

## Men's sheds in Australia

### Learning through community contexts

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The views and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author/project team and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government, state and territory governments or NCVER

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To find other material of interest, search VOCED (the UNESCO/NCVER international database <<http://www.voced.edu.au>>) using the following keywords: community centre; community organisation; community program; health; older people; men; retirement; unemployment.

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# Foreword

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This research was undertaken under the National Vocational Education and Training Research and Evaluation program, a national research program managed by NCVET and funded by the Department of Education, Science and Training on behalf of the Australian Government and state and territory governments.

This project investigates the use of community-run ‘men’s sheds’ which have proliferated in southern Australia in recent years. Men’s sheds are informal spaces and programs devised for, and used mainly by, men. The success of men’s sheds in attracting a population usually difficult to engage within more formal settings suggests there may be much to learn from them. This report investigates the learning styles employed in men’s sheds, as well as the motivations and experiences of the mainly older men who frequent them.

The report will be of particular interest to those who deal with or represent older men. Providers (particularly adult and community education) will also be interested in the investigation of the learning styles employed in the men’s sheds.

Readers interested in older adults are pointed to other projects in this area:

- ✧ Beckett, D & Helme, S 2001, *Engaging older learners, Melbourne: Final report to Adult Community and Further Education Board*, University of Melbourne, Parkville.
- ✧ Gelade, S, Catts, R & Gerber, R 2003, *Securing success: Good practice in training people aged 45 and over who are disadvantaged in the labour market*, Department of Education, Science and Training, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.
- ✧ Golding, B & Harvey, J 2006, *Final report on a survey of men’s sheds participants in Victoria*, report to Adult, Community and Further Education Board, Victoria.
- ✧ Hayes, C, Golding, B & Harvey, J 2004, *Adult learning through fire and emergency service organisations in small and remote Australian towns*, NCVET, Adelaide.

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Managing Director, NCVET

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Our grateful thanks for excellent transcription go to Aileen Donoghue. Thanks also to the important and voluntary contribution of our Research Reference Committee comprising Keith Bettany (Alzheimer's Australia, South Australia), Anthony Brown (University of Western Sydney), Rick Hayes (La Trobe University) and Gary Green (Orbost Community Health). The researchers acknowledge and thank Rick Hayes and Shelby Williamson for their research cooperation and permission to use many of the shed-specific questions developed as part of their Hayes and Williamson (2005) Victorian study. We gratefully acknowledge insights gained informally from participants in the first Men's Sheds Conference. We sincerely thank Jack Harvey and Christine Hayes, whose input into the Hayes, Golding and Harvey (2004) research for NCVER into *Adult learning through fire and emergency service organisations in small and remote Australian towns* helped shape the current survey. Thanks also to the Adult, Community and Further Education Board and ACFE providers in Victoria for the strong and ongoing support of research into, and encouragement of, men's learning, including the Golding and Harvey (2006) Victorian men's shed survey, that helped to act as a pilot and contributed data to the current national survey. Finally and importantly, our thanks to NCVER, as well as to Sally Darken and other staff of the School of Education, University of Ballarat, for their support of this research.

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<sup>1</sup> No participant interviews were conducted.

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# Key messages

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Men's sheds organisations are typically located in shed or workshop-type spaces in community settings that provide opportunities for regular hands-on activity by groups deliberately and mainly comprising men. They have recently proliferated across parts of southern Australia with higher proportions of older men not in work.

- ✧ Men's sheds are particularly successful in attracting older men that have proved difficult to engage through conventional health, employment, education and training initiatives. Many of these older men are facing issues associated with significant change, including ageing, health, retirement, isolation, unemployment, disability and separation.
- ✧ They provide mateship and a sense of belonging through positive and therapeutic informal activities and experiences with other men. Men's sheds achieve positive health, happiness and wellbeing outcomes for men who participate, as well as for their partners, families and communities.
- ✧ Men's sheds confirm the preferences of older men for hands-on, practical learning styles, more similar to those found in adult and community education (ACE) compared with those in formal education settings.
- ✧ Men's sheds have more to do with producing non-vocational benefits and rarely provide direct vocational pathways to future paid work.
- ✧ Being heavily reliant on volunteers, men's sheds often struggle to cope with the initial costs, regulations and complexities associated with establishing a safe working environment and procuring funding to assist with coordination and supervision of participants. Despite the limitations in funding, men's sheds have grown in number; however, the impact on future growth and sustainability is uncertain.



# Executive summary

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'Men's sheds' organisations are typically located in shed or workshop-type spaces in community settings that provide opportunities for regular hands-on activity by groups deliberately and mainly comprising men. Men's sheds in community organisations are shown to be a relatively new, diverse and poorly known set of community-based, grass-roots organisations—found only in Australia. These informal spaces and programs in community settings have grown recently and rapidly in parts of mainly southern Australia with a higher proportion of older men not in paid work. Men's sheds are typically organised by, and legally constituted through, existing community organisations. They usually provide a woodworking workshop space, tools and equipment and an adjacent social area in a public, shed-type setting. Some include a metalwork area and/or an adjacent garden.

This research examines the effectiveness and importance of community-based men's sheds in Australia, focusing particularly on ways in which the nature and organisation of these sheds affect the informal learning experiences and lives of the men who use them. It includes consideration of the rationales for creating these masculine spaces in community contexts for groups of men, including a profile of use and the nature of the learning activities as well as men's experiences, benefits and outcomes from participating. Data were collected by on-site interview and survey (N=211) from a sample of 24 of approximately 125 men's sheds in five Australian states open in July 2006. Despite their diverse origins, locations, configurations, legally constituted organisations and purposes, men's sheds organisations are shown to share a common commitment to older men's friendship, health and wellbeing in conjunction with regular and supervised hands-on activity in group settings in a shed-type space for both individual and community benefit. They run a variety of informal programs and activities for mostly retired, unemployed or isolated older men, typically through health, aged care, adult education, church, war veterans or local government organisations. Importantly, one-half of men are not members of any other community organisation.

Half of the men who participate are over 65 years of age. Most are recently retired or involuntarily withdrawn from the paid workforce. One in five men are war veterans. Around one in five are unable to obtain paid work, though expect to do so. Three-quarters are on some type of pension. Older, retired men who participate are significantly more likely to be living with a partner and have experienced less significant recent changes in their lives in terms of their health, wellbeing, security and financial status than younger single men who participate. Men not living with a partner tend to be somewhat younger, less likely to be retired and more likely to have experienced significant and recent difficulties with their health and wellbeing. The support of a partner appears to provide a buffer to support older, retired men against debilitating changes—including when work finishes and/or health deteriorates—in ways that are not available to many separated and isolated younger men. For many older married and retired men, the men's shed provides a welcome and positive circuit-breaker for both men and women from the 'underfoot syndrome' in the family home, particularly where the man has recently experienced retirement or unemployment. In the past five years around one-half of participants have experienced retirement or a major health crisis and one-quarter have experienced what they self-define as some form of significant loss. While around one-half of men heard about the shed through friends, around one-third of men were referred to the shed by a health or welfare worker. Men who are referred to the shed through a health or welfare worker take part regularly but less frequently than other men and are significantly more likely to need support to improve their health, work status and relationships.

Men aged over 65 years are significantly more likely than younger men to go to the shed for social reasons. While not having access to a private shed where they live is one factor affecting some men, a need for the friendship of other men in a place that affirms positive aspects about being men would appear to be the most important factor that leads men to participate. Men particularly enjoy and benefit from the lack of compulsion, opportunities for mentoring and sociability associated with the shed as well as a strong sense of belonging and improving their health and wellbeing. Men particularly enjoy the opportunity to 'get out of the house', and almost all 'feel at home' in the shed. Men experience a range of very positive benefits as a result of participating. They feel better about themselves, are happier at home, have a strong sense of belonging and enjoyment and greatly appreciate the opportunity to be accepted by, and give back to, the community through what they make and do. Most men are also positive about the enhanced opportunity to informally get access to men's health information.

Approximately one-third of the sheds are available to both men and women. However, most sheds have relatively few women participating. Women are not welcome in around one-third of the sheds, and in the remaining third they are welcome as visitors. The attitudes of men towards women participants, and the shed policies on women participating, reflect this split. Men who need more training on the shed equipment are significantly less likely to feel comfortable if women participate in the shed. Women typically play an important and valuable role in ensuring the sheds run smoothly but are usually deliberately detached from the men's workshop activities. Men's sheds are particularly welcoming of new members and most provide resources for wider community use. The high proportion of gentle and caring older men who use men's sheds contradict several of the prevailing masculinist stereotypes that men are overly competitive and unsupportive.

Many of the men's shed participants have the relatively limited formal school and post-school education and training backgrounds typical of older men, although 40% are former qualified tradesmen. Around 30% of the men had positive recollections of formal learning and 15% had attended a formal learning program in the last year. The men's sheds participants enjoy the opportunity to informally learn and share leisure, technical, trade, craft, safety or health skills. While skills that transfer directly to paid work are seen to be relatively minor by most men, the opportunity to learn such skills is regarded as positive and valuable for those men with the intention of re-entering paid work.

Around three-quarters of men were interested in some form of further learning through the shed. Preferred learning styles are via hands-on, practical situations, preferably in informal contexts where they can meet other people, learn and mentor in groups with other men. Men's sheds tend to already match the informal learning needs and preferences of this older demographic of participants, one in four of whom experience difficulties with their learning skills. Any further learning should be informal and facilitated 'in house', ideally from and with other participants with the necessary skills in the same shed setting. While men who participate in men's sheds are positive about technical and further education (TAFE) for the wider community, most consider it does not offer anything they need to learn and around half would not feel comfortable going there.

Men's sheds organisations are highly reliant on committed volunteers and a small number of tenuous funding sources. As sheds are becoming more known and planned, strategic and networked, they are grappling with issues associated with establishment, funding and occupational health and safety. While most sheds have a supervisor whose responsibility is regarded as important by participants, it is also seen to be important that men have input into the type and scheduling of activities and running of the shed.

Activities similar to that provided by men's sheds will become increasingly important as the progressive ageing of the Australian population leads to the extension of working lives as well as lives post-work. Because of their increased longevity, men will be in retirement and semi-retirement longer, strengthening the need for policies of lifelong learning to extend beyond economic purposes to include social and personal purposes required to maintain independence and autonomy in an increasingly complex society. Men's sheds produce significant, non-vocational benefits

through informal, collective, community involvement. The programs and spaces certainly encourage and perpetuate men's workshop-based, hands-on, trade skills typical of wood and metal workshops in TAFE and pay close attention to compulsory occupational health and safety practices. However, the current emphasis in sheds is low on formal and current industry competencies for working in contemporary industry workplaces. They rarely provide direct vocational pathways to future paid work.

By virtue of the situated nature of the informal learning that they encourage in community settings, men's sheds model learning styles are similar to those found in adult and community education (ACE). What is different is that they deliberately create an area for socialisation in a men's workshop rather than a house or learning centre designed primarily for and by women. For this reason some ACE organisations, particularly in Tasmania and Victoria, are successfully complementing their provision and encouraging older men's learning by creating a men's shed separate from or parallel to their community centre or neighbourhood house-type organisation.

Our key finding is that for older men, active participation in communities of practice is possibly more conducive to learning than involvement or enrolment in formal education TAFE or ACE. Shed-based activity provides an important, positive and therapeutic male-positive context that satisfies a wide range of needs not currently available in more formal learning settings. Men's sheds provide a voluntary social and community outlet for older retired men, particularly for former tradesmen. They provide new opportunities for men of all ages to pool their considerable skills and experiences for mutual and community benefit.

Men's sheds are shown to cater informally but very effectively for the mainly non-vocational social, health, wellbeing and learning needs of mainly older men and a small number of women. Their main benefit is that they cater for the holistic as well as the specific, often acute, needs of an otherwise difficult-to-reach group of older and sometimes isolated men—typically experiencing complex and difficult changes in their working lives, status and identity, their physical and mental health, their relationships and identities as men. In doing so, they contribute significantly and positively to the wellbeing of their partners, families and communities in situations where paid work is either desired but not available or not feasible because of retirement or ill health.

# Introduction

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## Rationale for the study

A range of Australian demographic, education, training, health and wellbeing data confirm that men are experiencing a range of dilemmas as they age—particularly after retirement. While men’s shed-type spaces and programs have some parallels with earlier, mainly male, organisational types such as engine and rail preservation societies and woodworkers groups, the idea of male socialisation through men’s sheds in community organisations is a new and primarily Australian cultural phenomenon. Men’s sheds programs are unique and of interest in that they have the ability and potential to reach older and isolated men that would otherwise not be likely to be involved in learning or to access men’s health or wellbeing programs. By virtue of their main or exclusive focus on men, these programs and spaces are of particular interest in terms of gender theory. While they can be portrayed as being ostensibly masculinist in their focus and appeal, many of their objectives can be seen as being pro-feminist. The role and place of both men and women in creating the need for, and the provision of, these spaces and contexts for men (and in some instances for women) is therefore of particular interest and one of the secondary prongs in this investigation.

