CHAPTER NINE

MEN'S LEARNING IN SMALL AND REMOTE TOWNS IN AUSTRALIA

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INTRODUCTION

A series of research projects conducted by the author in Australia in 2002–4 has thrown new light on the ways in which men in small rural towns do (or don't) return to learn. This chapter summarises the evidence from some of these studies and places them in the context of a small but emerging literature on the distinctive and arguably different nature of men's learning and their learning preferences. The research is timely in the light of concerns, both real and imagined, about men's (McGivney, 1999a) and boys' (Slade, 2002, House of Representatives 2002) differential rates of participation and attainment as compared with women and girls and changing discourses of gender and education (Lingard & Douglas, 1999). While there has been widespread historic gender segmentation of adult learning by field of study in most education sectors, segmentation involving men has not received sufficient or critical recent inquiry.

This research focuses particularly on the learning experiences of rural men with limited choices for learning locally through structured providers or programs. People in most small rural towns in Australia with a population of less than approximately 3,000 people have relatively limited local learning options: certainly no on-campus university access, and rarely access to technical and further education (TAFE). Depending on the State or Territory and the size of the rural town, the only local public access to learning for adults is likely to be some form of Adult and Community Education (ACE), at best offering short vocational and interest programs with public internet access, typically oriented to the particular needs and interests of women that make up at least three quarters of users. While some larger towns may also have private providers, as town population size decreases, the likelihood of even a local ACE provider diminishes.

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As this chapter will show, the fact that men tend not to use ACE—even where it exists in rural Australia—does not mean that men are not learning. As remoteness from services increases and town population size decreases, the role of formal learning organisations becomes less important, and a small number of 'surrogate' local organisations—often with secondary learning functions, becomes critical for rural adults of all ages. Even in the smallest communities in Australia there is usually a primary school and invariably a fire or emergency services organisation. The learning that adults experience—simply by being responsibly involved in running a local primary school or a fire brigade along with sporting clubs and farmer-based organisations—becomes particularly critical. As the penalties for *not* learning have increased, particularly with the introduction of new information and communications technology (ICT) to all facets of work, leisure, family and community life, adults of all ages who are *not* learning through their connections as volunteers or participants within such organisations are at particular risk of being left behind in the rapidly changing world—particularly the world of work.

As the research will show, the key negative issue identified in this chapter is that it is men who have had least positive formal learning experiences— particularly at school—who are most at risk and are less likely to come to ACE or embrace any form of institutional, adult and community or formal learning. On the positive side, the opportunities and potential of learning informally over a lifetime through active participation and reciprocation within community-based voluntary organisations is huge.

No attempt is made to make a hard and fast distinction between formal and informal learning. As McGivney (1999b, p. 1) notes, it is difficult to make such a clear distinction 'as there is often some crossover between the two. The setting itself is not necessarily the defining element …'. The author concurs with McGivney's judgement (p. 1) that it is fallacious also 'to make a simple distinction between accredited programs which are considered to be formal and non-accredited programmes which are generally classified as informal', on the grounds that there is a diversity of content, teaching and learning styles in both. Though governments in Australia tend only to fund formally accredited vocational or university programs, the learning that actually occurs through universities, TAFE and ACE, is not the same as what is contained in the formally embedded curriculum or units of competency. For the purposes of consistency, the author has adopted McGivney's (1999b, pp. 1–2) definition of informal learning as 'Learning that takes place outside of a dedicated learning environment, which arises from the activities and interests of individuals or groups but which may not be recognised

as learning', as well as 'Non-course based but intentional learning activities … provided or facilitated in response to expressed interests and needs from a range of sectors and organisations'.

While the term ACE is used in this chapter to describe adult and community education, it is important to note that there is no national Australian ACE system and that the acronym ACE is neither widely understood nor recognised in Australia. Further, several States and Territories in Australia have no ACE sector, policy or funding (Golding, Davies, & Volkoff, 2001). Though many Australian rural towns have the equivalent of an 'ACE provider', the actual name of organisations rarely includes ACE and typically varies to include combinations of the terms learning, education, community, house, neighbourhood or centre. In some towns neighbourhood houses run alongside or instead of ACE providers and tend to cater more for the needs and interests of women. In reality, most rural ACE providers survive by providing resources and programs from a range of mainly government agencies and are therefore effectively (though often precariously) funded from a range of sources.

The increasing emphasis in my research and in this chapter is therefore on less structured learning that takes place after the completion of compulsory schooling. However it becomes evident from the research, as Schuller (2004, p. 9) notes in his study of the benefits of learning that 'schooling is a major influence on both subsequent learning', and the effects of initial schooling on people's motivation for learning can be long lasting. There is an argument coming out of the current research as the need for creating lifelong learners increases, that researchers in education might usefully spend less effort on analysing why a minority of people positively 'succeed' at school—and more effort looking at the long-term, debilitating impact of negative school experiences—for what appears from the emerging evidence, to be a majority of rural men.

Men had been identified, along with people living in rural areas as being under-represented adult learners (the Leigh Report, 1997, pp.154–6, cited in Beckett & Helme, 2000, pp. 16–17). Several reasons were cited for this: unlike women, men have gained fulfilment from work and now want to rest; men prefer outdoor activities; women are better at joining groups and networking; men are afraid to appear weak by not knowing things; adult learning centres are perceived as women's domains; and men don't respond to a structured learning environment.

From the outset it is important to acknowledge that the analysis of any group of adult learners, including men, who comprise 50 per cent of the adult population, cannot assume homogeneity. As Merrill and Alheit (2004, p. 154) note in their study of adult returners to learning, adult students are not a homogenous group 'as

they differ also by age, gender, class, ethnicity and mode of study'. It is also important to note that their chapter focuses deliberately on the learning undertaken by men in small rural towns in familiar local environment. In doing so, the analysis goes well beyond the idea of men formally learning as adult 'students', 'enrolled' in education 'providers'. It draws in part on insights from important and extensive recent research into informal learning (McGivney, 1999b) and into men who are, arguably, 'missing' from education and training (McGivney, 1999a), particularly in the United Kingdom.

