

# 55 (AT LEAST) AND NOT OUT OF THE LEARNING GAME: OLDER REGIONAL STUDENTS

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores older students' perceptions of formal, non-formal and informal learning in regional South Australia. Drawing on earlier studies as well as a continuing one, it compares: the study motivations of students aged 55 and older enrolled formally in university undergraduate programs; the learning motivations of University of the Third Age (U3A) members enrolled in various non-formal classes; and the learning of older people in other community organisations.

Research focusing on these different groups of older learners was conducted via anonymous surveys. Members of a particular U3A branch, sponsored by the regional university campus at which it meets, took part some years ago in a study that investigated the importance attributed by them to continued learning and the impact on them of their U3A participation. Social as well as educational benefits were identified. In a later study investigating the reciprocal contributions of U3A and university campus, U3A members were also asked about their possible interest in undertaking formal university study, while university staff were asked how they thought these older students would fit in as enrolled undergraduate students. More recently, an online survey allowed university students of more mature years to provide an insight into their higher education experiences, both highlights and challenges, and the contributions that they were able to make to their classes from their life experience.

The main focus of this paper draws on data from an ongoing survey of past, present and potential links between the university campus and local organisations with an older membership. It reveals how these age-mates of the older participants in the earlier studies regard the possibility of formal university study for themselves.

The article argues that in a just, inclusive society all groups within it, including older people resident in more remote areas, should have access to lifelong learning opportunities, including both non-formal continuing education and formal higher education.

## INTRODUCTION

Learning takes many forms and occurs in many contexts. Lifelong learning, if it is to deserve the name, should encompass all age cohorts. Early education should include fostering children's natural curiosity and interest to learn new things. As they progress through their schooling and beyond, individuals continue to acquire the skills to keep on learning. Each stage of life brings with it different needs for learning in order to adapt to the changes of a rapidly changing society and workplace, and the changing needs and interests that are part of individuals' ever-developing, ever-changing relationships with each other and their environment. It might be argued that lifelong learning, as a response to a variety of needs – careers, self-actualisation, coping with change – is a part of our being human.

This article relates some broad classifications of types of learning to the learning experienced by older regional citizens. Findings of a number of small research projects described here show how learning, both within and outside of an institutional context, is perceived by older learners. The article goes on to consider briefly ways in which the learning needs of older people living in remote areas might be met, and needs for further research.

## LEARNING: FORMAL, NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL

Learning may be classed as formal, non-formal or informal. This provides a conceptual framework for the research considered by this paper. As well as within educational institutions, learning occurs at work, at home and at leisure (Halliday-Wynes & Beddie, 2009).

*Formal learning*: generally this term is used to apply to learning that is catered for in accredited, formally assessed programs, such as those provided by an educational institution, and usually having the goal of a recognised qualification. In the contexts described in this paper, it refers to learning as part of university programs, with courses assessed either by assignments or examination or a combination of both. The definition used here diverges from distinctions made a quarter of a century ago by Dib (1988), who classified learning by correspondence or distance learning as non-formal. Today, developments around 'flexible learning' and the frequent use of 'blended learning' in higher education break down such a distinction between formal classes in a lecture room and a dispersed class using various e-learning technologies and a variety of learning spaces, both physical and virtual (Milne, 2011). In addition, the widespread shift towards a student-centred learning paradigm has superseded Dib's (1988) references to formal learning being teacher- or institution-centred.

*Non-formal learning* takes place in an organised way, but generally lacks formal assessment. This is an appropriate description for the organised learning opportunities provided by the University of the Third Age (U3A), which caters for the ongoing learning needs of active retired (or semi-retired) people, and operates in many countries, spreading from its origins in France in 1972 (Formosa, 2012). In North America, Lifelong Learning Institutes and Elderhostel play a similar role (Findsen & Formosa, 2011). Sessions with an intentional learning component arranged by other organisations could come under the non-formal learning banner; Country Women's Association craft teaching sessions provide one example. Within a higher education context, the term could describe learning activities that are part of a mentoring program (e.g. students mentoring their peers), or optional study skills sessions. Depending upon the way in which they are conducted, conferences, and workshops and seminars also belong under this heading.