What the programs and spaces appear to have in common is a recognition that many older men’s needs and problems are currently not being reached or served by existing institutional forms of education, training, health or aged care service provision. Part of the solution to some of these problems is being provided by and to older men through community-based men’s sheds, with men’s specific needs in mind and with their active involvement.

Indicators of Australian participation in adult, vocational and community education and training confirm rates of participation and outcomes that are significantly lower for older men in all formal education sectors. Rates of participation in formal learning, including vocational education and training (VET), are also low for men over 35, who with an ageing population now comprise half of all Australian men (Ageing Australia 2001). Around one in four Australian men are not participants in any formal or non-formal learning activities and state that they have no intention of returning to learning (Bundy 2002). While most gender equity policies in Australian education and training target participation of women—based on knowledge from extensive research—there is very poor knowledge of older men’s preferred learning styles or pedagogies and almost no research into men’s learning and men’s learning spaces.

Hayes and Williamson (2006, p.13) observe that older men’s employment patterns and pathways changed significantly from the mid-1970s, from 75% working full time in one chosen career to half working full time in more diverse careers. Many of these men are recently retired. Like older Australians, they typically left school very early and many worked for decades with minimal formal education. Older men without further training or education therefore tend to be particularly vulnerable if displaced—for whatever reason—from the paid workforce. Adult Learning Australia (2002, p.6) cite Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data from 2000 that revealed that:

... 57.4 per cent of unemployed persons aged between 45 and 54 had no post-school qualifications and 44.6 per cent had not completed the highest levels of school. Once out of the workforce these people remain out of the workforce for double the average time for young people. Nearly two out of five remain long term unemployed.

Men aged 45 and above, as Adult Learning Australia (2002) note, are generally facing a period of transition. Most have faced a decade of dramatic changes in the workforce; others now face postponing retirement; others have entered retirement but are finding it difficult to adjust to life without a work 'role' or without supportive social structures. Some find it difficult to cope with a partner working and excelling in their career while their own career trajectory has stopped. Though many men cope with these transitions, many others do not. The rates of depression, loneliness, addiction and suicide among older males are high (Nelson n.d.). Meantime, men over 45 years are significantly under-represented in education and training. Most men over 45 years have a negative attitude to most forms of formal learning as well as to services and programs delivered through Adult and Community Education (ACE) (Golding, Harvey & Echter 2005), including community neighbourhood and learning centres (Family and Children's Services Western Australia 1999; Learning Centre Link 2004). Consistent with these attitudes, even those 'mature aged' people (over 45) who *do* participate in Australian accredited VET courses, at Certificate I and II level, 'experience no substantial vocational and further study outcomes' (Stanwick 2006, p.6) along with low rates of completion (approximately one in five: 19% complete their course). This is despite the fact that 'Employment-related reasons were the main motivation for undertaking these courses' (Stanwick 2006, p.6).

While older Australians are staying healthy and living longer, National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) data do not routinely record participation figures for people aged over 65. There is a popular but false assumption that people over 65 years are at best of no value, and at worst a 'cost' to the community. It is widely assumed that people over 65 are beyond productive employment, not interested in learning and should not be eligible for government support to do so. There is a related assumption that they will become a burden on the health and welfare sector as they age. Golding's research has refuted the assumption that men are not interested in learning, in a number of studies, by demonstrating the extent and transferable value of informal learning acquired in volunteer, community-based settings in Australia. As Golding's suite of research has shown, as remoteness and town size decreases, involvement in community networks and activities for people aged over 65 becomes critical for individual, social, family and economic wellbeing.

The current research is deliberately directed to older men's learning programs in community settings. Backyard, individual sheds were promoted and popularised in Australia by Thomson (1995) and Australian Broadcasting Commission (1996), Hopkins (1999) in New Zealand and Thorburn (2002) in the United Kingdom. Men's sheds organisations in community contexts, directed particularly at the needs of older men, have since proliferated and flourished in all Australian states, in various forms, to a point that they are now well established in many southern Australian suburbs and towns. This proliferation has occurred in the virtual absence, with some exceptions (for example, Community Health Bendigo 2001; Hayes & Williamson 2005, 2006), of critical research and evaluation as to the value of these programs and the extent to which they provide pathways to older men back to learning, work and engagement with community.

Men's sheds and similar spaces and programs created primarily for older men in community contexts have previously escaped serious attention from researchers in the education and training sector. In part, this is because they deliberately and contentiously target men. It is also because they are grass roots, new and informal and have tended to come from holistic health, welfare and community services models and concerns rather than from top-down skills or competency-based models of provision. This research is timely in the light of recent extensive research into the barriers to men's lack of participation in formal learning in the UK (McGivney 1999a, 2004), the critical importance of community-based informal learning in widening participation in excluded communities of people who are educationally, economically and socially disadvantaged (McGivney 1999b, p.78) and the emerging Australian literature on boy's literacy and schooling (Rowan et al. 2002).

## Research purpose and questions

This research examines the informal skill development that takes place for older men in men's sheds: dedicated men's programs and spaces in community organisations in Australia. It examines the circumstances and attitudes that have been shown to bring otherwise disengaged older men (defined as age 45+) to learning. In doing so, it closely examines the rationales, pedagogies, experiences and outcomes of participants in men's sheds. These spaces and programs form a growing part of local government, community services and welfare provision for older men at a neighbourhood and suburb level in towns and local communities. Voluntary community organisations with significant proportions of older male participants such as rural and remote fire services (Hayes, Golding & Harvey 2004), football clubs and land care organisations (Golding, Harvey & Echter 2005) have already been shown to be critically important sites for re-engaging men in informal learning, with significant benefits to their lives, work, families and communities.

The research deals with the increasing difficulties older men are experiencing in the much changed world of work—typically with identities that are tightly defined by their previous paid work—including quite negative attitudes towards most new forms of formal learning like VET; a lack of social and emotional connectedness; an inability to relate positively to existing formal and indoor learning programs or spaces and increasing discomfort with widely proliferated forms of information and communications technology (ICT) familiar to most younger men. It includes an examination of the impact of a range of factors, shown from previous research to pose barriers to older men's attitudes to learning, derived particularly from McGivney (2004), Foskey and Avery (2003) and Golding, Harvey and Echter (2005). These include many of the already known barriers to learning for many older men: the lasting impact of negative school experiences; fear of failure; negative attitudes to formal post-compulsory education; the importance of work to male identity (and the deliberate avoidance of many forms of formal learning); resistance to change; lack of social capital; scepticism about the benefits of learning; and practical and structural obstacles, including the formality of VET and comprehensively feminised nature of ACE learning spaces (Golding & Rogers 2002). The surveys and interviews provide unique and new insights about learning preferences for older men who would not usually or typically be involved in ACE or VET programs or be counted in VET statistics.

### Research questions

This research explores the following research questions:

- ✧ What do current data and research say about learning programs, settings, spaces, policies and pedagogies for older men (age over 45)?
- ✧ What are the rationales for creating dedicated men's learning spaces and programs, including 'men's sheds'—specifically for older men in Australia? Who are the participants, why are they participating, what are their outcomes and are they effective?
- ✧ How might findings about older men's learning in such settings be incorporated into a typology for older men's learning that enhances re-engagement, informs policy and leads to greater participation and outcomes in VET, ACE and pathways to work?

### Specific research purposes

This research and the new data it generates are regarded as important to:

- ✧ inform people and organisations operating (or planning to operate) men's sheds as to the profile and attitudes of men who currently participate in them in order to more effectively meet their needs
- ✧ inform government organisations that fund (or are considering funding), support or organise such organisations as to their value and advantages as well as their possible disadvantages
- ✧ inform men who use (and don't use) sheds programs about their nature, benefits and outcomes

- ✧ inform the vocational education and training (VET) and adult, community and further education (ACE) sectors as to the learning opportunities that are (and might be) created for men through community-based men's sheds
- ✧ alert the community, including the academic community, about the significant value of men's sheds, particularly to isolated and older men experiencing change
- ✧ provide rigorous, new data to attempt to break down and refute some of the uninformed resistance to the relatively new idea of creating new spaces specifically for men
- ✧ carefully identify the gender issues associated with provision of services to older men, particularly given that men's sheds intersect with sectoral contexts (health, adult and community education, aged care and community development) where women comprise the vast majority of practising professionals.

## What are men's sheds in community organisations?

Private, domestic men's sheds have previously been recognised as important places for individual men. This research looks specifically at a relatively new but diverse set of sheds, mainly in southern Australia, accessible to groups of men in community contexts, typically organised through, or as an annex of, existing community organisations. Being recent, dispersed, typically separate and independent 'grass roots', community-based organisations, these men's sheds have until very recently escaped critical examination or attention. Because they have no obvious or easy overseas parallels, they are difficult to pigeonhole in the wider research literature. This being the first study of such a phenomenon across Australia, there was a need firstly to undertake considerable background research simply to determine and map the location of existing programs and spaces and to shape and delimit the scope of the study and the appropriate research methods.

This background research confirmed that a wide range of community-based sheds have indeed sprung up in the past decade. Because they do not all include either 'men's' or 'sheds' in their organisational titles, they are therefore difficult to locate and simply or neatly categorise. The shed names for the selected programs and spaces that comprised the final research sample for the current research (listed in the Acknowledgments) are illustrative of this diversity. The main attribute that men's sheds organisations have in common, and the working definition adopted for this research, is that they are:

... typically located in a shed or workshop-type space in a community setting and become a focus for regular and systematic, hands-on activity by groups deliberately and mainly comprising men.

Shed-type organisations, spaces, facilities and programs that fit this broad definition spring from, and are organised mainly through, health, aged care, adult education, local government, church and war veterans organisations. The specific nature and purpose of the activity, as well as the profile of men who are attracted to these sheds, would therefore be expected to vary with the nature and membership of the legally constituted organisations and the specific purpose and function of the shed. The surveys and interviews conducted for this research sought to explore that diversity and to identify commonalities and differences within a national sample of community-based men's sheds. While the survey focused deliberately and particularly on aspects of the informal learning purposes, functions and benefits associated with these men's sheds' spaces and programs, it recognised that learning was only one of several other important formal and informal purposes, functions and benefits. These benefits particularly include individual and community health, friendship and wellbeing. While some women were found to be involved as members and organisers, and while many women, based on the separate interview data, clearly benefited from men's involvement in community-based men's sheds, consistent with the expressed purposes and known membership of these sheds, the survey was specifically for men.

Several shed types that come close to the boundary of the definition adopted above are worthy of mention. Spaces described as ‘community sheds’ have been included in the national shed database from which the sample is drawn, since where they occur they are mainly targeted to, or primarily used by, men. So, too, have organisations such as ‘Clem’s Shed’ (in Yorketown, South Australia) and the Ballan Shed (that operates as an annex of the ‘Ballan Community House’ in Victoria). While neither shed organisation includes ‘men’ in the shed name, such shed spaces and programs are otherwise similar in profile and membership to community-based men’s sheds. Interestingly, the reason many such sheds directed to men and men’s wellbeing have used these other shed titles is to avoid perceived and potential problems in relation to equal opportunity legislation. Importantly, the Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Prue Goward, verbally confirmed to shed practitioners that this perception was not a problem at the Australian Men’s Health Conference in 2005. ‘The Shed’ (at Mt Druitt in New South Wales) has been included in the study sample though it has no indoor workshop activity because of its title and because it deliberately targets the wellbeing of Indigenous men. Similarly the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) Vietnam Veterans Shed in suburban Perth has been included even though it is conducted in a private, suburban garage because its activities deliberately target men and community wellbeing of members of a community-based organisation. A few semi-commercial sheds that form part of the Men’s Shed Pty Ltd network in New South Wales are included in the national database. However, none of their shed participants were surveyed because of problems gaining access to their contact details and because of perceived issues associated with ‘commercial in confidence’.

Organisations also located in sheds whose primary purpose and membership is craft, trade, service or enthusiast-based—such as woodworking guilds, machinery or railway preservation societies, country fire organisations as well as car, stationary engine and motorcycle clubs—were deliberately excluded from the study. This other set of organisations tends to predate and share some but not all of the characteristics of community-based men’s sheds. While they consist mainly of men and clearly have positive, informal, community and individual benefits, including learning, their primary focus is on enthusiasts preserving a craft or skill. In particular, they appear not to share other deliberate emphases found in community-based men’s sheds on men, on the shed-space specifically, or on their informal learning, health, friendship or wellbeing benefits.