It is important also to note the role gender segmentation already plays in the economic and vocational life of small rural communities in Australia—a factor that flows though the research findings as they relate to adult learning. While farm work has tended to be dominated by men there has been a tendency for the labour tasks to be divided, such that men have tended to do the work beyond the farm yard and women have traditionally done the books. With the advent of computers and the Internet, women have tended to 'go on line' first. They have also been more likely to reinvent themselves—sometimes through education and training, which includes ACE—to engage in paid vocational roles off-farm more so than have men. As in many families, women generally have tended to take more of an active interest in the learning undertaken by children and grandchildren than have men. Further, a surprisingly high proportion of the professional workforce (and also the 'learning leaders') in small rural towns have been women—in teaching, health, nursing and welfare professions in particular. The net result is that learning in its many forms has tended to become dominated by women: as workers, teachers, mothers and learners.

From the perspective of a child growing up in a country town, most of the teachers, learning mentors and role models are women. As in many developed, modern agricultural economies, for at least 30 years there have been limited options in small towns for professional employment of young people post-school. As a consequence, most young people who complete school move to education, training and employment in larger cities. There is a relatively lower number of 15 to 24 year olds in rural and remote Australia (Kilpatrick, Williamson, & Thrush, 1997). Of the ten regional study locations of Kilpatrick's (2000) national study of learning through VET, seven rural areas experienced inter-censal declines in youth population (1986–1998) of between 8 and 36 per cent combined with even greater increases in all but one region in the 65+ population between 15 and 54 per cent (Appendix 6, p. 13). Given this general and widespread general aging of rural populations and often static or declining rural town populations, 'there will need to be an emphasis on skill upgrading and updating, and retraining for the existing

workforce, as the economy restructures to meet the challenges of the 21ˢᵗ century' (Kilpatrick, 2000, p. 7).

Those men that remain in small towns tend to have farms or businesses to 'come back to', and in general have more limited levels of formal school or post school education than men and women who leave—or people, including professionals, para-professionals and tradespeople—who come from elsewhere to take up local jobs in town. In effect, men who stay in town and who do not undertake formal vocational upskilling tend not to be competitive in the new, and increasingly feminised world of work—particularly if they lack the now essential ICT skills.

Two research reports from the UK by McGivney (1999a, 1999b), about *Informal learning in the community* and *Men who are missing from education training* have been particularly seminal and useful in informing, guiding and validating the design and intent of the author's recent research into learning in and beyond ACE, and logically into men's learning. McGivney's (1999b) key findings in her research report on informal learning have been used as part of the design template for some of the author's recent research that is inclusive of informal learning. McGivney (pp. iv–v) identified that while informal learning is difficult to pin down conceptually, it 'plays a critical role in widening participation among people who are educationally, economically and socially disadvantaged'. Her research confirmed that informal learning 'can result in important benefits not only for the individual but for the family and for the community or society as a whole'. While it 'takes place in a huge variety of settings', McGivney (p. 20) identified the siting of learning in a familiar local environment' as 'extremely important, often more so than its actual focus' (p. v). Her research (p. 47) also noted that 'People often choose familiar, non-threatening or stereotypical learning activities' as a safe starting point that 'gives them the confidence to progress to something quite different'.

McGivney's (1999a) report on men excluded from education and training has been similarly useful and inspirational for a range of reasons quite apart from its academic rigour and clear evidence and findings. When questions of possible gender bias towards women in some adult learning contexts were originally raised in ACE and VET research contexts in Australia, the author was quietly but firmly advised to 'back off'. Much of the research in ACE has a strong feminist flavour, and the idea of a male publicly raising questions about gender equity for men were initially difficult. While the situation has changed somewhat with the two commissioned reports on VET and ACE now published, it is important to note that the Australian House of Representatives (2002) report into the education of boys

also experienced difficulties getting information and cooperation from a number of education stakeholders including researchers. What McGivney's (1999a) report did was clearly flag that what was showing up in research in Australia as a tendency for men not to 'come forward' to embrace new initiatives in adult and continuing learning was not isolated to Australia and could be the focus of serious academic inquiry.

McGivney (1999a), like the author, is at pains from the outset to stress the importance of creating and retaining educational pathways for women and recognising the disadvantages still endured by many women in education and work. As McGivney (1999a, pp. 1–2) notes in her Introduction, consistent with the McGivney (1999b) report, 'because adults may be missing from formal education does not imply that men (or women) who do not participate in formal, organised programs are not learners in the broad sense of the term. … Nor to imply that people who do not engage in organised learning programmes are any less talented, enterprising or resourceful than those who do. … It is, however a question of equity. If we have education and training programmes and institutions which are ostensibly open to all but which attract only certain segments of the population, that 'openness' is itself open to question. … [I]f we aspire to be a learning society with a culture of lifelong learning, the problem of unequal access to education and training opportunities needs to be addressed'.

McGivney's (1999a) research in the UK turned up a number of trends, some, but not all, have since been confirmed in Australian research. As in Australia, 'community-based adult education courses … continue to be dominated by women' (p.5), 'In higher education, the number of women students has also increased significantly' (p.6), 'There are clear differences between the sexes in their choice of subjects' (p.7). Unlike women, 'who tend more than men to engage in learning activities which are connected with self-development and which expand their interests and activities and lead to educational progression. Men appear to be more single-minded, focussed and practical in their motivation to learn, seeking to further specific goals and particular interests' (pp. 7–8). As is the tendency in Australia, McGivney (1999a, p. 8) also noted 'the greater tendency for men to be learning for reasons connected to employment', and the tendency for men to use VET and university as their main educational pathways to career and academic status, while women follow a wider range of learning routes to achieve greater societal and economic participation. They are more likely than men to be involved in non-vocational learning and far more likely than men to continue learning after age 40.

Of particular relevance to the most recent research in Australia (Golding, Harvey & Echter, 2004), Elsdon (1995), also in a UK context, identified a higher rate of women's involvement in generalist voluntary organisations. However, adults, particularly men with minimum school experience, were much more likely to be found in specialist organisations. Men's interests were found by Elsdon (1995, p. 44) to be 'more linear and focused, especially on practical activities'. Many men, particularly 'the long-term unemployed, manual workers, men with poor literacy and no or few qualifications' were found to be amongst those significantly under-represented in many forms of educational provision.