*Informal learning* may be regarded as "almost synonymous with everyday living. To live is to learn!" (Findsen & Formosa, 2011, p. 24). Such learning occurs in conjunction with both formal and non-formal learning – in conversations with classmates after class, for example. It "includes the underlying learning in the classroom that is usually incidental, implicit, unconscious and conversational" (G. Lear, personal communication, 1 October 2012). It also includes the learning experiences of those engaged in self-directed, solitary activities, such as reading, working on hobbies, and viewing television. Group activities in various community organisations often have opportunities for much informal learning through sharing skills and experiences and following others' examples (for example, in craft or sporting activities). Neighbourhood or community houses or community learning centres provide opportunities for those who find in them an environment conducive to learning (Association of Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres, 2012). Learning was a source of satisfaction for the leisure group participants of a Tasmanian study, who valued the flexibility and acceptance they experienced (MacKean & Abbott-Chapman, 2011). Men's sheds have been identified as a source of much informal learning, not only associated with woodworking and other practical activities, but also providing an opportunity for the dissemination of information on health and other issues (Misan, 2008). Some have used the term "authentic learning" to describe the learning that comes from real-life experiences (Lombardi, 2007), or "natural learning" (Scevak & Cantwell, 2007, p. 133, citing Bowden & Marton, 2003). However, educators increasingly seek to incorporate such experiences into formal education (Mantei & Kervin, 2009).

These types of learning are not mutually exclusive. For example, formal learning contexts may have associated with them non-formal or informal elements. There may be a progression from informal learning, through a desire for deeper understanding, to a more structured engagement with an area of learning. Eisen (1998, cited by Findsen & Formosa, 2011) has categorised older adults' learning activities according to whether they are to gain credentials, or based on convenience, or an opportunity for socialisation or for personal interest. Each of these may vary as to how learner-directed or teacher-directed they are. Perhaps we should think of a continuum from formal to

informal, with each type able to admit elements of the other, or at various times being more or less formal or informal; there are always opportunities for crossing such boundaries as may exist.

All of these forms of learning can be related to the experiential learning cycle described by Kolb, who holds that effective learning takes place when learners move from a stage of concrete experience to reflecting on that experience, then drawing conclusions (abstract conceptualisation) based on their reflection and possibly others' ideas, and finally applying and testing what they have learned (active experimentation), before going on to select new learning experiences (Svinicki & Dixon, 1987). Depending on the learning activity and context, some stages in the cycle may receive more emphasis than others.

## OLDER PEOPLE AND LEARNING

In our ageing society, older people increasingly may need or choose to continue in paid employment or return to it after retirement. The Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency (2012) has identified increasing participation in the work force by mature-aged people, including over half of people aged 60-64, up from one third in 1991; there has been a further increase over the same period in participation by people of 65 and over from 7% to 12% (p. 14). Those who think that such people may have not very many years left in the workforce, would do well to consider examples that show that this cannot be taken for granted (Persch, 2011). The flood of feedback on a talkback radio program on returning to study included many comments from people who had begun new careers through university study in their fifties or older (Tait & Browning, 2012). A further example from our university is a former teacher who studied to become a nurse in her sixties and then, in her seventies, went to Africa to take on a leadership role in a hospital (University of South Australia, 2012).

A research report from Australia's National Vocational Education and Training Research Program (Coelli, Tabasso, & Zakirova, 2012) showed that there was more likelihood of older people being engaged in vocational education and training than university study (p. 9). While the formal education participation rate of 55-64 year-olds was only 2-3% (Coelli, Tabasso, & Zakirova, 2012, p. 9), those with more prior education were more likely to seek enrolment (p. 9). In the United Kingdom in 2012 the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education survey on adult participation in learning, which uses a broad definition of learning, also noted the influence of prior education, as well as socioeconomic class and employment status, and that participation in learning (of all types) declined from 29% for the 55-64-year-olds to 16% for those aged 65-74 and 7% for those aged 75+ (as cited in Aldridge & Hughes, 2012, pp. 2-3).