## What are the origins and location of men’s sheds?

Men’s sheds in community organisations, as defined in this research, have developed relatively recently though in different ways in different Australian states and regions. Sheds specifically for men, other than the personal ‘backyard’ variety, particularly those shed organisations whose aims included the enhancement of men’s health and wellbeing, appear to have developed and proliferated first in South Australia during the mid-1990s. It is surmised that before that time notions of a community space being developed specifically and deliberately for men’s wellbeing were rarely publicly countenanced. Until the late 1990s wider issues associated with older men’s ageing, health and wellbeing, and particularly of possible male disadvantage, were seldom advanced in public forums. Morrison (2004, p.1) suggests that older men ‘are frequently neglected in social policy, under-represented among service recipients and over-represented in a number of adverse health and wellbeing domains’. And yet it is politically difficult, while women still experience significant disadvantage, to focus on men’s needs in policy, theory or practice. As Flood (2003, p.458) neatly puts it:

Men’s collective and profeminist mobilisations on gender issues are a delicate form of political activity, as they involve the mobilisation of members of the privileged group in order to undermine that same privilege.

It remains difficult, even in 2006, to theorise about men’s needs from a pro-feminist or masculinist perspective, in part because of some prevailing, negative and hegemonic views about men and particularly masculinism. It is worth persisting with, for reasons again succinctly summarised by Flood (2003, p.459):



Men can be and are motivated by interests other than those associated with gender privilege. There are important resources in men's lives for the construction of nonviolent masculinities and forms of selfhood, such as men's concerns for children, intimacies with women and ethical and political commitments.

Some of the earliest community-based men's sheds have developed in South Australia through a growing awareness in Australia of the characteristics and potential benefits of personal men's sheds by means of popular texts. Mark Thomson's (1995) widely read *Blokes and sheds* booklet was written in Adelaide. Around the same time gerontologist Leon Earl was beginning to advocate the efficacy of sheds for older men in aged care centres in South Australia. Sheds were also being recognised as therapeutic for ex-military men by antecedents of the current XMRC (Ex-Military Rehabilitation Centre) in South Australia and a community-based men's shed was under way even earlier in Broken Hill in New South Wales. The wider message about the desirability of backyard men's sheds was very effectively proliferated via a national television program about personal men's sheds (Australian Broadcasting Commission in 1996), magazine articles and popular music (for example John Williamson's line in *The Shed* song from 1998 that 'All Australian boys need a shed').

Since 2000 a number of community-based sheds had developed and proliferated on a range of models in most other Australian states. Table 1 in the Method section and the maps in appendix 3 (support document) summarise and map the distribution of men's sheds organisations in Australia to July 2006 by state, region and type. Sheds in cities have tended to be larger and involve somewhat younger men compared to rural sheds. Having developed slightly earlier, sheds in South Australia are organised by a wider range of organisational types, including aged care, health centre, hospitals and Vietnam Veterans organisations and are generally better networked. While Hayes and Williamson (2006, p.20) trace the history of community-based Victorian men's sheds back to the development of safe places for men to gather in the mid-1990s by health-promoting organisations, many sheds there have developed parallel to ACE organisations. Sheds in Tasmania are also tending to be more aligned with, and developed through, the existing network of community houses. Sheds in New South Wales tend more to be associated with churches. Sheds are generally less well known in other Australian states and territories, particularly in Queensland. As shown in the maps in appendix 3, the vast majority of men's sheds in community contexts are in southern Australia, south of a line between Newcastle in New South Wales and Perth in Western Australia. They are operating from a range of organisational types and different degrees of formality but are most numerous per head of population in South Australia and Tasmania.

# Literature review

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## The situation for Australian men aged over 45 years

Australia is facing a situation of chronic under-employment and long-term unemployment among older men. This research into aspects of older men's learning forms a small part of a wider, government policy-driven investigation as NCVER (2005, p.18) notes, 'into what skill development activities work best for mature aged people'. The Australian government's particular interest is keeping older workers in the labour force longer as one way of addressing 'the projected overall reduced supply of Australian labour' (NCVER 2005, p.18) and increasing national productivity (Productivity Commission 2004). Interest in older workers has come into recent focus in Australia and most developed countries through a trend for people to have fewer children and live longer (Commonwealth of Australia 2002–3), but to leave the workplace earlier.

There has been extensive discussion in the literature and in the public domain regarding the impact of ageing within Australian society. This ageing is evident when the Australian demographic data for the 45+ age group is examined. There have been significant increases in the proportion of both males and females in the 45+ age group in a relatively short time span between 1991 and 2001, a trend that is predicted to continue. In 2001, 3.2 million men were in the 45+ age group. On the one hand, re-skilling older men over 45 years has increasingly been seen by federal and state policy makers as a potentially fruitful way of addressing widespread perceived skill shortages in a number of key industries in Australia. *Age Counts: An inquiry into issues specific to mature aged workers in Australia* (Age Counts 2000, p.ix) was alarmed to find that 'in 1997, almost half of the men over the age of 45 were out of the workforce through retrenchment, redundancy or retirement'. On the other hand, older men have tended to be unlikely to voluntarily engage in education or training. For example, Beckett and Helme (2001, p.54) conclude that 'On average older women were three times more likely to participate in ACE in Victoria than men, and this proportion remains relatively constant for each age group.'

An examination of the change in participation rates in the labour force in Australia between 1978 and 2005 demonstrates that there is a trend towards decreasing participation rates for men, coupled with a trend towards increasing participation rates in the labour force for women. The overall labour force participation rate for both men and women combined has not changed significantly during this period. This trend has also been reflected across multiple states, and indicates that there is a decline in participation rates for men in each state and across Australia generally to around 85% for men between 45 and 49 in 2001, down from 90% in 1991. Examination of the labour force status by age group and by gender, specifically for persons in the 45+ age group between 1991 and 2001, indicates that there is a strong increase in the participation rate of all women in the labour force, including an increase for women in the labour force who are in the 45+ age group.

Fischer, Foster and McQueen (2005, p.1) provide evidence that the 'ageing of the Australian population is likely to lead to the extension of working lives as well as extending lives post work'. They conclude that the currently 'publicly funded training system is geared to meeting the needs of industry' and that 'The planning process does not take account of individual and community needs'. They suggest that older learners, because of their increased longevity, will 'find themselves in retirement and semi-retirement for longer periods', strengthening 'the need for policies of lifelong learning to extend beyond economic purposes to include social and personal purposes'.

Golding's extensive research with adults in community contexts confirms a widespread, almost universal desire to learn, but not, as Access Training and Employment Centre (2000, p.12) observe for older learners, 'through "off-the-rack" training courses'. Golding and Harvey (2006) used shed-based surveys in Victoria to demonstrate that older men who participate in men's sheds are highly engaged in a space that is low on formality and high in terms of the quality of men's engagement. Beckett and Helme (2001, p.19) also emphasised the importance of finding out how to 'engage older adults who participate in ACE to convert their experiences (both lifelong and in the provision itself) to learning'. The intensity of the engagement observed in men's sheds is not dissimilar to the intensity many women report in studies based in neighbourhood house and community-centre-type settings used mainly by women since the 1980s, that Beckett and Helme (2001, p.17) note tend to be perceived as women's domains.

Consistent with NCVER's (2005, p.18) prediction, there is very little recent research beyond Gelade, Catts and Gerber (2003) to tell us what skill development processes work best for people aged over 45, particularly for older Australian men. Andrew et al. (2005, Summary, p.3), in a study of Australian farmers, note that:

Farmers tend to choose to participate or not participate according to their experience, the experiences they trust and value and the patterns of information seeking they are accustomed to. This seems to be because they are acquainted with and feel confident about participating or not participating in particular learning environments.

Gelade, Catts and Gerber (2003, pp.143–4) also identified the critical importance not only of creating a safe and non-threatening environment for men, but also negotiating the learning processes, motivating learners, using different pedagogical approaches and implementing organisational innovation. Their research (p.144) emphasises the need to sidestep the use of terms like 'testing', 'assessment', 'examinations' and 'evaluations' in order to create the necessary safe environment and not to create 'opportunity for failure and feed into the powerlessness felt by a displaced or unemployed person' (p.144). They came across many older learners, 'coerced into the learning situation by the necessities of mutual obligation' and with 'a pervasive fear of failure—brought about by the inability to obtain, or retain, a job and having been rejected by employers a number of times' (p.145).

Data on unemployment of Australian men (OECD 2005) compare very unfavourably with similar data from other wealthy countries, particularly for men 'in their prime', despite years of general overall decline in unemployment and rapid job growth. Australia was in the bottom quintile of rich countries for employment among men aged 25–54, a problem identified by the Australian Treasury Secretary (cited in *The Age*, 30 June 2005, Business p.3) as 'structural, not merely cyclical'. To put the Australian data in context with New Zealand, gender aside, 'If Australia could match NZ, it would have 635,000 more people in jobs; half in their working prime, and half older workers' (*The Age*, 30 June 2005, Business p.3).

Hayes and Williamson (2005, 2006) identified some of the trends having an impact on Australia that are relevant to the rationales for establishing men's sheds in Victoria. They cite evidence which suggests that during the last 30 years the roles and circumstances of men have changed dramatically, particularly for men over 50 and men under 30. Hayes and Williamson (2006, p.13) note that divorced and never married men particularly are 'more likely to lack sufficient high quality linkages with the community as they grow older'. Hayes and Williamson (2005, p.9) cite literature that emphasises the general importance—in terms of morbidity and mortality rates—of avoiding social isolation, and in particular of the need to find ways to enable men to stay healthy by being connected. There is an extensive literature (Anthony Brown, pers. comm.) on the way in which men in particular construct meaning and identity through their involvement in paid work; the way retirement and loss of paid work places potential strain on men's social lives and the health and wellbeing of older men and the importance of work and leisure activities as a source of older men's friendships.

Since identifying men's learning as an issue worthy of investigation in Golding, Davies and Volkoff (2001), Golding has undertaken a suite of studies, in collaboration with other researchers, to

explore the particular and arguably different learning preferences of men. These studies have used surveys and interviews focused particularly on men in rural and remote settings, in adult and community education as well as in volunteer community-based organisations (Golding & Rogers 2001; Golding 2004; Hayes, Golding & Harvey 2004; Golding, Harvey & Echter 2004) and very recently in men's sheds (Golding & Harvey 2006).

## Why learn in men's sheds?

Adult learning occurs in a myriad of ways through work and social participation (Courtney 1992). Social participation theory, as Andrew et al. (2005, p.21) suggest, 'supports the claim that people learn in contexts where they interact with others'. Courtney (1992, p.2) argues that participation in organised learning relates particularly to participation in other forms of social life, such as voluntary groups and sporting groups. Forester and Payne (2000, p.3) use a somewhat different starting point, in relation to adult learning, by focusing on the importance of 'meanings, in context, and cognitive structures that adults bring to their learning'. They argue that adult learning in formal settings is 'deeply problematic' because of the inability of formal providers 'to engage with the interests and enthusiasms of the adult population across a range of "difference"' (p.3). They argue that while few adults seek formal education and training, most engage in independent, self-directed learning.

Courtney would argue, in the case of men's learning places and spaces, that if motivation to learn in contexts such as men's sheds are to be understood, it is important to understand what motivates people to be part of the organisations and why the organisations require some form of voluntary participation. This leads to the related important question of what characterises men's learning spaces, and in particular, what forms of organisation motivate men to voluntarily participate. In several senses 'training' in volunteer-based country fire and emergency services organisations (Hayes, Golding & Harvey 2004) as well as football clubs (Golding, Harvey & Echter 2005) serve an important role for men in Australia, typically based around regular meeting and activity in fire sheds or football sheds, respectively. It is also arguable that trade-based workshops such as those associated with technical and further education in Australia, including engineering, automotive, plumbing and carpentry, share some pedagogical characteristics of men's sheds. By virtue of their periodic, group-based, hands-on, workshop and shed-based instructional modes and associated mentoring through an extended apprenticeship system, trade workshops (with the exception of hairdressing and hospitality) have functioned very effectively as sites for training, learning and socialisation mainly for tradesmen.

McGivney's (2006, p.92) research in the UK emphasises the need for funding that allows for what she calls 'the essential first stage development work ... engaging with people in the community, winning their trust, listening to them' in order to increase the quality of engagement with reluctant learner groups. As McGivney (2006, p.94) notes, 'To engage in organised learning is completely outside some groups' cultural frame of reference'. Furthermore, for reluctant formal learners generally, she suggests that to engage older men is 'neither an easy nor short-term task' because of:

... the psychological risks (of possible failure or ridicule); the social risks (of acting contrary to family or cultural norms) and financial risks (endangering welfare benefits or getting into debt) where there are no guaranteed (employment or fiscal) returns from learning.

(McGivney 2006, pp.94–5)

Previous research has identified a range of factors that pose barriers to older men's attitudes to learning, particularly McGivney (2004), Foskey and Avery (2003) and Golding, Harvey and Echter (2005). This research confirms the already known barriers to learning for many older men: the lasting impact of negative school experiences; fear of failure; negative attitudes to formal post-compulsory education; the importance of work to male identity, particularly for men involved in rural occupations (Foskey & Avery 2003, p.2) such as mining, forestry and agriculture; the deliberate avoidance of many forms of formal learning; resistance to change; lack of social capital;

scepticism about the benefits of learning; and practical and structural obstacles, including the formality of VET and comprehensively feminised nature of ACE learning spaces (Golding & Rogers 2002).