McGivney (1999a) also identified African and Caribbean men in the UK amongst the significantly under-represented. This chapter does not attempt to cover the similar, well known and significant disadvantages experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in mainstream education systems. While this includes Aboriginal men in education and training, VET tends to be the Indigenous sector of choice. Research by the author shows that with some local exceptions, Aboriginal Australians generally make little use of ACE in Australia as it is currently configured, though the need for appropriate adult and lifelong education provision remains huge. The author has elsewhere in his research (Golding & Pattison, 2004, pp. 113–115) flagged the need to separately consider and address the striking relationship between increasing Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage and decreasing accessibility to services/increasing remoteness. It is important to note that Indigenous Australians in Northern Territory, Queensland and South Australia in particular are concentrated close to remote towns and homelands and have objectively and significantly less access to TAFE (Golding & Pattison 2004, pp. 115–117). In these locations they arguably also have the greatest need for appropriate community-based adult education but have the least well developed ACE sector, providers, policies or funding. In many of the sites in which rural (as distinct from remote) research has been conducted in south-eastern Australia, Aboriginal Australians make up a very small proportion of the adult population and rarely access ACE.

The research on men learning in small towns draws heavily and deliberately on analyses of learning that move away from the traditional focus of attention '… on the mind of the individual learner and his/her accumulation of the valued information and abilities transmitted by a teaching adult' (Gregory, Long, & Volk, 2004, p. 9), towards sociocultural approaches '… that shift and broaden that focus to the learner's active appropriation of valued cultural practices and knowledge with a social context'. Theoretical approaches that consider fire service volunteers and football club members as learning in context through *communities of practice*

are more accommodating of learner experiences than approaches that regard adults and what they learn as an individual endeavour as students interact with content.

The field of research that probes literacy, particularly adult literacy from a sociocultural perspective, also provides important insights into what men are learning and why. There are tantalising insights from research into what Moll, Amanti, Neff and Gonzalez (1992, p. 133) call *funds of knowledge*: the 'historically accumulated and culturally developed of bodies of knowledge and skill essential for household and individual functioning and well-being' that help explain intergenerational accumulation and transmission of knowledge and skills through community organisations. This research also helps explain why educational achievement at school is so closely related to the educational achievement of the parent, and as Gregory, Long and Volk (2004, p. 22) point out, points to the importance of 'knowledge and skills transmission within a social matrix, a community of social networks based on reciprocity and *confianza* or mutual trust'.

Research in small towns that establishes the importance and value of learning in context, through organisational and family networks, links also to more recent literature on the relationship between learning, well-being and social capital (Schuller, Preston, Hammond, Brassett-Grundy, & Bynner, 2004). Schuller, Hammond and Preston's (2004, p. 192) three concluding points are particularly salient in the context of the current research: that (1) 'Learning has value at every age'; (2) 'Learning outcomes should be assessed within a framework which goes far beyond the acquisition of qualifications, and includes the learners' capacity to sustain and develop themselves and their communities across a range of domains. It follows that learning opportunities should be broad and diverse in content, mode and pedagogy, and driven by personal need and motivation more than top-down specification'; and importantly, (3) 'Huge costs are incurred when learning is absent'.

Other literature that informs the research comes, sometimes obliquely and at other times from the gaps in the literature on gender in education, couched largely in feminist discourse, and which typically presupposes combinations of universal female disadvantage and male hegemony in educational participation and outcomes. Some feminist analyses of educational theory, while acknowledging men's general privilege in terms of access and control to high status knowledge, educational routes, institutions and employment (Weiner, Arnot, & David, 1997), recognise that effects of current and future social change will be different for men and women in different positions in the social hierarchy and within different nation states.

Arnot (2002, p. 260) notes that 'previous transitions from school to work which were taken-for-granted aspects of the transfer from boyhood to manhood have been disrupted and young men are forced to contemplate an accelerating "diploma disease"'. Arnot predicts that media discourses of schools of the future that construct the 'future as female' will lead, in advanced economies, for a need to address a 'crisis in masculinity'. Arnot also notes (pp. 260–261) that other theorists predict, 'In an alienating social and economic climate, and indeed in a shifting gender climate, boys may celebrate hyper-masculine identities' as they '… cling on to traditional male roles, traditional family structures and local (territorial and community) identities'.

IMPLICATIONS OF RESEARCH FOR EDUCATION POLICY

The research introduced in chronological order below provides a snapshot of evidence and key findings that emerged primarily through the author's research, sometimes with others, over the decade from 1996. The emerging research helps to build up a pattern of research endeavour that increasingly and deliberately changes foci, methodologies and findings. The early research presupposes initial learning by young students enrolled in their first post-compulsory courses in formal and institutional settings without consideration of location or context. Later research looks at lifelong learning by older adults, particularly men, in and through ACE and informal community settings in particular rural locations. In its totality, the research is illustrative of the cumulative and derivative nature of research. It shows that insights and findings from one piece of research are all the more powerful when supported by an emerging body of related data, policies and discourses from elsewhere. It also illustrates how research can amplify, explore and sometimes negate prevailing education policies.

Evidence that important aspects of learning derive from contexts other than formal education, as summarised above (Schuller, Hammond, & Preston's 2004, p. 192 second point) have accumulated in a range of research projects over the past ten years. They were first apparent in a national study of generic skills in the context of credit transfer and the recognition of prior learning (Golding, Marginson, & Pascoe, 1996). In that research adult students were surveyed with experience of both university and vocational education and training (TAFE). They were asked in which sector or context (school, TAFE, higher education, work, home) they had experienced a major contribution to work-related skill development for twelve different generic skills including the eight Mayer key competencies. Overall, for this sample of adults with considerable, multi-sectoral

tertiary experience, informal workplace and home settings were perceived by respondents as making the major contribution to their key competencies (Golding, Marginson, & Pascoe, 1996, Tables 6 and 7, pp. 23–24). What was also striking, as an important aside, is the mismatch between where university and TAFE staff *perceived* that skill formation would generally take place and the contexts *attributed* to the learning of those skills. In effect, experienced tertiary educators surveyed greatly over-emphasised the role adult learners ascribed to skill formation through formal education, as compared to informal learning at work and at home.