Benefits of learning for health and wellbeing accrue not only from acquiring the knowledge necessary for looking after oneself, but also from the cognitive workout provided, and the social interaction that comes from learning in a group with shared interests. Benefits relate to both physical and mental health and wellbeing (National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre [NSPAC], 2010). Building up cognitive reserve through educational pursuits, work and leisure activities has been shown to have a beneficial effect (Stern, 2006; Roe, Xiong, Miller, & Morris, 2007). According to Valenzuela and Sachdev (2009), "Cognitive exercise training in healthy older individuals produces strong and persistent protective effects on longitudinal neuropsychological performance" (p. 179). Recent research on neuroplasticity confirms that brain development is not fixed, and continued learning is not only possible but also assists in that development (Doidge, 2012). Certainly, many older people have demonstrated their ability to perform at high academic levels into their later decades (Rowbotham, 2012; Lear, 2003, 2004, 2007).

Socially inclusive higher education policies may be supported by three ideologies: neoliberalism, which justifies wider inclusion on the grounds of economic growth; a social justice agenda, promoting equal rights for all, and with particular attention to those social groups excluded in the past; and human potential, involving empowerment and recognition of the contributions that all students can bring (Robinson, 2012, drawing on Gidley, Hampson, Wheeler, & Bered-Samuel, 2010). Others have sought a realignment of lifelong learning goals away from vocationally oriented ones to ones imbued with social justice and empowerment ideals (Evans, 2009; Jackson, 2011). Social justice considerations mean that older people have a claim on the educational opportunities available in society, which can also enable them to play an active part as knowledgeable citizens. The United Nations Principles for

Older Persons relate to areas of independence, care, self-fulfilment, dignity and participation; under the heading of self-fulfilment it is acknowledged that “older people have a continuing right to pursue opportunities for the development of their potential, through education, skills training, employment opportunities and the chance to take part in community affairs” (HelpAge International, 2000, p. 11).

However, learning rights sometimes get overlooked in discussions of the human rights of older people (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2009). Elmore has focused on the moral aspects of ensuring such opportunities (Elmore, 1999). Moreover, if older people are excluded from inter-generational learning contexts, the many contributions that they could potentially bring will be lost, and the enrichment brought by ever greater social diversity will be lacking. As Bunyan (2003) found in her study of participants of a higher education access course, “both younger and older adults feel that the age diverse classroom is a positive experience that should be encouraged and nurtured” (p. 6).

### **REGIONAL RESEARCH THAT HAS INCREASED AWARENESS OF THESE VARYING LEARNING CONTEXTS**

Sponsorship of the local U3A branch by the Whyalla campus of the University of South Australia (UniSA) for the past 16 years has brought advantages to both organisations. The author’s U3A involvement, both as a course lecturer and as a member, has provided opportunities for observing and learning with these older students. A small research project conducted over a decade ago investigated the impact on U3A members of their participation and the importance placed on continuing to learn. The study collected data via paper-based anonymous questionnaires distributed by the U3A Committee to members with their newsletter. (The survey also collected information for Committee use on programming matters – desired courses, time of classes etc. This was passed on to the Committee while safeguarding the anonymity of the respondents.)

A later project, ‘University engagement with older members of the community’, sought to identify the mutual benefits of the University–U3A relationship and identify further ways of working together. The study involved an anonymous paper-based questionnaire that U3A members were invited to complete, and an anonymous online questionnaire for campus staff concerning what they identified as contributions by both parties to the relationship. These questionnaires also queried the possibility of U3A members’ becoming formal higher education students; U3A members were asked whether they had any interest in enrolling formally in university courses/programs, and staff were asked to express their thoughts about how this would work out, including any advantages and challenges that the presence of such older students would bring to their classes.

More recently, formally enrolled university students of a similar age range were surveyed concerning their experiences as higher education students. The catalyst for constructing this new survey was a lecturer’s comment in the previous study that students of 55 or more were already performing well in regional university classes. All students aged 55 or above enrolled through the University’s Centre for Regional Engagement (CRE), which encompasses both Whyalla Campus and the Mount Gambier Regional Centre, were invited to take part in the anonymous online survey.