## The men's sheds literature

Men's shed's benefits are poorly documented in the literature though best known informally in men's health circles. Though they have not previously been examined as sites for learning, including informal learning, Earle's largely action-based gerontological research in the 1990s made the link between men and sheds. Earle, Earle and Von Mering (1999) challenged community and recreation professionals 'to devise programs to make sheds more socially inclusive and productive learning centres'. Bettany (2005) has made theoretical and practical connections between the importance of sheds, men with dementia in aged care facilities and the wider international literature in the field of aged care. This work has involved important new innovations that include lockable, fold-down shadow boards and work spaces that are relatively simple to safely fit into existing aged care centres and portable 'shed reminiscences' kits, comprising collections of shed tools and literature designed to provoke positive and therapeutic, shed-based reminiscences. Bettany has taken up Thomson's (1995) issue of 'shedlessness' in retirement and made links to research by Cohen-Mansfield (2001) whose elderly dementia treatment principles point, by implication, to the likely efficacy of shed activity for older men. Cohen-Mansfield (2001, p.3) notes that it is important for elderly patients with dementia to identify activities with the potential to match with their 'primary need for social contact and meaningful and challenging activity', in order to 'maintain the sense of identity they may have found through work and family roles'. Thomson, Earle, and Bettany have all researched and disseminated their ideas from a South Australian base, where community-based sheds appear to have developed earliest, reached their highest density per head of population and taken on their most mature and diverse forms.

Earle, Earle and Von Mering (1999) recognise that sheds have an untapped iconic dimension for many Australian men. They argue that 'The shed, and perhaps the car, reinforce identity and therefore have social health implications for men', and identified the need to further investigate 'the value of compelling and enduring functionals such as a shed ... with respect to implications for productive involvement, identity and social health' (Earle, Earle & Von Mering 1999, p.10). Hayes and Williamson (2005) reviewed the rationales for community-based men's sheds and developed draft guidelines for evidence-based, best-practice in Victorian men's sheds. Though their review was comprehensive of active Victorian sheds, their emphasis, consistent with the underpinning rationales for many of the organisations that support sheds, was more on the health, wellbeing and social benefits of sheds for men than on learning. As a consequence there was little consideration of the nature of the informal learning and skill acquisition presumably taking place, other than as a mechanism of social connectedness. Using a Delphi study of 20 Victorian sheds, Hayes and Williamson (2005, p.10) conclude that, while the purposes were diverse, overall, 'sheds were deemed to be important as a place or space for *gathering* men together (serving a utility function) and for men to gather *together* (serving a social function)'. Hayes and Williamson (2006, p.14) identify a range of men's shed-based activities 'from education, respite care, masculine identity exploration, and meaningful support of dementia sufferers'. They also note a number of carers among shed users. They conclude that of the Victorian sheds they examined, most were developed relatively recently (most since 1999), catered for older men (age over 50) and around three-quarters do wood work specifically. Their study senses a 'growing awareness ... that many men are left without a space or place to safely meet in Victoria today' (Hayes & Williamson 2006, p.10).

There have been several small studies of participants and programs within single men's sheds. Community Health Bendigo (2001) evaluated the Bendigo Men's Shed in 1999 and Jones and Richards (2003) undertook a participant study of the Cobaw Men's Shed. Hayes and Williamson (2005, p.7) referred to an evaluation of the Darebin Men's Shed. The rationales, pedagogies, experiences and outcomes of older men in Australian spaces and programs devised for, and used

primarily by, men, including in community organisations, otherwise remained virtually unresearched prior to the current study.

## Men's sheds, health and wellbeing

Apart from men in retirement, men who are unemployed or with a disability and of working age comprise the next most significant group of men who are referred to and use community-based men's sheds. There is some previous research from the health and aged care sector that sheds are relevant in addressing 'several social psychological disorders prevalent among mature aged males' (Earle 2005a, p.1), including men experiencing dementia. Earle's research suggests that sheds can provide an important and enduring sense of purpose in retirement. By bringing back 'warm memories' to men, sheds are able 'to build on what they have got rather than what they have lost' in retirement. Earle (2005a, p.6) also observes that:

... aged care homes cater for mostly female residents. Men who live in nursing homes are therefore faced with spending time with a lot of women who live longer, sitting in pretty loungerooms with varied activities, most of which are geared towards women's preferences.

The value of shed-type programs is also becoming recognised by legally constituted organisations. These values include new partnerships as sources of funding, 'hooks' to engage older men and attract volunteers that can save funds to the organisation through maintenance and as a means of increasing men's access to health services and information. The potential 'downside' of men's sheds include the opportunity for personal and political agendas to be imposed on others and the lack of thought about making sheds inclusive; the possible capture of a grassroots organisation through a management (or commercial) culture; the stereotyping of men; mismanagement by cliques; and inappropriate support for some men. Most of these values and potential downsides are identified and elaborated in Hayes and Williamson (2006, pp.19–20).

While there are few serious academic texts about men's sheds that are publicly accessible to men in the community, there are several books and articles in the Australian popular press about men's personal workplaces or 'sheds'. *Men and their sheds* (Australian Broadcasting Commission 1996) is a film that was shown on television and is clearly remembered by many older Australians. The film 'researched across four States ... sets out to discover the reasons for very private pursuits of "shedophiles", why they need their own and exactly what they think inside those corrugated walls' (Australian Broadcasting Commission 1996). Thomson (1995) in his *Blokes and sheds* book identifies the backyard shed as having an important place in Australian culture and mythology. The book's blurb suggests that 'An Aussie man's pride can be measured by his shed—its size, what he stores in it and what he can fix in it'. Thorburn (2002) and Hopkins (1999) write in a similar, folksy style for United Kingdom and New Zealand audiences, respectively. Thorburn (2002) suggests in the blurb for his *Men and sheds* book that 'a shed is to a man what a handbag is to a woman—both contain all the essentials for surviving in the modern world ... no reasonable woman would dream of putting a foot in a men's shed'.

These popular books and the popular press they have generated tend to emphasise the personal, backyard men's shed for the 'Aussie Ocker'. Some other popular literature about backyard sheds is sexist or verges on the crude and lavatorial. Perhaps for these reasons the few health professionals and fewer academics that have grazed into the shed field have become easy targets for sensationalist reporting. There remains a general absence in the literature of evidence as to the efficacy of public sheds for men, whether it is for health, wellbeing, learning, or as sites for socialisation, other than to a limited extent in the field of aged care and gerontology (Earle 2005b).

## Older men's relationships, transitions and retirement

Changes in men's relationships, particularly marital separation as well as in work status (including unemployment and retirement), are known from research (Relationships Australia 2003) to have

significant and adverse effects on men's stress, health and wellbeing. In Australia, 42% of marriages end in divorce. Given the median age for divorce is age 42, at least one in five men over 45 will experience (or will have recently experienced) a divorce. While the impact of separation and divorce on men are well known, significant and ongoing, men are typically reluctant to seek professional help or advice (Smith 2005), particularly from female professionals operating from deficit models based on negative masculinist stereotypes. In the area of health education and the caring professions there is a virtual absence of male workers. McDonald (2005) regards current approaches to men's health as being unfairly based on assumptions of a negative ideology associated with hegemonic masculinity. McDonald urges researchers working with older men to look more closely at the social determinants that foster despair in some men and lead to health problems.

Nelson (n.d.) surveys the health and wellbeing literature to identify the particular needs of men in retirement to whom men's sheds are often targeted. Nelson cites literature that suggests that 'even persons who had enjoyable leisure activities and had developed satisfying routines were prone to some form of letdown or depression at the end of their paid working lives', and 'pose significant risk of depression and potential suicide' (p.2). Pease (2002, pp.135–6) reviews other literature about the stresses associated with older men's retirement and concludes that 'The loss of colleagues and social support, the loss of opportunities to feel competitive and independent, and loss of income are all seen to threaten a man's sense of masculinity' (p.136). Some sheds are specifically or mainly for war veterans. Of 355,000 Australian war veterans in 2001, 96% were aged over 55 years. Vietnam Veterans, who comprise one in five participants in the shed sample for the current study, are known to be particularly prone to ongoing physical as well as psychological health issues (Nelson n.d., p.2) that can include 'depression, flash backs, hyperalertness, sleep disturbances, guilt'.

Golding and Harvey (2006) show that men's sheds participants in Victoria were typically older males without a work-based identity and/or in the process of one or more difficult transitions: in terms of work or retirement; relationships with partner, children or family; and health, psycho-social or financial status. There is evidence from studies of retired husband syndrome (a Japanese RHS study is reported in *The Age*, 29 October 2005 Review, p.4) that retired men create crises for their wives by being 'on their patch' at home, 'particularly in the kitchen' (Pease 2002, p.136). Gradman (1994, p.106) neatly encapsulates the syndrome in a quote from one retired man's partner: 'I married him for better or worse, but not for lunch.' A gerontological study in the United States of America by Price (2003) describes the phenomenon as 'underfoot syndrome', where a husband 'smothers' his wife by interfering in her household routines. As Price points out, the loss of work, whether it be through retirement, unemployment or under-employment, can lead to feelings of depression, a sense of having no purpose, and a loss of identity for either spouse, highlighting the need for retired couples to have opportunities for separate personal space at regular times, including for individual hobbies. The interview data generated by the current research identify underfoot syndrome as a major contributing 'push factor' for partnered men who participate in men's sheds. It suggests that sheds have the capacity to create new, important and attractive opportunities for 'getting out of the house' and socialising with other older men.

## Locating men's sheds in relation to gender theory

What we attempt to do in this report, using empirical evidence and narrative, is undertake a materially based analysis of men's practices in community-based sheds from the perspective of men who participate in them. In doing so we make some important new distinctions between men who use these sheds and what theory says about traditional and largely negative aspects of masculinity. Men's sheds, like men's groups, are distinctively different from other community organisations in which men congregate, in that their identity in them 'is first and foremost as men' (Pease 2002, p.33). The question of whether and why men need a place of their own is an important one in terms of gender politics. Our contention is that men's sheds in community organisations have the potential to forge new, positive and effective practical links between men and masculinity, particularly for men 'whose need for affirmation of masculinity through work' makes them 'more vulnerable to the consequences of employment, disability and retirement' (Pease 2002, p.100).

There is evidence from our research that men's sheds give licence for older men to come together and positively experience and reconstruct their masculinity, 'without the negative repercussions of traditional patterns of aggressive behaviour' (Pease 2002, p.173). We provide evidence not only that very few aspects of the negative and stereotypical forms of masculinity are carried over into shed practice, but also that involvement by men in sheds typically has positive benefits for the men, their partners, children and extended families.

The act of deliberately researching, theorising and encouraging more equity for men in adult learning, health and aged care settings, and in this case men's sheds, can be characterised and criticised as being part of a backlash against women. It can be seen as a defensive reaction to feminism and pitting the needs of men against those of women (McLean 1996, pp.65–6). Like Rowan et al. (2002, p.5), we take the view that it is nevertheless important for researchers to develop skills to investigate, navigate and negotiate what we identify as contested terrain. We concur with the approach taken in Lingard and Douglas (1999, p.123) that any form of hegemonic femininity or masculinity can be dangerous to both men and women. We are also arguing that there should be a more overt recognition of the social construction of gender in learning, health and aged care services 'and a tolerance and acceptance of different practices of femininity and masculinity' (Lingard & Douglas 1999, p.123) if such services are truly committed to gender equity.

We are also recognising that many aspects of men being together (like women being together) are positive and worthy of affirming. We have tried to take what Lingard and Douglas (1999, p.4) describe as a 'pro-feminist' position, which, as they acknowledge, is 'a position easier to describe than practise'. This position 'sees the need to change men and masculinities, as well as masculinist social structures, while recognising the hidden injuries of gender for many men'. To paraphrase Lingard and Douglas, while we reject the idea of 'a turning away from a concern' with the education of women (p.4), we suggest the need for 'more equal gender relations that requires, *inter alia*, a policy and practice focus in education' (p.5) for both men and women. Our pro-feminist position would be particularly difficult to sustain if we take what Lingard and Douglas (1999, p.115) describe as a 'competing victims' syndrome' in relation to male and female educational disadvantage. Similarly, a pro-feminist position would be inconsistent if we made an over-claim that *all* men are disadvantaged (or all women are advantaged) by virtue of men's statistical under-representation (or women's statistical over-representation) in adult learning contexts.

By virtue of our focus on men, we nevertheless drift into what Rowan et al. (2002, p.5) describe as 'dangerous or hostile terrain'. We sail closest to a competing victims' syndrome in a pro-feminist breeze (and into a possible feminist storm) by arguing for a place for some men's sheds alongside women-dominated community houses and learning centres. To avoid misinterpretation we make three important points. Firstly, we acknowledge and support adult and community education (ACE) in Australia as a site of positive, feminising practice and for 'doing' femininity (after Connell 1996 and Lingard & Douglas 1999, p.118). Secondly, we recognise that much can and should be done within ACE to encourage more men to more equitably participate and learn alongside women (for example, see Learning Centre Link 2004, pp.12–14; Golding, Brown & Naufal 2006). Thirdly, we recognise that men's sheds have the potential to provide new and different opportunities for men to affirm other positive aspects of their masculinity, and to learn informally in the process.