To the mid-1990s TAFE specifically and VET generally were the largely neglected poor cousins of 'higher' education. ACE, as now, remained largely beyond the education policy radar as the 'Cinderella' sector. A national qualifications framework regarded university-based learning as 'higher' education. A separate qualifications stream was created for accredited, competency-based vocational training and training (VET). Only formal learning in school, university and VET programs (with what were presumed to be vocational intent and vocational outcomes) was supported by both national government policy and funding. The prevailing paradigm was that young people got their skills for a career of work by 'front-loading', that school students would gravitate universally upwards as suggested by the qualifications and sectoral hierarchy from school and then to VET or university and work.

A major study of two-way movement between university and TAFE (Golding, 1999) identified shortcomings in models of movement in education that had assumed a linear progression of adult learners from a lower to a higher post-compulsory sector. The study was the first to identify significantly stronger movement from university to the VET (TAFE) sector rather than had previously been assumed—from VET to university. It concluded that intersectoral movement is a complex, two-way phenomenon indicative of the need for extensive learning. It clearly demonstrated that learning, particularly post-initial learning post-school, is largely contingent on circumstance and context and indicative of considerable change in vocational and personal circumstances of individuals over a lifetime. The research was conducted in the wake of the 1991 economic recession and the considerable restructuring of school, VET, higher education and work that flowed from it during the decade that followed. It illustrated the high level of 'to and fro' between work, formal tertiary courses and sectors. It also established 'a conceptual framework for characterising and modelling post-secondary movement and recognition, in the context of changing recurrent education and training needs of people in and out of work' (Golding, 1999, p. ii).

To the mid-1990s national education policies had generally assumed that students would have one intention and one outcome that matched either an academic or vocational outcome. It further anticipated that the match between intentions and outcomes for individuals would be relatively congruent. Extensive longitudinal research into outcomes from vocational education and training (Golding & Volkoff, 1999) for a range of equity target groups revealed the very diverse intentions and outcomes of adult learners in VET—and the frequent lack of congruence between intentions and outcomes over the course of their training. It also illustrated the importance of learning for reasons other than for paid employment: for interest, to help children, to become engaged with the community, to change life direction.

Through interview it was possible in the research to identify a set of learner intentions and outcomes at different times over the course of the training. By interviewing students over several years, it was possible to identify a set of pathway types that included congruence or lack of congruence between intentions and outcomes. While the research revealed congruence between intention and outcomes for around half of learners surveyed, it identified less congruence for people categorised as having low skills. Of considerable relevance to the later research conducted in ACE contexts, the pathways travelled by ACE learners undertaking literacy and numeracy programs more frequently led to minimal outcomes.

The mid-1990 equity 'target groups' identified as under-represented in education (such as Indigenous Australians, people from non-English speaking backgrounds, with limited formal literacies or living in rural and remote areas) were taken to be relatively discrete and homogeneous. Disadvantage, however, was found from the research to act within and across groups of adult learners and across learning contexts (Golding & Volkoff, 1999) as well as to overlap and reinforce in particularly insidious ways for particular groups of adult learners. Disadvantage was shown as acting differentially by group—and cumulatively there is overlap as a consequence of multiple membership. In particular, most Indigenous Australians and adults with a disability were shown to experience particular relative disadvantage in terms of access to and outcomes from learning. Adults with low skills and/or who had experienced long periods of unemployment were also less likely to gain positive outcomes. While people in rural and remote areas as a whole were not seen as disadvantaged in terms of participation and outcomes from VET, particular subgroups such as Indigenous Australians in such areas were more affected by remoteness and lack of services than others.

The findings in the research that some women experience disadvantage at all phases in VET (access, participation, and outcomes) are important to acknowledge, in the context of arguments later in the chapter, about some men's disadvantage in ACE. Golding and Volkoff concluded (Volume 2, p. 229) that a lack of paid work is often a barrier to women's participation in VET, since it impacts on self-confidence, on direct and indirect financial cost of learning as well as on income foregone during VET participation. Further, women experience disadvantage at all phases in VET and are adversely affected by roles associated with parenting and childcare. Their disadvantage was found to be exacerbated by the gendered division of labour and gender segmentation in particular fields of study and professions as well as by susceptibility to low-paid, casual, part-time and insecure work in professions dominated by women.

Golding and Volkoff's (1999) study looked also at rural and isolated people in VET and found that while access to programs is typically more limited in such settings, the positive interactions experienced while learning provide a critical social and community function for adults in rural and remote communities. Frustrated by their inability to discriminate between regional, rural and remote locations in their study using an objective rural or remoteness typology they (p.253) recommended the development of standard national definitions of 'what is meant by urban, rural, regional, remote or isolated, based on nationally recognised criteria'. The Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA) introduced nationally during 1999 (ARIA, 2001) effectively provided the typology required and has been used in most subsequent research.

Despite these definitional problems, Golding and Volkoff (1999) identified more problems for learners in smaller, isolated localities, particularly where 'thin markets' in education limited program choice. It identified the cost of travel as well as distance, particularly for younger learners, as a major barrier to participation. Consistent with later research findings, it also concluded (Volume 2, p. 250) that 'Rural and isolated learners, particularly Indigenous people, were susceptible to early withdrawal from school programs and subsequent early commencement in VET programs'. In terms of gender, it concluded that 'The opportunities of secure, well paid work for rural and isolated women after VET were generally more limited than for men in a smaller number of male dominated industry areas. Those learners who were older, male and less educated were less likely to achieve job-related outcomes'. The research, as a precursor to the work that would follow, also concluded that:

> … voluntary community involvement after VET was an important outlet for many
> rural people, parallel to or in place of, paid work. It was also a significant and

> valuable activity which helped sustain social and community capital. VET programs
> have a criticalsocial and community function in rural and remote communities.
> *(Golding & Volkoff, 1999, p. 250)*

Research was pointing to a disjuncture between adult and vocational learning as conceived in national VET frameworks and how it actually occurs in regional Australia. This disjuncture became the focus for a major study of VET in ten diverse areas across regional Australia that the author contributed to (CRLRA, 2000; Kilpatrick, 2000). The study showed, amongst its diverse findings, that 'Learning is highly valued, training and education are not' (CRLRA, 2000, p. 119). It provided evidence that while work is assumed by national VET authorities 'to be available, single-industry oriented, full time and permanent. This is not the case in regional Australia' (CRLRA, 2000, p. 118). This finding had important implications for a national 'one size fits all' training system based on universal national vocational competencies. While VET had been conceived as having immediate single use in particular industries, the CRLRA research showed that VET has multiple uses spread over time, that include social and community as well as economic purposes. It identified the multiple outcomes of VET learning other than employment, including 'health, intergenerational activity, community and public service' (p. 118).