In another branch of the project, community organisations that included older members in their ranks were approached concerning past, present and potential links with the local university campus, and any interest in studying there. After initial telephone or e-mail contact, seeking permission to approach the organisation, questionnaires were distributed. One format elicited basic information about the group from a leader of the group, and another format allowed individual members to describe any links they had with the University and their thoughts on the possibility of formal university study.

The context for all of these studies is Whyalla, a regional city with a population of 23,000, situated in the Upper Spencer Gulf region to the north-west of Adelaide (South Australia’s state capital), and 400 kilometres from it by road. However, the study of older university students also includes some participants from another regional city, Mount Gambier, which has a population of 26,000, and is 460 kilometres from Adelaide in the Limestone Coast region in the south-east of the state.

Approval for all of these studies was obtained from UniSA's Human Research Ethics Committee. The CRE Director was supportive of CRE staff involvement in the second study and gave approval to approach CRE students in the following one. Members of community organisations were approached with an invitation to complete the survey only if their committee or appropriate office-bearer had given permission.

After a brief outline of the learning-related findings of the earlier studies (reported on earlier: Ellis, 2006, 2009; Ellis & Leahy, 2011; Ellis, under review), the focus in what follows is on the learning interests identified by participants in the later survey of community group members.

## LEARNING-RELATED FINDINGS

The first study found that a majority of the respondents rated highly the importance of continued learning activities, and affirmed that their U3A participation was having a positive impact on them. Enjoyment of learning was very much bound up with social aspects of their involvement in U3A classes, extending their networks, and enhancing their quality of life (Ellis, 2006).

Both university campus and U3A benefited from their ongoing relationship, as identified in the second study (Ellis, 2009; Ellis & Leahy, 2011). U3A enjoyed a rent-free place of their own to meet at the campus, use of other facilities, and various forms of assistance from university staff. U3A members were also able to assist the university in various ways, such as being 'patients' for Nursing students, or an audience for student presentations, and providing favourable word-of-mouth advertising and links to the wider community. They contributed to campus diversity, providing lifelong learning role models, and in some cases added to university students' learning experiences through sharing insights and knowledge gained over the decades.

The third survey (Ellis, under review) was of regional older students enrolled in undergraduate university programs and also Foundation Studies students on a pathway into higher education. Respondents revealed a mixture of motivations for their study, both intrinsic and occupation-related. Despite some negatives relating to study-life balance, they had experienced many positives, and felt that they had contributed to the classes in which they were involved. They were unanimous in encouraging others of their age to pursue any interest in higher education participation.

More detail is given of the community groups study, unreported until now, focusing on the individual responses. This investigation into community groups' connections with the university gleaned some interesting data on their perceptions of the university and concerning their own learning needs.

Of 22 Whyalla community groups approached, 18 gave permission for their members to be invited to participate, in some cases first asking their members if they wanted to be involved. Sixteen groups returned questionnaires (ranging from 1 to 13 per group). There was also a questionnaire requested and returned by an individual (involved in a different organisation) who had heard about it and wanted to contribute. Inclusion criteria for groups were that they were local organisations with a membership that included people of retirement age. The list included craft groups, sports clubs, retired persons or pensioners' groups, groups of volunteers in various areas (social welfare, health, conservation), and service organisations. Data described here are from the individual questionnaires (N=66). The participant profile is summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1: Profile of participants (N=66)**

Sex	Female	51
	Male	9
	Not stated	6
Age group	<60	6
	60-69	34
	70-79	22
	80 and over	2
	Not stated	2
Years of involvement with organisation/group	Up to 2 years	7
	3-5 years	17
	6-10 years	15
	10 years	24
	Not stated	3
Years of living in Whyalla	>50 years	18
	40-49 years	21
	30-39 years	13
	20-29 years	5
	10-19 years	0
	<10 years	7
	Not stated	2
Visited university campus	Yes	39
	No	27
Visited campus library	Yes	22
	No	44
Attended UniSA Open Day	Yes	7
	No	59
Attended public lecture, seminar etc. at campus	Yes	15
	No	49
	Not stated	2
Family members studied at campus	Yes	24 (2 family members for 5 individuals)
	No	42