Gender equity in education has come to invariably mean establishing equity for *women*. The fact that women clearly outnumber men as learners in most adult and community learning organisations (Golding, Davies & Volkoff 2001, p.68) has widely been considered normal and unproblematic. The Adult, Community and Further Education Board (1996) noted a decade ago that 'Women have constituted 75 per cent of Australian adult education participants for the past 75 years or more but this has received very little strategic focus in research policy or planning within the adult education field.' ACE has a strong feminist history and has very successfully and deliberately positioned itself as a sector of choice in adult education for many women. Golding, Davies and Volkoff (2001, p.68) note in their comprehensive review of Australian ACE research that literature on ACE 'is generally underpinned and informed by women's and feminist perspectives'. *Bringing in the blokes* (Learning Centre Link 2004, pp.8–11) identifies a wide range of difficulties and obstacles of attracting men to



Western Australian community neighbourhood and learning centres, noting that they are generally perceived by men as ‘a women’s thing’, having been created ‘as a response to the educational needs of women and ... established by women’ (p.8). In 2006 Australian ACE providers at town and neighbourhood level are typically set up, staffed and maintained mainly by women. The centre décor, the layout, the posters, the program and the opening hours tend to be oriented towards and embrace women and their particular and different needs from a house-type base in somewhat similar ways that men’s sheds position themselves for the specific interests and environments that attract and engage men. It is important for balance to note that in much the same way, the Australian VET sector, TAFE, tended through its culture, practice and pedagogies—until relatively recently—to become a site for masculinised trade practices and ‘doing’ masculinity.

It is possible to mount an argument, on solid evidence, that women are so prevalent in community and volunteer-based learning, caring and ageing contexts precisely because they are so disadvantaged in the workforce, generally less able to find secure, well-paid, full-time or tenured employment and training, and more interested than men in participating in non-work-related learning in their own time. In this reading, men who are employed get preferential access to instrumental vocational learning through their employers, and as McGivney (2004, p.65) suggests in the case of adult learners, ‘will lose face and standing with their peers if they depart from the established norms of male behaviour’ and unlike ‘real’ men engage as adults in learning.

It is therefore important to consider whether men’s sheds are effective—and should even be positioned—as learning organisations to train and make men more employable. While the answers remained open prior to the conduct of the surveys and interviews for the current research, there is now evidence to confirm that if sheds were to call themselves men’s ‘education’, ‘training’ or ‘learning’ centres—or even ‘health’ or ‘social’ centres—many older men would not come. In some ways sheds appear to work for men because of the quality of the engagement and the informal possibilities the spaces create for men rather than because of what ‘programs’ men can access there.

From a learning angle, McGivney (2004) has argued that while men tend to earn, women tend to learn: ‘Learning is seen by men as an unacceptable form of vulnerability’ (p.68) and ‘something that children, retired people or women do’ (p.65). Similarly to Hayes, Golding and Harvey (2004, p.36), Bull and Anstey (1995, p.9) found 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 to augment work.

While most feminists acknowledge that men are indeed under-represented in conventionally defined adult and community learning contexts and experience issues with learning and literacy, they are sometimes reluctant to countenance or acknowledge men’s disadvantage. Many share an understandable concern about likely misreading or simplifications of research findings—even of careful, nuanced and well-meaning research—about men’s different patterns of participation in formal and informal learning. There is a concern that research that identifies men’s disadvantage might take the focus off funding or support of programs to address women’s disadvantage, still experienced by women in terms of participation in—and particularly outcomes from—education and training more broadly. Feminists particularly counter suggestions of simple sectoral *exclusion* of men from adult education and training, implied in the title of McGivney’s (1999a) *Excluded Men: men who are missing from education and training* in the UK, but more nuanced on a careful reading of that work. McGivney in fact says that some of the ‘missing’ men:

... are not deliberately avoiding education: they are systematically excluded from it by employers, education institutions and the system governing programmes and welfare benefits for the unemployed (McGivney 1999a, p.70).

To date it has not been possible to prove or conclude that broader structural exclusions for men—identified in UK adult education contexts by McGivney (1992)—apply in the case of Australian adult learning. Our research allows for some investigation of the alternative or parallel possibility,

identified by McGivney (1999a, p.70), that men's reluctance to engage in education and training might be related 'to lack of interest, fear of failure or the embracing of traditional masculine values'. We provide more evidence of men's withdrawal to a men's space than evidence of structural exclusion from women's spaces and settings, other than perhaps the family home.

There are a number of good reasons, from the research, for encouraging men to meet, socialise and informally learn in all-male groups such as men's sheds, as advanced in general terms by Flood (2005, p.4). Flood suggests that 'the best involvements in men or boy's issues' should be underpinned by three 'interrelated principles: they are male positive, they are gender just, and they recognise diversity and are inclusive'. Berkowitz (2004, p.3), for example, found that workshop activities with men 'are more effective when conducted in small, all male groups because of the immense influence that men have on each other and because of the safety all male groups can provide'. Flood (2005, p.9) defends the use of all-male groups for three reasons that are important to hear in full, because of their relevance to some of the key empirical findings later in this report.

First, men's attitudes and behaviour are shaped in powerful ways by their male peers (Kimmel 1994, pp.128–9), and this male-male influence can be harnessed for positive ends (Berkowitz 2004, p.4). Second all-male groups can provide the space and safety for men to talk. Third, working in single-sex groups minimises the harmful, gendered forms of interaction that are common in mixed-sex groups. Men may look to women for approval, forgiveness and support and women may adopt nurturing or caretaking roles for men.

(Mohan & Schultz 2001)

While Flood (2005, p.9) cautions that 'all male groups do involve greater risk of men's collusion with sexism and violence, and this must be minimised', he identifies several good reasons to use men as facilitators and peer educators in gender-based work with men. They are that 'male educators tend to be perceived as more credible and persuasive'; that 'male educators can act as role models for men'; and that 'having men work with men embodies the recognition that men must take responsibility for helping to end gender inequality, rather than leaving it up to women'. It is also important, as Hayes and Williamson (2006, p.8) observe, to recognise that some men do face problems, and that some of these men can and do cause problems for themselves and others, not to see men as the problem 'because they are men'. It is also important, as Hayes and Williamson (2006, p.9) note, to recognise that community-based sheds, unlike some backyard sheds, 'are not places men go to get away from people. They go to Sheds specifically to be with other men.'

In this study of men's sheds, it is also important to identify and anticipate the positive role of women—as participants in some sheds but also as shed coordinators and managers, typically co-facilitating with men and almost invariably responsible for procuring and managing the externally sought funds. We also note the overwhelming evidence of strong support and active encouragement by the wives and partners of men who participate. Flood (2005, p.10) notes that 'female facilitators can also work very effectively with men, and there are benefits of women and men working together'. Berkowitz (2004, p.4) also suggests that it is 'beneficial for men to see women and men co-facilitating in a respectful partnership'. In both Australia and the UK there is a sense of frustration—particularly among women—of their inability to 'reach' men through adult education in particular. There is a growing recognition, summarised in UK contexts by McGivney (1999a, p.69), that since 'adult community education is seen as a service for women [it] consequently has a limited appeal for men', partly because 'they are mostly staffed by women'. As Tett (1994) identified, 'many adult and community education programmes are designed to help women gain new interests and achieve personal goals [and] therefore do not attract men who have a more instrumental attitude to learning' (McGivney 1999a, p.69).

Golding, Harvey and Echter (2005) showed that active involvement in community-based surrogate learning organisations that included football clubs, senior citizens and fire brigades were more effective learning environments for men that participate in them than for men who participate in ACE programs. These counter-intuitive findings prompted adoption in our research of several insights from situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger 1991). Rather than being about 'enrolment'

in ‘courses’, men’s sheds participation is treated as an immersion in a community of practice. The learning is socially constructed, interwoven within the community of practice and the negotiated processes of membership and participation. Participation is a way of belonging, where belonging is ‘not only a crucial condition for learning, but a constituent element of its content’ (Lave & Wenger 1991, p.35).

### The literature about informal learning

On the basis of the review of a range of literature, Fuller and Unwin (2005, p.24) ‘reject any notion that learning that takes place in specialist educational institutions is inherently superior to learning that takes place in settings such as the workplace or the home’. This perspective on learning recognises the particular strength of informal learning pedagogies, similar to those we identify in men’s sheds, that are social and situated (Lave & Wenger 1991) in communities of practice.

Hodges (1998, p.9), researching in an ACE context, suggests that ‘What emerges as crucial, then, is less the “content” of education, and more substantially the quality of the person’s participation within this educative community.’ What is being offered through TAFE and ACE is arguably less valuable than the learning some older men experience through belonging to, and participating in, surrogate learning organisations like men’s sheds as participants and volunteers—particularly with other men in communities of practice. Learning, through this perspective, as Hodges (1998, p.9) observes, ‘is an ontological transformation, not an epistemological effect’. Putting it another way, older men tend to come to men’s sheds programs and not to use TAFE or ACE because they tend not to feel like they belong, or experience the same quality of participation that they experience in sheds. Using a somewhat similar theoretical lens to that used by Hodges (1998, p.8), it is possible to argue that this is, in part, because participation in ACE is organised by female structures of privilege that deny men’s difference and diversity. Men therefore have to anticipate that men’s sheds will also be seen by some women as setting up male structures of privilege.

## Surveys and interviews

The survey questions were developed and refined in consultation with members of the Research Reference Committee as well as with key stakeholders in men's sheds, men's health, aged care and adult learning. Identical or close variants of around two-thirds of the questions had been tested in previous research projects of informal, community-based and men's learning. These include Hayes, Golding and Harvey's (2004) study of learning through fire and emergency services organisations and Golding, Harvey and Echter's (2005) study of *Men's learning through ACE and community involvement in small rural towns* in Victoria. A set of new, men's shed-specific questions were included towards the front of the survey. These questions were piloted in Victoria for Golding and Harvey's (2006) survey of participants in all 28 active men's sheds in Victoria. The new questions sought to profile men participating in shed-type programs, in particular to determine men's perceptions about their experiences of the program, anticipated outcomes, reasons for being involved, demographic and educational profile, recent life and employment transitions as well as current learning opportunities, preferences and experiences. The Victorian survey results helped shape the final form of the interview schedule that did not form part of that previous study. Data from some of these sheds were transferred, with appropriate permission, directly to the national survey to avoid the need to resurvey some participants.

To increase the relevance of the survey and to enhance response rates, each survey header was customised to include the name of each shed program and location. Appendix 1, 'Survey instrument', contains a copy of the survey. Appendix 2, 'Interview and survey protocols', includes information for the local person facilitating the survey distribution and interviews and the interview schedule for program facilitators and program participants. Appendix 2 also includes the Provider information pro forma, used to record on-site information to systematically categorise provider and program types in the survey sample and ensure consistency between the three field researchers (Golding, Brown and Foley). The links between each shed organisation and other organisations were mapped using a network diagram with standard organisational prompts, as developed by Golding and as successfully used in several previous NCVER research projects (Hayes, Golding & Harvey 2004).

Though targeted interviewees were male shed participants aged over 45 years, a few younger men were interviewed. Consistent with our University of Ballarat research ethics approval, close attention was paid to participant and provider privacy and confidentiality and interviewees were required to be over 18 years of age. No data are reported in a way that identifies individual respondents or which enables respondents to be linked to particular shed organisations. All shed organisations involved in the study were fully informed during the study and received early drafts of the aggregated survey results and this report.

## Identification of men's shed organisations

At the commencement of the project, in September 2005, there were no reliable or systematic national databases available of men's shed-type programs and spaces, though partial and selective state and regional lists were available. The researchers set about identifying all shed-type programs using a combination of internet searches, phone calls and emails to known program or shed

coordinators. Attendance and involvement in workshop presentations at both the annual Australian Men's Health Conference in Melbourne in October 2005 and the inaugural 'Men's Sheds Conference' in Lakes Entrance in November 2005 were extremely useful in identifying the active sheds and the key shed stakeholders. The latter conference included the small number of researchers in what Hayes and Williamson (2006, p.3) accurately described as 'an emerging field in which the evidence is not straight-forward as yet'.

Table 1 summarises the concentration by state and territory of all men's shed-type programs and spaces, consistent with the earlier definition, located in Australia to July 2006. It includes approximately 126 active men's shed-type organisations in community contexts and 65 other sheds planning or preparing to open.