By 2000 some winds of change were blowing through the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA), the national body responsible for VET until its demise in 2005. As Dreise and Golding (1999, p. 9) noted from an Indigenous VET policy perspective, lifelong learning and social capital were:

> … formally acknowledged as desirable by ANTA. Moira Scollay, CEO of ANTA
> noted in a keynote speech to TAFE Directors that (March 1999) ANTA was in an
> ideal position to provide a dynamic and vibrant approach to lifelong learning and
> skill acquisition. Scollay cited the UNESCO Delors Report [Delors 1996], which
> recognised that education is at the heart of both personal and community
> development. The Delors report, like ATSIPTAC, is concerned about a broad
> concept of education that is pursued throughout life, and which is flexible, diverse,
> and available at different times and places.

By 2000 research into social capital was beginning to inform studies of education. Falk, Golding and Balatti's (2000) study of social capital in ACE provided new evidence of the critical importance of providing opportunities for adults to learn through networks and to build social capital in communities. It identified the important web of relationships between adult learners, ACE

providers and the communities in which they are embedded. Based in Victoria and on an analysis of narratives collected in ten diverse ACE sites, the study set out to examine ACE learning through a social capital 'lens'. In effect, it looked for evidence of social capital—networks, trust and reciprocity—in the process of learner transformation. One of its key findings was that 'building social capital is not an incidental by-product of the way ACE providers operate. Building social capital is the modus operandi of the sector' (p. v). Falk, Golding and Balatti observed that while learning in many forms—lifelong, transformational, skills-based, informal, self-directed, workplace, community—typically takes place in ACE, 'learning' is not often used to name what has happened' (p. xii). As McGivney (1999b, p. vii) had identified, '"onward and upward" progression to structured formal learning was [mostly] unplanned and unanticipated'. As Falk, Balatti and Golding (2000, p. xii) concluded, adult and community learning does not always come from enrolment in a 'course' but 'from exposure to a multitude of experiences and points of view, and the making of new connections between them'.

Having grazed fortuitously into ACE, it became obvious that it was very much a women's paddock. As Golding, Davies and Volkoff (2001) remarked in their consolidation of Australian ACE research in the decade to 2000, ACE, where it exists in Australia, is profoundly oriented to the educational needs of women. One of the foci in their analysis of the research literature was user-groups in ACE. They concluded, on the basis of consistent data showing at most a ratio of one male to every three females in ACE, 'Most national and State ACE research confirms that women clearly outnumber men as learners and workers in ACE. This phenomenon is historic and ongoing' (p. 68), and further, that 'ACE is profoundly oriented to the educational needs of women' (p. 69). Most of the research literature on gender in ACE was found to be underpinned and informed by women's and feminist perspectives and learning pedagogies. There was no evidence of research into men.

On the basis of evidence in a subsequent major study of 20 small and relatively remote towns in Victoria with and without ACE provision, Golding and Rogers (2001) found that women dominate adult and community learning in small rural and remote towns. They identified ample scope for existing ACE providers in small and remote towns to meet the different needs of men as well as to develop better networks with organisations that attract and target male learners. These findings were amplified in detail in Golding and Rogers (2001, pp. 19–20) as below:

- The attitudes and skills necessary for this 'new world' of work, enterprise and community have tended to fall increasingly to women: as learning leaders, networkers and learners. Women have been better placed through adult education networks to embrace widespread proliferation of computers in workplaces, and more recently the Internet.

- Most [Adult, Community and Further Education] providers in small towns are run, staffed and networked primarily by women. Most have a rich history of women's involvement through patronage, management and volunteerism. The program profiles are typically oriented to women's needs. The learning environments are typically shaped in ways which are overtly inclusive of women and which promote connection to community through learning.

- However, there is evidence from this research that as a consequence, men in small and remote towns are much less likely to become involved in ACFEB-funded adult learning. The Statewide ACE participation data show women outnumber men in all ACFE regions by a factor of between two and four[1]. It can be argued that men tend, in effect, to be excluded from ACE and learning networks in ways not dissimilar to the ways in which TAFE has typically tended to cater for men and exclude women.

- The implications of female domination of ACE go beyond the likely gender-based exclusion from opportunities for local lifelong learning in small and remote communities. The question needs to be asked as to what role models and messages mainly female adult learning environments provide to local young people through parents and adults, particularly in the relative absence of other adult learning organisations overtly inclusive of males. It is important to note that most organisations in small towns which incorporate and embrace adult male learning are those devoted to sport and emergency services such as [State Emergency Services] and [Country Fire Authority] and further, that these organisations are typically very poorly networked to existing learning organisations.

- There are exceptions. Situations where men are more directly or collaboratively involved in learning organisations as managers, teachers or as committee members, male involvement in, and attitudes to, learning are qualitatively different. In some recently created learning organisations, such as those structured around computer-based networking initiatives funded by State and Federal governments gender exclusion appears to be less of an issue.

The report concluded that:

> New incentives are necessary to increase the skills, diversity and capacity of learning organisation committees, to actively encourage male involvement in ACE at all levels and to improve the skill and employment base of remote ACE staff and providers, particularly through professional development offered locally and cross sectorally *(p. 6).*

Having clearly identified the bias towards women as learners and workers in ACE as well as ACE research to 2002, the author sought to undertake research that would look closely *not* at why men were not in learning in ACE but in a site where men actually *were* learning. Hayes, Golding and Harvey's (2004) major Australian study of learning though rural and remote fire and emergency services organisations showed that they are important community locations for adult learning, particularly for men. The research was based in 20 small and objectively remote towns, selected by ARIA in five southern Australian States. It involved a survey and extensive interviews in both Fire/SES as well as conventional ACE-type organisations. It was underpinned in part by government perceptions of 'literacy problems' amongst public safety volunteers who were being increasingly required, by changing formalisation and national accreditation of training, to engage in more formal training and assessment. At the time of the study in 2003 there were around 400,000 volunteers, mostly men, in fire and emergency services in Australia.