Of those who had visited the campus, 18 had done so because of their U3A involvement, 6 had studied there and 3 had taught there. Other visits had been by participants in a health research project and other health-related activities, a talk on ageing (and other seminars and discussion forums mentioned under the relevant question), open days, taking a school class there for science experiments, using the library, and just visiting. The highest level of formal education achieved so far

included: primary, various levels in secondary schooling, TAFE, trade qualifications, teaching certificates and diplomas, graduate diplomas and degrees, one holding a master degree. Family members who had studied through the campus were mainly their children (19); there were also grandchildren (4), spouses (4), a sibling (1), and a son-in-law (1).

Only a minority of respondents expressed interest in becoming a UniSA undergraduate student, particularly in a full program. Nevertheless, others volunteered perceptions of their motivations should they take up such study. (See Table 2.)

**Table 2: Learning interests and motivations**

Interest in studying in a regular UniSA course	Yes	15
	No	43
	Not stated	9
Interest in studying a whole program	Yes	4
	No	35
	Not stated	23
Main motivation(s) for possible study	Interest	38
	Intellectual stimulation	29
	Gaining a qualification	5
	Other (computer knowledge; equipping for engaging and motivating community)	2

Participants were asked about factors that would prevent them or discourage them from studying. Of 47 responses, some (6) indicated that “nothing” would, one adding “if I decided to do it”, and one wrote, “not much”. Time was a factor mentioned by 10; others were: cost (6), age (3), health (3), family or personal commitments (2), lack of a course of interest (2), travel wishes (2), transport (1), “poor memory”, and “[lack of] education”. One was discouraged by the idea of “long hours of learning”, and others by “inconvenient hours” and “the amount of effort and time required”. One felt that “U3A fulfils my needs at present”, and others that “I have enough interests to keep me going” or “sufficient interests for a busy life now”. Some felt that retirement was for “leisure time”, they had “had enough of serious study”, or that they had “done enough” and now “need a rest!”

Similar factors were mentioned in 36 responses to the question, “If you do not want to study, what is your main reason?” Time, busyness, other interests and priorities, including wanting the flexibility to travel, were mentioned by 15. Two illustrative comments were:

*I feel at 84 I'm quite happy at the things I do. I'm still machine knitting and can teach the younger ones.*

*I am involved with several organisations, so study would have to fit around my involvement with them.*

Other factors were: lack of interest or motivation (5), age (3), cost/need to earn (2), health (1). One judged that “poor memory” would be a problem and another said, “It sounds too hard.” “Life is too busy and my brain is already overworked,” was another comment.

A limitation of the above data includes some respondents’ equating of U3A and ‘regular UniSA’ programs and courses. Informal conversations with people involved in distributing the questionnaires revealed a similar confusion. Moreover, although a copy of current information about programs offered at Whyalla was provided to the groups participating, not all individuals consulted the booklet and so some responses indicated that they were unaware what programs were offered, or they expressed a wish to study in an area not currently available. It is also possible that the ‘program’ and ‘course’ nomenclature was confusing (previously called ‘course’ and ‘subject’, respectively).

## DISCUSSION

In a comparison of the groups of participants in these studies, it is not appropriate to put them or their type of learning into separate 'boxes'. As we have seen, there is considerable overlap, with formal university learning being complemented by non-formal and informal learning activities. Likewise, informal learning occurs in conjunction with non-formal learning activities. In informal learning settings, there may also be occasions on which participants embark on some more formal level of learning, for example, in order to gain a necessary first aid qualification or to gain some type of licence needed for their activities.