**Table 1 Community-based men's shed-type programs in Australia to July 2006**

State/territory	No. of sheds	State/territory population (millions)	No. of sheds open per million population
South Australia	51 (42)	1.51	27.8
Tasmania	13 (6)	0.47	12.8
Victoria	64 (45)	4.82	8.1
Northern Territory	1 (1)	0.20	5.0
New South Wales	45 (23)	6.61	3.5
Australian Capital Territory	1 (1)	0.32	3.1
Western Australia	10 (5)	1.90	2.6
Queensland	6 (3)	3.64	0.8
<b>Australia total</b>	<b>191 (126)</b>	<b>19.47</b>	<b>6.5</b>

Note: The 'No. of sheds' includes 65 sheds in the process of forming and opening. The number actually open in July 2006 is shown in brackets. State and territory population is in millions, based on 2001 census data. The 'No. of sheds open per million population' is the ratio of the number of sheds open to the state/territory population in millions, on which the table is sorted.

All 191 men's sheds organisations in Australia located for the current research are mapped in appendix 3. As anticipated from table 1, most are in south-eastern Australia (see also appendix 3) with a particularly high concentration per head of population in rural South Australia, eastern Victoria and Tasmania. The concentration suggests a distribution created more by local and recent diffusion through example and mentoring around particular nodes, rather than by a distribution that is explicable based on men's need or demographics alone. The small number of sheds in Queensland specifically and northern Australia generally remains unexplained in this study, though climatic and cultural factors that lead men in Queensland to seek leisure and retirement experiences elsewhere, including outside, are the most likely explanations.

Most sheds have been developed in locations and organisations where a particular need has coincided with a local leader who has been inspired by experiences of other successful programs. Shed networks are becoming particularly evident in 2006 in south-eastern Australian states. A large proportion of sheds is directed to the needs of older men. While the settings and organisations involved vary, many are located within aged care and frail aged settings; some are part of men's health, war veterans, welfare and wellbeing programs; others are based out of community education centres or neighbourhood houses. Some shed programs in aged care and day care centres target activities at men with dementia. In longer-established spaces and programs, including larger towns and capital cities—as well as in rural locations with strong community support—there is a tendency for multiple use and more evidence of links to men's and boy's needs in other organisations, including to some schools. There is a limited commercial shed network being established in some sites in New South Wales, beyond its initial base in Grenfell. By virtue of commercial confidentiality, some sites under development or being mentored as part of this network were not disclosed to researchers.

## Justification and confirmation of targeted programs and sites

The original research plan anticipated visits to four sites in each of six states. Given the concentration and diversity of potential sites in South Australia and Victoria in particular, the Research Reference Committee endorsed researcher recommendations to make a purposive selection of 24 sites as originally planned, but to concentrate relatively more effort in South Australia and Victoria where around two-thirds of all Australian men's sheds are located. Seven Victorian sites and five South Australian sites were included in order to capture the diversity apparent in Victorian sheds. Four sites were selected in each of New South Wales, Western Australia and Tasmania. The very small numbers of mainly frail-aged programs in Queensland were not sampled. One interview was undertaken in Sydney with the principals in a commercial shed network. The final selection was made of 24 sites across the selected five states that broadly represented the range of shed types found in the national database.

# Results of men's sheds survey

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Survey and interview data are available from participants in 24 community-based men's sheds purposely selected for the survey sample. Interviews and surveys took place in Victoria (7 shed organisations), South Australia (5), Tasmania (4), Western Australia (4), and New South Wales (4). The original aim of 15 surveys distributed per shed was adjusted to account for different numbers of shed participants. The number of surveys actually distributed per shed ranged between five and 20. The achieved respondent sample, though non-random and biased by practical considerations towards locations and respondents closer to capital cities, is considered to provide a reasonable cross-section of community-based men's shed types, configurations and locations open in Australia in 2006. It is, however, likely that the national databases and the achieved sample under-represents small and informal sheds located in some aged care centres. A wide range of characteristics of sheds sampled were collected on a separate survey completed by shed managers or coordinators, which were able to be matched later to participant responses from particular sheds.

## Response rate and limitations

When the 46 surveys returned either blank (43) or late (3) are subtracted from the total of 345 distributed, the overall response of 211 completed surveys from 299 effectively distributed is 70.6%. This is a remarkably high response rate for a mailed, reply-paid survey from a cohort of older men. In terms of sampling errors, the sample sizes achieved are adequate for estimating population parameters with an acceptable degree of accuracy.

There is evidence from the analysis of responses that around one-third of respondents experienced questionnaire fatigue, particularly on later questions, and that some questions may have had less relevance to respondents. Hence there is some risk of non-response bias—the views of those respondents who answered these questions may differ from those of the respondents who did not. The section of the survey about TAFE was the least answered, with as few as 55% of the 211 respondents answering one of the sub-questions. However, most of the more complex questions—even those later in the survey—elicited between 60 and 80% response for questions that invited all respondents to answer. For all of these reasons, the percentages of respondents who answered particular questions should be considered as a reasonable and approximate indication of answers from the respondent sample for the selected survey sample of around one-quarter of all Australian men's sheds in community contexts, rather than an accurate measure of all men who use the larger number of community-based men's sheds across Australia.

## Responses by state, location, shed size configuration

Of the 211 respondents nationally, Victorian respondents comprised 36%, New South Wales 19%, South Australia 18%, Tasmania 14% and Western Australia 12%. Respondents from capital city men's sheds comprised 49% of survey respondents. A further 29% were from Australian regional cities and 22% were from rural towns. Around one-third of respondents surveyed were from 'stand-alone' sheds. Of the respondents, 31% were from sheds that had been purpose built. Thirty-four per cent of respondents were from sheds located on main street frontages, while 66% were in 'out of the way' areas. All but two of the 24 sheds sampled were based primarily around woodwork

activity, though 55% of respondents were from sheds that also included a metalwork activity area and 55% of respondents were from sheds that also included an adjacent garden area.

One-half of respondents (50%) were from smaller sheds with 20 or fewer average participants per week: the other half were from larger sheds that had more than 20 participants per week. Weekly shed participation ranged between 5 and 125 men per week with an average of 36 men. Around half of the respondents (46%) were from sheds organised by health or aged care organisations or, in a few cases, by Vietnam Veterans or Returned Services League (RSL) organisations. Most of the rest (54%) of the men's sheds in the survey sample were organised by church, adult and community education or local government organisations, sometimes in combination.

## Responses by shed origins, management and funding

Thirty-one per cent of respondents were from sheds developed 'spontaneously': the rest (69%) were from 'planned' sheds. Reflecting this trend, 36% of respondents were from sheds with unpaid volunteer coordinators and 65% were from sheds with paid coordinators. Most sheds had been developed relatively recently: one-third of respondents (34%) were from sheds that had been opened within the past four years. The balance of respondents (66%) was from sheds that had been open for four or more years. Only 28% of respondents were from shed organisations that considered themselves 'stand alone': the balance was from sheds 'physically embedded in a larger organisation' (42%) or 'part of a larger organisation but physically separate' (30%). It is important to note Hayes and Williamson's (2006, p.34) finding that it is 'particularly important when community health services auspice [men's sheds] it is important that they are sufficiently embedded in and not just bedded at the organisation'.

Some sheds in smaller towns were only open part of one day a week. Other, larger sheds in cities were open for most of the week, some with different participants and programs on each week day. Forty-six per cent of respondents were from sheds that were open less than four days a week: the balance (55%) was from sheds open or accessible to participants on four or more days a week. Two-thirds of respondents were from sheds open some time during most weeks 'all year round'. With some exceptions, most men's sheds have one particular, regular day or a number of days with set times during the day that the shed is available to particular individuals. Men were asked 'How often, on average, do you take part in this men's shed's activities?' Most men used the shed either 'weekly' (45%) or 'a few times a week' (45%). One in 20 men (5%) indicated that they used it 'daily'. Very small proportions used the shed less regularly: 2% ticked 'fortnightly', 1% ticked 'monthly' and 3% ticked 'occasionally'.

One-half of respondents are from sheds that are 'mainly funded': 19% are from 'partly funded' sheds and 31% are from 'unfunded' sheds. Fifty-nine per cent of respondents were from sheds whose funding was 'mostly sought', the balance (41%) being from sheds whose funding was 'mostly donated'. As a consequence, around one-third (38%) of respondents pay to attend the shed. Fifty-nine per cent of respondents were from sheds whose funding was 'general purpose': the balance of funding was 'for men's programs'. Nearly one-half of respondents (46%) were from sheds whose funding was considered 'adequate': the majority (54%) were from sheds with 'inadequate' funding. Consequently, two-thirds of respondents (67%) were from sheds dependent on resources *other* than funding. Shed managers and coordinators were mainly male, but 21% of respondents were from sheds where the shed coordinator was female. Most shed and workshop supervisors are men.

## Response by shed membership and rules

Consistent with the relative recency of community-based men's shed development in Australia, around half of respondents reported that they had participated in the shed for less than four years:



the mean length of participation was 3.0 years and the mode was one year (range zero to 14 years). Responses to a separate question confirmed that 63% began participating in the men's shed in which they were surveyed during the past two years. Most (63%) were from sheds in which the use of tools was 'strictly limited to participants with demonstrated competency': the balance (37%) was from sheds where access to tools was either 'open' or 'partly restricted'.

Respondents were unanimous about the important role of the shed coordinator: 99.5% of respondents agreed that 'the role of the shed coordinator is important' (60% strongly agreeing). Consistent with this strong positive response, 97% of men agreed that 'someone has to be responsible at all times', with 58% strongly agreeing. In most sheds (80%), men agreed that they had 'some say over how the shed was run'. Sheds varied from those accessible at any time to the small number of members who were provided with a key, to sheds that were tightly timetabled by shed supervisors for large numbers of men over much of the week. Of all survey respondents, around two-thirds of participants agreed that 'it is best to have programs with set times and days'. While 35% of men were 'frustrated by the limited time the shed was open', the overwhelming majority (97%) enjoyed the freedom of 'being able to come when I want to', with 62% strongly agreeing. Fifty-four per cent of respondents were from sheds theoretically available 'to any men': 48% are from sheds targeted to a 'specific group of men'. Over one-half of respondents were from sheds that directly or indirectly required some form of 'membership criteria'. While 54% of respondents were from sheds that considered that they were 'available to some young people', only 1% of respondents who use sheds were aged less than 25 years<sup>2</sup>.

## Participant attitudes and experiences of the shed

The survey data provides a very rich source of information on who uses the men's sheds surveyed, including men's attitudes and experiences of using the shed. This section contains a summary focusing on some aspects of the broad demographic background of men who responded, in particular for variables to be examined more closely in subsequent analyses involving cross tabulations and tests of significance by group.

### Age, marital and employment status

Most sheds cater primarily for older men, though there are exceptions. While there was strong (93%) agreement that 'it is best to have a mix of men of different ages', around one-half (47%) of respondents were age 65 years or older and 89% were 45 years or older. Not surprisingly, 73% of all respondents were 'retired from paid work' and only 11% were 'in the paid workforce'. Eighteen per cent were neither retired nor in paid work: 22% agreed that they were 'unable to get paid work' and only 21% agreed that they 'expect to get more paid work'. Of all the men who responded, around three-quarters 'received some type of pension'.

While 81% of respondents indicated they were 'married or have previously been married', 63% of men 'currently live with a wife or partner'. This compares with between 69% and 73% of all men in five-year age cohorts who reported being in either a registered or de facto marriage in Australia in 2001. Seventy-nine per cent of men indicated that they were fathers and 57% were grandfathers. Some of the implications of other types of sheds for men and fathers are explored in Moloney (2003).

For four out of ten men (39%) who answered the question about school experience, 'Year 9 or below' was their 'highest completed formal education at school', though one in five (21%) had completed the final year—Year 12—at school. The most frequent completed formal education at school among respondents was Year 10 (28%). It is important to note that the proportion of men surveyed in men's sheds with their highest levels of school education as Year 9 or below

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<sup>2</sup> The survey specifically excluded women and school age children.

approximates the 38 and 39% of men aged 65–74 and 75+ with those education levels in the Australian population (2001 census), but is significantly greater than the proportion of men with those highest levels in the 45–55 year (17%) and 55–64 year (30%) age cohorts.

Four out of ten respondents (41%) were ‘former qualified tradesmen’. For around one-third (35%) of respondents who responded to the question about post-school education and training, an ‘apprenticeship or traineeship’ was the ‘highest completed formal education since school’, though 27% had a ‘TAFE certificate or diploma’ as a highest qualification. While 14% had completed a ‘university or higher degree’, 15% had no completed formal education since school.

## Other important attributes of respondents

A series of questions asked men to indicate whether or not particular attributes applied to them. Most men who responded were ‘active participants in this men’s shed’ (93% answered ‘Yes’) and one-third (34%) indicated that they had ‘a leadership role in this men’s shed’.

A relatively high proportion of men (29%)—compared with the general men’s population—indicated that they had ‘special needs (an impairment or disability)’ or were ‘a returned serviceman’ (20%).

One in ten men indicated that they ‘speak another language other than English at home’ (10%) and 2% indicated that they were ‘Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander’ persons. These proportions are regarded as being of a similar order of magnitude to those expected of the background Australian population for men of that age for the locations sampled.