Hayes, Golding and Harvey's (2004) research identified that 85 per cent of volunteers in these small and remote towns were men. It also confirmed that there were as many fire organisations as primary schools extending to the remotest parts of Australia in which adults were regularly meeting, practicing and receiving increasingly accredited training. Despite being widespread and having a long culture of training and a high training frequency, few people consciously regarded these public safety organisations as adult learning organisations. Their research confirmed a broader interest in learning amongst fire and emergency service volunteers that goes beyond industry competencies, and that: This interest remains relatively untapped for a group of learners that is not otherwise measured in conventional adult learning data and are often (wrongly) regarded as unreachable through existing adult education organisations. While in some small towns fire and emergency service organisations are the only or most important site for accredited training, they are not currently regarded by most local people, including their members, as learning organisations. (p. 36)

As had been anticipated, volunteers in these organisations were also:

> … unlikely to be otherwise involved in formal or non-formal learning, though many
> learn informally. In general, their knowledge of existing adult learning organisations
> is very limited, even where they exist locally. *(p. 36)*

From a literacy perspective, the research confirmed the findings of Bull and Anstey (1995, p. 9) that in many rural communities literacy, as it is traditionally defined, was seen more as women's work. 'Conversely, men generally saw literacy in more functional terms in order to complete tasks or augment work.'

As in the CRLRA (2000) and Golding and Rogers (2001) research, network diagrams were used as part of the research to identify the inter-relationships between learning organisations. These networks indicated the very poor linkages and mutual recognition of learning between service-oriented, community-based 'surrogate' learning organisations such as fire and emergency services on one hand, and ACE providers with 'learning' in their mission (and often their organisational title) on the other.

What this research highlighted was that hundreds of thousands of Australian people in rural and remote towns, mainly men, were engaged in intensive and extensive local training and practice for community benefit that was not generally recognised as learning. While many of the specialist emergency skills they were acquiring would rarely (if ever) be employed, the direct and indirect benefits of the learning experiences were shown from the research to be extensive—in employment, business, family, personal, and community life. In particular, volunteers who meet and train regularly for a common purpose:

> …develop high levels of bonding social capital—trust, reciprocity, networks within
> their organisational structure. These are essential in providing a quick and coherent
> response to local community emergencies and, when required, to distant major
> emergencies. *(p. 37)*

One important finding was that fire and emergency service volunteers have a clear preference for training (learning) that is practical and hands-on, particularly for older men with lower levels of formal schooling and limited post-school qualifications. As McGivney's (1999b) research predicted, *where* the training takes place is also critical. 'Very few volunteers would feel comfortable training in a conventional formal classroom setting, particularly in a setting beyond their own organisation, even if it is close and accessible' (Hayes, Golding & Harvey, 2004, p. 36).

A particular value of the survey used as part of this research was that it provided a mechanism for objectively separating out gender and also age as a

significant[2] variable for this large national sample of volunteers from small and remote towns. Men were found to be significantly less likely than women to have an ability to use computers to find information (but with significantly better map skills), and significantly more likely to have been in the organisation for many years and also hold leadership positions. Older volunteers were found to be significantly less likely to have stayed on at school or to be confident ICT users, and in more remote localities had significantly less opportunities for learning in their own communities.

Though inequitable access to adult and vocational learning for adults in rural and objectively remote areas of Australia as a consequence of remoteness to services and facilities was perhaps self-evident, it had not been researched in ways that objectified accessibility to services and remoteness. Many researchers—and even national governments—had wrongly assumed that all locations beyond capital cities could be classified as rural and that inclusion of regional cities in research samples would give a sufficient window into issues of rural accessibility to learning.

Golding and Pattison (2004) undertook a national desk study, in part using the relatively new Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA), 2001 VET data and 2000 Indigenous disadvantage data to contribute to a book on research readings on equity in VET in Australia. They argued a case for factoring in location based on accessibility to services as part of VET policy and provision and also accounting for known socio-economic disadvantage by location. Previous national data on regional differences had been based on metrocentric assumptions and categorisations that regarded most areas beyond capital cities as rural and which regarded all 'remote' locations as equally remote. They argued a case for using measures such as ARIA to address known inaccessibility to publicly-funded adult and vocational learning (including TAFE) in rural and remote locations, particularly remote Indigenous communities known to be objectively very remote and highly disadvantaged.

MOST RECENT RESEARCH INTO MEN'S LEARNING

Golding's most recent research has further explored evidence of gender segmentation of adult learning in small and objectively remote Australian communities. It provided new evidence that males in many small and remote communities are in need of learning spaces that meet their particular and different needs. It argued that while the ACE participation and research data indicated men's relative absence from ACE:

> … men are nonetheless learning on the farm and in businesses, they are particularly learning 'by doing'. However, the learning men do tends to be less long-term, strategic or discretionary. Typically men learn what *has* to be learned just in time for a particular practical purpose. … In essence, while men's participation in VET in quantitative terms is not radically different from that of women's, men's learning in VET tends to 'lack the *quality of engagement* (or perhaps immersion) in the community' (see Beckett & Helme, 2001, p. 13, their emphasis). *(Golding, 2004, p. 230)*

Questions posed about gender segmentation and its effects on adult learning (Golding, 2004, pp. 236–237) became the foundation of subsequent research by Golding, Harvey and Echter (2004). It confirmed that men experience important and valued learning through their experience as volunteers and participants in community organisations more so than as 'students' in ACE. Their research was framed in the wake of the House of Representatives (2002, p. 62) report into the education of boys that included the note[3] that:

> A number of assumptions developed during two decades of activity in girls' education have been uncritically carried forward into the renamed gender strategies. While it may not be fashionable to argue male disadvantage, it is important to recognise the extent to which boys and men in small and remote towns are particularly disengaged from learning and therefore disengaged.

A citation from Baker (1996, p. 32), based on UK research, provided part of the expanding rationale for this subsequent study focusing only on men.

While it is easy to applaud the demise of male domination in the workplace—an outcome certainly overdue—it is nevertheless still crucial to acknowledge the profound effect such a change has on men's sense of themselves. It cannot be right that so many men are left feeling confused, angry; dispossessed and powerless without that experience being publicly acknowledged and discussed.