Nor can we neatly divide up the motivations and aspirations associated with these various types of learning. While people undertaking formal higher education qualifications often have a career goal in mind – either to make a career change, to enhance possibilities for advancement in their current line of work, or even to justify their current position in a climate of restructuring and credentialism – there are others who seek challenge; or to accomplish a previously unfulfilled dream of completing university studies; or to follow up a deeply held interest or enthusiasm. The learners in the non-formal and informal situations described here are for the most part learning because of their interest in the topics offered, and also because of the social advantages they experience in learning with a group having similar interests. Jarvis discusses responses to learning by “the sage, the doer and the harmony seeker” (2001, p. 77); the sages are still on an intellectual quest, the doers are more likely to engage in actively learning skills, and the harmony seekers often avoid learning that may dislodge their view of themselves and their environment; some try to combine the first two responses and lead busier lives than when they were in the work force (Jarvis, 2001).

In the learning process, following Kolb's experiential learning model (Svinicki & Dixon, 1987), the emphasis on each stage will vary, depending on the learning focus. In more formal settings, time can be allocated so that there is space for both reflection and action, and a balance of concrete and abstract. In less formal contexts, reflecting on what they have experienced, linking it to other learning to draw logical conclusions, and applying these, will also bring learners enriched learning.

The impact of learning activities again varies from group to group and from individual to individual according to their situation: for the higher education students, a time of stress and juggling many priorities can also bring a great sense of achievement and be an eye-opening experience, opening up a world of new opportunities. In general, the learners in the U3A classes or in informal learning opportunities in other organisations do not have the university students' stress stemming from deadlines to be met and perhaps a lack of confidence as they embark on this new journey. Instead, they are in the relatively fortunate position of being able to commit as little or as much time as they choose to their learning activities. For some, there may still be challenges, such as the barriers described below.

A personal perspective on post-55 study was gained when the author, having earlier completed a Master of Education degree, undertook an undergraduate Business program. This experience illuminated some of the positives and challenges experienced by more mature students. Participation in mixed age classes, and in some courses working in a team with much younger students, provided enjoyable experiences, involving mutual sharing and assistance. However, after years of not having faced them, examinations proved to be much more worrying than in earlier undergraduate days. Bunyan in her 2003 study also noted an aversion to examinations in some of her participants. Older students may employ a deeper approach to their studies (Justice & Dornan, 2001), which may not be optimal for gaining high marks; in the author's case, examples of this can be identified, such as doggedly working through a series of set exercises, running out of time to complete these before the relevant test, and consequently scoring badly, whereas some younger fellow students had strategically concentrated on completing only those that were most likely to be included in the test. Exploring interesting side issues also sometimes got in the way of tasks that should have been given a higher priority.

In all of these learning contexts, older learners have the potential to contribute from their life experience to the group in which they are learning, including online groups. In university courses they have shown that they can provide practical examples of situations from the workplace that make



it easier for others to relate theory to practice. Different generations working together can provide access to differing points of view and understandings of the issues being discussed, as older and younger learn from each other. Moreover, a context more representative of organisations in the real world is produced. Likewise, in informal learning groups, older and younger members often have different skills and knowledge to share with one another.

A diversity of learning contexts caters for a diversity of needs and interests. While, with the exception of some gender-specific groups, all of the contexts described are theoretically open to all, there are factors that may tend to exclude participation by older students. These factors include: cost of activities, feeling uncomfortable in certain settings, a lack of prior positive learning experiences, lack of transport, or mobility problems. Hence a range of different settings has more chance of providing something for everyone. Some researchers have identified U3A and similar organisations as orientated predominantly towards middle-class interests (Findsen & Formosa, 2011; Formosa, 2012). However, this is not universally the case. Certainly the Whyalla group includes a variety of backgrounds and circumstances, from aged pensioners on government benefits to independent retirees, and occupational backgrounds in trades and domestic duties as well as business and the professions. It also embraces a range of national backgrounds. Course offerings have included not only more 'academic' topics such as language and science, but also practical assistance with computing, and one-off sessions ranging from presentations by community organisations to accounts of community members' travels and volunteer work.