## Role of women in men’s sheds

Most sheds are mainly for men: 96% of men surveyed agreed that ‘this men’s shed’s members are mainly men’. However, many sheds included small numbers of female participants. One-half of respondents (50%) are from sheds that are ‘either for women or men’. Shed policies relating to women varied considerably. One-third of respondents were from sheds where women were ‘not welcome’: one-third (36%) were from sheds where women were ‘welcome as visitors’ and the remaining one-third (31%) were from sheds where women were ‘welcome as participants’. Consistent with these different policies on female participation, male shed participants were reasonably evenly split in terms of their attitudes to women participating in the shed: 56% agreed they ‘would feel comfortable if women participated’, including 14% ‘strongly agreeing’, while 44% disagreed, including 19% ‘strongly disagreeing’. Similarly, 48% of respondents agreed that ‘this shed only welcomes men’ and 42% disagreed that ‘this shed is equally welcoming of male and female members’.

## Health and wellbeing of participants

Men who responded provided considerable evidence of recent, significant and difficult changes in health, relationships and employment. ‘Within the past five years’ 55% had experienced retirement, 45% had experienced ‘a major health crisis’, 30% ‘a new impairment or disability’, 27% ‘an inability to get paid work’, 25% ‘a significant loss in my life’, 19% ‘separation from a partner’ and 19% ‘a financial crisis’. Eleven per cent of men had experienced ‘separation from the family home’ in the past five years and 10% ‘separation from children’.

Thirty-one per cent of men were ‘referred to the men’s shed by a health or welfare worker’ and 53% of men ‘heard about the men’s shed through a friend’. While 78% ‘currently have a car licence and drive’, 16% of respondents ‘depend on others to get to the men’s shed’. Six out of ten men (61%) who responded live with a wife or partner. Four out of ten participants (42%) regarded the shed as ‘a place where I can meet other people’. Most men who responded agreed that they ‘have limited access to my own tools where I live’ (62%). Most (71%) agreed that they needed ‘more training on some of the equipment’ in the community-based men’s shed.

## Access to a shed

A few questions were included in the survey to tease out why ‘a shed’ was preferred over other spaces as the site for mainly male activity. Only one-third of men (35%) had access to a shed as a boy and only 12% had lost their ‘own work shed or space’ in the past five years. Around one-half of men (55%) agreed that they ‘currently had limited access to my own work shed’ and 61% agreed that they currently had ‘limited access to my own tools where I live’. While ‘shedlessness’ is one factor affecting men, friendship would appear also to be a critical factor, as the next section reveals.

## Men’s perceptions of the shed

A series of questions teased out men’s experiences associated with the shed. The responses were overwhelmingly positive on some important dimensions, including the lack of compulsion, opportunities for socialising, as well as a strong sense of belonging, health and wellbeing. Virtually all men (98%) agreed that they enjoyed ‘being able to make what I want’, ‘the social aspect’ (99%) and ‘being able to come when I want to’ (97%). Virtually all men (97%) agreed that they ‘felt at home in the shed’, with one-half (51%) strongly agreeing. Virtually all respondents (99%) agreed that they had ‘made good friends in the shed’, with 52% strongly agreeing. The ‘chance to mentor others’ was also regarded as overwhelmingly positive, with 99% of respondents agreeing.

Consistent with the fact that the overwhelming majority of sheds have wood as the main medium of hands-on activity, virtually all men (97%) agreed that they ‘really enjoy working with wood’. Consistent also with the fact that many men’s sheds do not have a dedicated metal working area, a strong but smaller proportion of participants (81%) agreed that they ‘really enjoy working with metals’. Importantly for occupational health and safety, 70% of men agreed that they ‘need more training on some of the equipment’, though the question did not specify whether this referred to equipment that they already used or not.

Many but not all men’s sheds have trips and outings for members. Therefore a higher proportion of respondents than average did not answer the question asking whether men ‘enjoyed the trips or outings’, and some others indicated the question was not applicable. Of the 80% of all respondents who expressed an opinion, 85% agreed.

Five different statements explored aspects of how men regarded the men’s shed. There was overwhelming agreement to each. Strongest agreement was to the statement that the shed is regarded ‘as a place to meet new friends’ (99% agreement), ‘to be with other men’ (97%), ‘to learn new skills’ (95%), ‘to keep me healthy’ (95%) and ‘to get out of the house’ (90%). Strong agreement was recorded for over 40% of men for each of these statements, except for ‘to get out of the house’ which recorded 36% strong agreement.

## Outcomes from participating in the shed

Similarly, there was very strong agreement to each of the statements designed to explore outcomes and projected outcomes as a result of participating in the men’s shed—with the notable exception of the statement ‘I expect to get more paid work’. Eight out of ten men (80%) either disagreed (32% strongly disagreeing) or found this statement inapplicable. Only one in 20 men (5%) strongly agreed with it. In summary, a maximum of one in five participants entertained the possibility of re-entering the paid workforce. The strongest overall agreement, by 99.5% of men, is that as a result of participating, ‘I feel better about myself’, ‘I have a place where I belong’ (97% agreement), ‘I can give back to the community’ (97% agreement), ‘I am doing what I really enjoy’ (97% agreement) and ‘I feel more accepted in the community’ (90% agreement). The level of agreement remained strong but diminished somewhat for the statement that as a result of participating ‘I get access to men’s health information’ (79% agreement) and ‘I feel happier at home’ (77% agreement).

## Connections to the community

A few statements sought to identify respondent perceptions about the ways in which the men's shed connected (or not) to the local community. There was overwhelmingly strong agreement (99%, including 67% *strong* agreement) that 'This men's shed warmly welcomes new members'. There was strong agreement to the statement 'This men's sheds' resources are available for wider community use' (78% agreement). The 22% of respondents who answered 'no' were presumably members of sheds with relatively tight membership criteria. Men's sheds are very 'well connected to the local community (93% agreement, including 31% strong agreement) though with less 'strong links outside of the town' (63% agreement, including 11% strong agreement). This response is consistent with evidence from the network diagrams that some sheds have only recently become aware of the value of, and potential for, wider networks of shed-type organisations within similar regions, as well as across states or nationally.

## Learning-related attitudes and experiences

### Learning interests, opportunities and experiences in the shed

The results from the survey confirm that relatively few men had positive recollections or recent experience of formal learning. Only around one-quarter of men 'really enjoyed learning at school' (28% agreed), although 15% had 'attended a formal learning program in the past year'. The survey asked men to indicate which of nine different types of learning (expressed as skills) were available to them in the shed. Most of the skills identified were associated with the typically informal shed activities: most men (80%) ticked 'leisure skills', two-thirds (66%) ticked 'technical, trade or craft skills' and 62% ticked 'safety or health skills'. Of the remaining skills, around one-quarter of men indicated that there were opportunities for learning about 'computer or internet skills' (28%) and that 'team or leadership skills' learning (25%) was also available in or through participation in the shed. Fewer respondents indicated that opportunities were available for learning 'communication or literacy skills' (18%), 'customer service skills' (10%) or 'land management skills' (4%) or for 'other learning' (3%).

Respondents who indicated that a particular type of learning (skill) was available to them were asked, in a follow-up question, to indicate how *useful* each skill was to them in contexts beyond the shed: at home, at work or in the community. Multiple options were possible in this follow-up question and a fourth option 'not useful' was also available. For most of the main skills available through the men's shed, the majority of respondents identified the main usefulness of the skills learnt through their participation in the shed to the *home*, and the next most useful aspect in the *community*. For 'leisure skills', usefulness in the home was identified for 69% of cases, for 'technical, trade or craft skills' 79%, for 'safety or health skills' 60%, and for 'computer or internet skills' 53%. For 'leisure skills', usefulness in the community was identified for 33% of cases, for 'technical, trade or craft skills' 46%, for 'safety or health skills' 43% and for 'computer or internet skills' 29%.

Not surprisingly for mainly older and retired men who use men's sheds, only one in five of whom expected to get more paid work, the usefulness of skills that transfer to work was seen to be relatively minor by most survey respondents. For 'leisure skills' usefulness to work was identified in 13% of cases, for 'technical, trade or craft skills' 12%, for 'safety or health skills' 19% and for 'computer or internet skills' 9%.

In order to identify their preferred mode of future learning, respondents were asked 'If more learning opportunities were available through this men's shed, would you be interested in taking part?' Around six out of ten men (62%) said 'yes' and a further 13% said 'maybe'. One-quarter (25%) said 'no'. The three-quarters (75%) of respondents who answered 'yes' or 'maybe' were invited to indicate which of 11 different types of learning they would be interested in. Multiple responses were again encouraged. The overwhelming preference—from three-quarters (77%) of these potential learners—was for "hands on" learning'. More than one-half (58%) would prefer

learning ‘where I can meet other people’, via ‘special interest courses’, ‘in a small group’ (52%) or ‘through field days or demonstrations’ (50%). More than one in five men expressed a preference for learning by ‘individual tuition’ (30%), through ‘taking on responsibility’ (28%), ‘in a class’ (22%), ‘through the internet’ (22%) or by means of ‘a course to get a qualification’. In this sense, men’s sheds as they are currently configured tend to already match the informal learning needs and preferences of the older demographic of participants.

The same group of potential learners (comprising 75% of all respondents) were asked by whom ‘would you prefer these learning opportunities be provided?’, as well as *where* they would prefer to learn. While multiple responses were not encouraged, they were recorded for both questions. Most opted for, in effect, utilising ‘in-shed’ skills and expertise, either from ‘another member of [their] men’s shed with the appropriate skills’ (45%) or the ‘another member . . .’ response in combination with other responses (27%) totalling 72% of total responses. The next most preferred option was ‘bringing in a local tutor/trainer from outside of your men’s shed’ (18%). Only a very small proportion of men opted for ‘bringing in a tutor/trainer from outside your town’ (4%), ‘a men’s shed elsewhere in a larger centre’ or ‘the internet’ (1% each). Similarly, this same group of potential learners opted overwhelmingly for in-house delivery either ‘in this men’s shed’ (77%) or through a combination of ‘in this men’s shed’ and other responses (18%) totalling 94% of all responses. Only 2% opted for delivery in ‘a local community learning centre or neighbourhood house’, ‘a TAFE’ (1%) or ‘a venue outside your local area’ (1%). In summary, the community-based men’s shed is recognised by participants as an effective and strongly preferred site for learning informally, both currently and for future learning.

## Opinions about the local TAFE

Given that the research design included an examination of opportunities for vocational education and training, a set of positive, negative and conditional statements were included, for response by all men, exploring participant opinions of the ‘local TAFE’. Men were encouraged in the lead in to the question to answer with respect to the *closest* local TAFE campus to them. The most positive agreement was to the general statement that ‘[TAFE] is held in high regard by the local community’ (83% agreement). The next most positive response was to the statements ‘I would use [TAFE] any time if I really needed it’ (76% agreement), ‘[TAFE] is a useful place for me to do courses’ (65% agreement) and ‘[TAFE] is valuable to me as a resource’ (64% agreement). In summary, most men who use men’s sheds are generally positive about and supportive of their local TAFE as a useful place to do courses. There was overall rejection of the statement ‘[TAFE] doesn’t offer anything I need to learn’ (69% disagreement) as well as two conditional statements ‘I would go [to TAFE] more if more people I knew went there’ (62% disagreement) and ‘I would go [to TAFE] more if more men went there’ (58% disagreement). Men were reasonably split in their response to the statement ‘I don’t feel comfortable going to TAFE’, with 53% disagreeing and 47% agreeing.

## Opinions about learning in and through the men’s shed

Sixteen statements were provided on the survey to further explore ‘opinions about learning in and through the men’s shed’. Respondents clearly indicated their keenness ‘to learn more’ (94% agreement) and a desire ‘to improve my skills’ (95% agreement) in and through the shed. Ninety-seven per cent agreed that ‘being part of this men’s shed helps me learn’, 93% of men indicated that they ‘actively take part in the learning opportunities that are offered’ and 83% agreed that ‘there are opportunities to improve my communication skills’ in and through the men’s shed. Most men (84%) also agreed that ‘my skills are already good enough for me to take an active part in this men’s shed’. Consistent with this positive response, 85% of respondents *disagreed* that ‘there is too much emphasis on learning things I can already do’, 83% *disagreed* that ‘there is not enough recognition of what I already know’ and 79% *disagreed* that ‘there is too much importance placed on formal learning’ in and through the men’s shed. While 71% of men agreed that ‘members of this men’s shed need more opportunities to learn’, the significant remainder (29%) disagreed. Similarly, while

63% of respondents agreed that ‘this men’s shed could offer more opportunities for learning’, more than one-third (37%) disagreed.

Some difficulties were identified which limit the potential of both learning generally and learning through the men’s shed in particular. Nearly one-quarter of respondents (23%) agreed that ‘difficulties with my skills make it hard for me to learn’, and 11% agreed that ‘learning is made more difficult because of this men’s shed’s isolation’. By contrast, the relatively small size of most men’s sheds compared to other learning organisations was seen as positive, with 79% of respondents agreeing that ‘this men’s shed’s small size makes learning easier’. The already identified importance of learning through the men’s shed—rather than elsewhere—for many men was reinforced by the finding that over one-half (57%) of respondents agreed that ‘opportunities for learning elsewhere in this community are limited’.