The research, a ten-town, survey-based study of learning by adult males in small rural Victorian towns (Golding, Harvey, & Echter, 2004), explored the observed under-representation of rural men (ARIA 1.7 to 3.7) in adult and community education as broadly defined. It was therefore deliberately inclusive of men's learning both in *and beyond* narrowly defined ACE 'providers' funded by governments. The survey was specifically directed to men (not at school) who had accessed local ACE programs or services in the previous twelve months or who were involved as participants and volunteers in four other community-based organisations.

These included four other surrogate learning organisation 'types': the local football club, landcare organisation, senior citizens club and the fire brigade. The

intention of surveying men beyond ACE was to find out what learning men were currently doing or would do; what their learning preferences, attitudes and experiences were, and how learning in ACE might be configured to better meet men's particular learning interests and preferences. In their exploration of significant differences between sub-groups of men, Golding, Harvey and Echter (2004) revealed that previous formal education experiences, at and post-school, were relatively limited for most rural men.

Golding, Harvey and Echter (2004) provided strong and disturbing new evidence of the ongoing and debilitating effects of negative experiences at school on involvement in lifelong learning and community activity for men of all ages. Being an active part of a community organisation was shown to play a key role in men's current learning and provide critical opportunities for further and lifelong learning in ways that ACE apparently struggles to provide. Though relatively few men 'really enjoyed' learning at school and one in five were limited in their ability to engage in learning by their limited literacy skills, most men shared a clear desire to learn for a wide range of purposes in less formal, practical, group settings.

Consistent with the conclusions in McGivney's (1999a) study, most men wanted any extra learning delivered locally—preferably through their own organisations and generally not through ACE. Overall, most men expressed a keen desire to learn by being actively *involved in an activity* rather than passively learning 'about' something. Golding, Harvey and Echter's research threw new light on the critical and positive role played by active and frequent involvement in volunteer community activity through service and leisure organisations in small rural towns. It highlighted the current problems ACE has attracting men as learners—despite the value they clearly placed on learning—and the expressed needs of men of all ages to keep learning. Four out of ten men did not know enough about the local ACE provider to use it, and one in five did not feel comfortable going there.

The cross-organisational survey design allowed, for the first time, exploration, and comparison of a number of significant differences of learning-related variables by type of organisation in which men were participants. Men surveyed in the five organisation types learnt in significantly differently ways. In general, learning as a consequence of participation within and through non-ACE service and leisure organisations was more effective for men than learning through adult and community education (ACE).

On most learning-related criteria, fire, football and senior citizens organisations in particular fulfilled a number of critical, learning-related roles for

men who were actively involved in those organisations. Learning through regular and active community participation is more effective and more closely matched to men's learning preferences than learning through a local ACE provider—even for men who are already users of ACE.

Fire and senior citizens organisations provided men with significantly more opportunities than the local ACE provider for learning in modes preferred by men: through regular practice, by taking on responsibility through the organisation and for one-on-one learning. As Hayes, Golding and Harvey (2004) had anticipated, fire organisations also provided significantly more opportunities for accredited learning through the organisation than ACE provides for men to learn through special interest courses.

Nevertheless local ACE providers facilitated significantly more opportunities to learn through the Internet than did the other organisations. For many men who needed Internet skills, particularly those involved in senior citizens and landcare organisations, there remained large gaps between the importance of Internet skills and self rating of those skills, that ACE does not currently meet. Of the organisations surveyed, ACE users were significantly more likely to agree that the small size of the organisation made their learning easier, but were significantly more likely to regard ACE as a mainly 'women's organisation'.

Men involved in organisations other than ACE were significantly more involved as participants and also in leadership roles in those organisations than men who participated in ACE. They were also more satisfied that their level of skill allowed them to take an active part in their organisation and significantly less likely than ACE users to regard opportunities to learn elsewhere in their communities as limited. Non-ACE organisation participants were significantly more likely than ACE participants were to value the importance of skills to take responsible positions in community organisations. Most men who did not use the local ACE provider nevertheless regarded it as a valuable resource and around nine out of ten would use it any time if they really needed it.

A number of factors affected men's attitudes to and participation in learning. Men in *smaller* rural towns were significantly more active participants in their organisation's activities than in larger towns. They were also more likely to regard opportunities to learn elsewhere in the community as limited, and more likely to regard the local ACE provider as a useful place to do a course. Men in *remoter* towns showed somewhat similar trends to those in smaller towns, but importantly, were around one half as likely to agree (only 16 per cent in remoter towns agreed) that they 'really enjoyed learning at school' than men in the less remote towns.

There is evidence of a clear link between knowledge about learning and community involvement. Men who had been involved in organisations for more than ten years were significantly more active and interested learners on a whole range of adult learning criteria, but being older, had more limited computer and internet skills and held relatively negative attitudes towards the local ACE provider.

Men who knew enough about the local ACE provider to use it were significantly more involved in their own organisation's activities and more aware of the opportunities to learn through those organisations. Men who *don't* know enough about the local ACE provider to use it were significantly more satisfied with their current skill levels and less likely to take part in learning—even through their own organisation. Men with a limited knowledge of the local ACE provider were much more likely to feel uncomfortable using the local ACE provider. They were also around twice as likely to be older, not know other people using the provider and regard it as a women's space—than men with a good working knowledge of ACE.

For the small number of towns surveyed, the position of the ACE provider in town appeared to affect men's attitudes to the provider. Around twice as many men in towns where the provider was shopfront did not feel comfortable going there as men where the ACE provider was not shopfront.

Age was a significant intervening variable in terms of men's attitudes to and involvement in learning generally, and to ACE in particular. Younger men had significantly higher Internet and computer skills, were much less comfortable about going to the local ACE provider and were more likely to regard it as a 'women's space'. Around six out of ten men of age 24 years or younger did know enough about the local ACE provider to use it and over one half considered it did not currently offer anything they needed to learn. At the other extreme, men over 55 years had more negative and limited experiences of formal learning and ICT and were also unlikely to access ACE.

The survey provided strong and disturbing evidence of the ongoing and debilitating effects of negative experiences at school on involvement in lifelong learning and community activity for men of all ages. On a large number of criteria, men who did not 'really enjoy learning at school' not only had significantly less positive attitudes to adult learning, they were also much less actively involved in community organisations. They participated significantly less frequently, were less interested in more learning, regarded public speaking skills less highly and rated their computer skills lower. Men who did not enjoy school learning were significantly less likely to be active or hold leadership roles in organisations or to

have recently been involved in formal learning programs. In order for them to participate in ACE, courses would need to be shorter and their general attitude that they are 'too old' as adults to be involved in learning would also need to be addressed.

