remains an understudied area of research [54].

Australia needs to focus attention on the broad concepts of lifelong learning at government policy and operational levels. Provision of appropriate learning opportunities that support Australian seniors to assuage risk and manage their lives in increasingly complex community settings, will provide crucial support in dealing with the challenges of an ageing population in a positive and equitable manner [18]. By the time an individual is classified as a senior, they will have

already spent 40 or more years working, interacting and learning. However, an ageing society should not be seen as a burden. Rather, it should be celebrated and valued. That lifetime of experience can be used to support a just and prosperous society. Providing appropriate learning opportunities to seniors is one clear pathway for achieving that outcome.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No known conflicts of interest.

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None declared.

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