Gaining knowledge of how and where older people learn, and their learning aspirations, allows better targeting of programs for older age groups, whether these programs be part of formal educational offerings or non-formal community-based learning or provide increased access to informal learning opportunities. Such learning, as well as bringing many individual social, economic and/or personal development benefits, can produce a knowledgeable citizenry, equipped for further employment if desired, educated about where to find the resources they need (e.g. health information), and enabled to address community concerns with the confidence and knowledge to influence those in power. Third age learning can transform not only the individual but also the community (Lear, 2012).

For universities, targeting and recruiting older learners might assist them to meet the targets for increased participation in tertiary education set by the Bradley Review (DEEWR, 2008), even though these targets tended to focus on younger members of the community. Likewise, TAFE and other registered training providers can tap into the pool of older people wishing to gain further work-related qualifications as many seek or need to work beyond traditional retirement age.

It is important to be aware of the barriers that may get in the way of older people's optimal access to learning opportunities. As one person in a community group mentioned informally, "I think some people are daunted by the university"; hence any opportunities for breaking down such barriers through community events run at the campus, collaborative ventures with community groups, and easily accessible information about opportunities and pathways to university should be taken. Someone not involved in the study gave as her reason for not wanting to go to the campus to purchase a book that included her daughter's achievements: "I've never set foot on the uni grounds - didn't want to go to U3A. Why? I hated school." So an awareness of the past educational 'baggage' that many carry is needed - and perhaps "class baggage" as suggested by Formosa (2012, p. 122).

If universities can address the possible physical and psychological obstacles, facilitate supports such as mentoring programs and clearly outlined advice, and welcome older students as an asset rather than a possible liability, they are more likely to retain these students and benefit from their enrichment of campus diversity. In a recent newspaper article about the alternative pathway provided into university by University of South Australia's Foundation Studies program, the 2012 cohort was described as "ranging from 18 to 80 years of age" and the story of a retrenched winemaker who was completing an information technology degree in his 50s was featured (Hegarty, 2012). It is good that universities are looking to this under-tapped pool of potential students.

## FURTHER DIRECTIONS

Here many aspects of learning in regional contexts have been considered. However, we also need to bear in mind places where such opportunities are not so accessible. In smaller towns, many non-formal and informal learning opportunities are available through community organisations, men's sheds (Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey, & Gleeson, 2007), but we should also ask, "What about the bush?" How can older people in remote areas access learning to meet their needs for information and knowledge required in their situation and satisfy their desires for self-fulfilment and enrichment? In the past, innovations such as the pedal wireless enabled isolated outback residents to relate to others in similar situations and provided informal learning opportunities in the "galah sessions" (Theobald, 2012), and later allowed for children's education through the School of the Air. Internet capabilities have dispelled some of the obstacles to joining online learning communities, and now online social media may perform a similar function. (Even when they are not geographically isolated, Facebook appears to be used for sharing information and advice among young mothers, for example.) In the case of U3A, U3A Online, set up in 1998 to support the International Year of Older Persons (1999) and supported by Griffith University in Queensland, is available to interested people throughout the world, is one source that responds to retired people's learning interests (*U3A online*, 2012). The Australian Government's Broadband for Seniors initiative aimed "to provide seniors with free access to Broadband for Seniors Kiosks, help them gain confidence using computer technology, and to build community participation and social inclusion amongst older Australians" (Broadband for Seniors, 2012). Isolated professionals can also benefit. An American study found that online learning provided a real option for successful professional education study by late career teachers, who often found it more rewarding than their younger fellow students (Erickson & Noonan, 2010).

Further research is warranted on how well the learning needs of remote older Australians are being met. The learning needs of particular groups within regional and rural communities, such as people of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and the frail elderly, also need further consideration.

## CONCLUSION

In meeting the learning needs of the individual, health and wellbeing benefits accrue, which also meet the needs of the wider society, lessening potential health costs in later decades. Individuals' and groups' social needs can thus contribute to meeting national social needs. While not everyone, even of those who have the requisite persistence and ability, wishes to be a university student, or engage in other forms of formal education, everyone needs to learn, whether or not they consider some of what they do as 'learning'. Hence, all should be helped to be aware of the opportunities available, and given the opportunity to maximise their potential, to learn in accordance with their wishes and needs, and to contribute to the society of which they are a part.

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