Attitudes toward school—and many other learning-related criteria—were found to be significantly related to completion of higher year levels at school. Men who left school earlier (particularly older men) had significantly lower Internet skills. These differences flowed through into significant differences in men's post-school education. Men with any form of education or training completed post-school had significantly more opportunities for learning through their community involvement than men with no formal post-school experience. Men with limited post-school education completions also had significantly lower internet skills, were more likely to regard their age as a barrier to learning and to be attracted by learning opportunities in smaller organisations.

MESSAGES FOR ADULT LEARNING POLICY AND PRACTICE

All five organisations surveyed in Golding, Harvey and Echter's (2004) research played critical roles as learning organisations for men in small rural towns. For the men surveyed, adult and community education's (ACE's) importance as a learning organisation was different from but significantly less valuable than for the four other community organisations surveyed.

The research confirms the critical and positive role played by active and frequent involvement in volunteer community activity through service and leisure organisations. It highlights the current problems ACE has attracting men as learners—despite the value they clearly place on learning and the expressed needs of men of all ages to keep learning. While around 90 per cent of men value learning in some form, ACE falls well short of providing opportunities to meet the expressed learning needs of the majority of rural men in small rural towns.

Overall, most men express a keen desire to learn by being actively involved in an activity rather than passively learning 'about' something. Men particularly value learning that allows them to stay fit, healthy and safe, but also to take on responsible positions in community organisations including speaking skills and interpersonal communication. Men's preferences are for learning through practical, hands-on experiences, by doing, and wherever possible, in outdoor settings. A minority of rural men prefer to learn in a classroom setting and for four out of ten men, learning from books, via the computer or the Internet are also inappropriate.

Two-thirds of men who are interested in more learning want the learning facilitated in a local situation where the organisation that they are already part of normally meets. Given that a significant minority of men express an aversion to the local ACE provider as a place essentially for women, the provision of a choice for men to learn in contexts and settings than in an ACE provider or classroom— as it is currently typically configured—would appear to be more appropriate.

Men generally, and particularly younger men, have a limited knowledge of the local ACE provider. Around one in four men don't know enough about the local ACE provider to use it, and those who do use it appear only marginally attached to the organisation. In order to better meet the needs of men, there is an expressed request, from around three-quarters of men, for ACE to provide more practical, hands-on learning and more programs specifically for them. Around six out of ten men requested more flexible opening hours and for more males to be involved as ACE teachers or on the ACE committee.

The most negative attitudes towards adult learning, including towards ACE, come from men whose previous experiences of school or formal learning are limited or negative. While younger men have a significantly better grasp of ICT skills, they have fewer opportunities to learn through leadership roles in organisations and more negative perceptions of ACE.

If local rural ACE providers are to more effectively meet rural men's learning needs as expressed through the most recent research, they may need to create more learning situations in which men are already 'at home'—in fire or emergency service organisations, in sporting clubs or via practical, hands-on activity. The different strands of research over the decade confirm the need for ACE providers in these settings to recognise and break down the perceived and persistent barriers that a lack of enjoyment and limited early experiences of learning at (and also beyond) school can and do create for many men over a lifetime.

Another strong theme in the research is that changes in ICT pose new and bigger barriers particularly for older men who have limited access to new technologies through work or through community involvement as volunteers. Men of all ages, particularly younger rural men with higher levels of ICT skills, tend to have more dismissive, uninformed or negative attitudes towards ACE. Though ACE is recognised an important potential resource by most men, four out of ten men don't know enough about the local ACE provider to use it, and one in five men don't feel comfortable going there.

In summary, being an active member of a community organisation plays a key role in men's learning and provides critical opportunities for further learning. Though relatively few men 'really enjoyed' learning at school and around one in

five men are limited in their ability to engage in learning by their limited literacy skills, most claim and share a desire to learn. However most men express a clear preference for learning in less formal, practical, group settings. Most men favour learning delivered locally—preferably through their own organisation, and generally not through the local ACE providers in rural towns—as they are currently configured.

In conclusion, a 'crisis' arguably experienced by men learning in small rural towns is not only experienced by men and is not the end of the problem or the story. The research and its investigations of gender segmentation in adult learning in small town settings have important potential implications for adult and vocational education learning practice in rural communities generally, particularly for men's learning through ACE and through active community involvement. Further research is necessary to more clearly identify the relationship between adult male attitudes to learning and preferences as well as the attitudes towards learning of the next generation of boys. It will be important to establish whether the findings clearly demonstrated for rural men in small Australian towns do (or do not) transfer to other locations and other organisations. It would also be useful to know how learning through involvement by female volunteers compares or contrasts with men's involvement.

A range of grass-roots initiatives, typically called 'men's sheds', are currently working ahead of national research and policy and creating alternative spaces specifically for men to interact, support each other in crisis and also to learn. Some of the momentum for creating such sites comes not from a community education but from the men's movement and from family and community service perspectives—particularly from men experiencing family law disputes. As for some women, some men who perceive inequitable treatment as parents or who feel damaged after failed relationships need sites and services away from home supported and surrounded by other men where they can feel valued, recover and relearn.

A Commonwealth Department of Family Services report (2002) found a high level of un-met demand for services targeted specifically for men, noting that men are open to skills development and relationship support, provided that the approach is male-friendly and non-judgemental. A service that is not identified as being specifically for men is unlikely to attract a large number of men.

Research from Human Services (Murray, 2004) suggests that if men have access to male staff, perceive a service to have an honest and supportive attitude, not be portrayed using a deficit model as 'the problem' and not have services delivered in a physical environment primarily for the use of women and children,

they are more likely to attend. Such research might be particularly pertinent in
some adult education providers on each of these grounds if they are to cater better
for the learning needs and the wider need for well being of a wider range of men.

NOTES

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[1] 1998 data: see ACFE 1999.
[2] All significances reported in this and other research are based on a Chi square test of
   independence where $p<0.05$ is taken to be significant.
[3] R. Fletcher, Submission no.166, p.4, cited on p.62.

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