## Desired learning preferences and barriers to learning

The final learning-related questions explored men’s opinions about their *general* learning enjoyment, aside from the men’s shed, as well as possible general barriers to their further learning. Men were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement to eight statements beginning with ‘I generally enjoy to learn ...’. The overwhelming, general learning preference for men who use men’s sheds is ‘in practical situations’ (99% agreement) and ‘by doing’ (94% agreement). There was strong agreement to learning generally ‘in a group with men’ (86% agreement) and also ‘in outdoor settings’ (76% agreement), though most men (75%) agreed that they also enjoy to learn ‘in a mixed group including women’. Around one-half of men (48%) agreed that they enjoy learning ‘on my own from books and other printed material’. Four out of ten men agreed that they enjoy learning ‘via the computer or internet’ (41% agreement) or ‘in a classroom’ (40% agreement). In summary, while men’s *general* enjoyment is for practical, hands-on, group learning with other men *or* women mainly in outdoor settings, a significant minority of male participants were tolerant of some other forms of learning generally, including through texts and via the internet.

The partial statement ‘I would be more likely to be involved in learning if ...’ had 15 possible completions, all of which invited agreement or disagreement and which were designed to identify factors that might mitigate against learning for this group of mainly older men. The strongest positive response was that ‘I would be more likely to be involved in learning ... if there was something I really wanted to learn’ (86% agreement). A large number of other factors elicited a less strong, but overall positive, response, all of which had to do essentially with finding the appropriate and accessible location. These included if ‘... there was somewhere locally I considered a good place to learn’ (69% agreement), if ‘... there were more learning situations where men were encouraged’ (63% agreement), if ‘... there were sufficient learning resources locally’, and if ‘... I had more opportunities locally’ (59% agreement).

Other factors that would be more likely—for a slight majority of men—to be involved in learning were to do with free time, age and health. They included if ‘I had more free time’ (59% agreement), if ‘I was younger’ (54% agreement) and if ‘my health allowed it’ (54% agreement). Somewhat equivocal responses were forthcoming to the statements if ‘this men’s shed was open more often’ (51% agreement), if ‘there were more male tutors or teachers available locally’ (49% agreement) and if ‘I was more confident’ (45% agreement). Only one-third of respondents indicated that they would be more involved in learning if ‘they lived closer to the men’s shed’ (35% agreement) or if ‘courses were shorter’ (33% agreement). Finally, around only one in five men (23%) agreed that they would be more involved in learning if ‘I had more support from my family or partner’. Conversely, around one in five men (18%) *strongly* disagreed with the same statement.

# Conclusion

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What we have done in this report, using empirical evidence and narrative, is undertake a materially based analysis of men's practices in community-based sheds from the perspective of men who participate in them. In doing so, we not only make new findings about men's sheds and programs, but also make some important new distinctions between men who use these sheds and what theory says about traditional, negative and hegemonic masculinities. Our research confirms for the first time, using compelling and rigorously collected data from participants, the critical value of community-based men's sheds in Australia to older men's wellbeing: particularly to their health, social enjoyment, ongoing learning capacity and ability to contribute to the community. Sheds in community organisations, relatively recently created, provide a new, valuable and critically important activity space for a wide range of mainly older men within safe, supervised settings. They allow men to regularly meet and happily socialise, mainly with other men with tools, in a safe, familiar shared workshop setting in a wide range of communities, situations and organisational types. The men who use men's sheds respond positively to environments that allow them to socialise, feel at home and learn informally by doing, in practical, group situations with other men.

These community-based sheds are unlike individual men's 'backyard sheds' and different from other organisations in the community in which men meet and socialise in several important respects. Though they are hands-on and male-positive in terms of their activities, pedagogy and focus, unlike most private sheds they are generally inclusive of and tolerant of all men and women in the community, particularly their own families and partners. By being mainly accessible to groups of men in community spaces rather than out of sight in back yards, they are designed around the diverse needs of men and accountable to the communities and organisations that typically auspice and benefit from them. In all of these respects, men's sheds are also different from most other community-based organisations. They provide licence for men to 'come out' as men and share aspects of their masculinity with other men in positive ways, which are complementary to, but separate from, their relationships with women, their identities at home or their identity in the wider community. In essence, sheds provide a licence for men to tap into and safely experience the essence of being 'blokes', separate from, but without being oppressive to, women and girls. In the process they are able to build on and share their existing hands-on skills. What they produce has considerable practical and economic value to the community. The benefits are significant for partners, families and carers as well as to the health and wellbeing of men who participate.

Our research identifies men's sheds as one way out of the difficult situation older men find themselves—that is, with a desperate need for social learning that they are unable to admit to or address through VET or ACE. It provides evidence among the participants of a preference for hands-on and practical outdoor learning styles and pedagogies. The shed provides what a classroom does not, particularly for older men with limited or negative experiences of formal learning: a place and a licence for them to learn and be productive but still be both social and masculine with other men. Beyond these common conclusions we identify a diverse range of mainly older men who use sheds in community contexts. The characteristics of men who use particular sheds programs are determined, to some degree, by the nature of the organisation that sponsors, funds or organises the shed and also the services that the organisation offers. For example, sheds for Indigenous Australians or war veterans organisations tend to attract and meet the specific needs of the group they target. For these reasons, as Hayes and Williamson (2005) identified in their tentative shed typology, a comprehensive shed typology could include a long list of types, some of which include only a few

examples. In rural areas with lower population densities, there is less scope for targeting particular groups of men and sheds tend to include a wider range of men.

Men's sheds have more to do with producing significant, non-vocational benefits through informal, collective, community involvement than formal, individual enrolment and rarely provide direct vocational pathways to future paid work. They are therefore also difficult to analyse and categorise within a formal VET typology. The programs and spaces certainly encourage and perpetuate men's workshop-based, hands-on, trade skills typical of wood and metal workshops in TAFE and pay close attention to compulsory occupational health and safety practices. However, the current emphasis in sheds is low on formal and current industry competencies for working in contemporary industry workplaces. While the primary benefits of sheds are non-vocational, one in five men would undertake paid work if they could, and already benefit significantly from participation with other men in productive, regular, voluntary, work-based activity.

By virtue of the situated nature of the informal learning that they encourage in community settings, men's sheds model pedagogies more similar to those found in ACE. What is different is that they deliberately create an area for socialisation in a men's workshop rather than a house or learning centre designed primarily for and by women. For this reason, some ACE organisations, particularly in Tasmania and Victoria, are successfully complementing their provision and encouraging older men's learning by creating a men's shed separate from, or parallel to, their community centre or neighbourhood house-type organisation.

We identify a particular opportunity, so far developed in only a small number of sheds in each of the states examined, for sheds to set up very successful mentoring programs for school age students with an aversion to formal school settings but a keen desire to learn informally through shed-based practice.

Our research also raises some unanswered questions that are beyond the scope of this project and that might make topics for future research. Is a move towards men's sheds about men retreating or about men 'coming out'? Is it normal, natural and unproblematic? Is the 'male only shed' a form of the modern day Masonic Lodge? Will men-only organisations solve or perpetuate men's isolation and difference? In what ways are men's sheds akin to some women retreating to a position of learning strength with other women in the 'community house'? To what extent are men's sheds colonised by men who eschew a competing victims' syndrome? Does an 'ACE for women' and sheds or 'sheds for men' strategy risk an adult education divide based on gender?

Sheds in community contexts retain and incorporate some aspects of Australian masculinity, including the shed as an iconic place for men to go to. However, by being located in public spaces and organisations and being accountable to and with other men, they tend to both avoid and positively address all of the negative and sometimes pathological features of the generally accepted core features of 'traditional masculinity', as defined by French (2002). While men in the shed become 'providers' with other men in a hands-on sense, as in the traditional masculinist stereotype, they are providing essentially for other men and for the community. There is evidence from this research of shed behaviour and attitudes that directly and deliberately oppose traditional masculinist stereotypes of 'competitiveness, emotional stoicism, homophobia, neglect of health needs, mistrust of women and distant fathering' (French 2002, p.2). In their place there is strong evidence from men's sheds of extensive and systematic cooperation, recognition of the need and therapeutic value of forming deep and trusting friendships with other men, as well as acceptance of a need to support other men. There is a strong and universal concern for men to take control of and improve their own health and wellbeing and recognition of the need to provide positive role models for sons, grandsons and other men. Men with a partner who use community-based sheds typically acknowledge the significant benefits to them both of having time, space and an interest outside of the home.

These findings from community-based men's sheds are consistent with Flood's (2005, p.10) general contention that the most effective programs for men are safe places where men can talk and learn,



‘characterised by interactive participation in which men honestly share real feelings, concerns, and experience and engage in discussion and reflection’. The shed’s success lies fundamentally in its provision of a safe, culturally, pedagogically and age appropriate setting *with other men*, in which interactive and informal participation and discussion as well as trust and friendships can grow rather than being foregrounded. The hands-on activity in a shared space recreates productive work environments familiar to, and valued by, men. The key is to provide the appropriate, safe, male-positive and affirming space inclusive of a diversity of men.

While the spaces are deliberately or mainly for men, the research reveals that the overwhelming majority of men involved in community-based men’s sheds value and recognise the need for respectful, trusting and egalitarian relations with women, within and beyond the shed. A high proportion of men with a wife or partner who participate do so with their partner’s active support and encouragement so as not to be ‘underfoot’ at home. Men in relationships and older former tradesmen are significantly less likely than are single and separated men to want to discourage women from taking part in the shed.

Men who participate in sheds enjoy the flexibility, the informality, the lack of compulsion, the chance to mentor and the opportunity to take an active part in the running of the shed. Shaped in part by the practical opportunities currently available to them in existing community-based sheds, men express a particular interest in working with wood, though many also enjoy working with metal. Around seven out of ten men who use men’s sheds agree that they need further training on the equipment, in part to comply with Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) requirements, though around one-third are nevertheless frustrated by the need to comply with these OHS rules. From a management perspective, the issue of how to provide Safe Operating Procedures (SOP) on each machine and Safe Work Methods (SWM) for men is significant in all new sheds.

Nearly half of the men involved in men’s sheds in Australia are over 65 years of age and around three out of ten have special needs (an impairment or disability). Around three-quarters of men are retired from the paid workforce and a similar proportion receive some type of pension. Two-thirds of the men who use men’s sheds had very limited formal school education—that is, not extending beyond Year 10. Seven out of ten men did not enjoy learning at school. One-third of men have an apprenticeship or traineeship as their highest formal education post-school: 15% have none. Three out of ten men were referred to the men’s shed through a health worker. In summary, men’s sheds embrace, engage and actively involve a wide range of older men, many of whom are former tradesmen with a lifetime of skills and experience to share with younger men and in some cases children.

Consistent with these findings from our survey-based research and recent publication of 2001, census data on the distribution of economically inactive men in Australia (Lattimore 2007, pp.71–6) suggest that the distribution of community-based men’s sheds is specifically related to regions with higher than average percentages of older, non-Indigenous men not in paid work. The distribution of shed organisations in Australia (appendix 3) corresponds reasonably closely to regions, suburbs and towns in mainly southern Australia where the proportion of men aged more than 65 years exceeds 85% (Lattimore 2007, figures 4.1 and 4.2, p.72) and where the proportions of Indigenous men of that age is likely to be low. We contend that the distribution of community-based men’s sheds is non-random and indicative of an underlying, grassroots need in widely separated Australian communities for a place for men to go who are not in paid work, prime age or not. We further conclude that sheds have sprung up first and most actively in Australia in areas where former tradesmen and manual workers live, particularly where they have tended, in their previous employment, to work ‘hands-on’ in groups with other men in factories, workshops and mines.

Based on Victorian shed survey data, one-half of men who use sheds have no connection to any other community organisation. Many would not previously have anticipated being active and committed participants in what is effectively a health promoting, informal learning organisation designed mainly (but not solely) for men. The majority of men who participate have experienced significant losses and crises recently—defined as being within the past five years. Nearly one-half

had experienced a recent major health crisis, and one-quarter had experienced a recent significant loss in their life. Three out of ten had recently experienced a new impairment or disability. More than one-half had recently retired. One in five had recently separated from a partner. One in ten had experienced recent separation from children or the family home. More than one-quarter had recently experienced an inability to obtain paid work. For all of these men, shed-based experiences are positive, engaging, healthy and life affirming as well as affirming of positive aspects of being a man.

This research confirms the critical importance to men of having a shed coordinator and someone who is responsible at all times, despite some reservations about limitations imposed by OHS. Men diverge fairly evenly on the question of whether women should be involved as participants in their men's shed. While slightly more than half of men who participate agree that they would feel comfortable if women participated, one in five men strongly disagree. Consistent with this finding, one-half of men reported that their shed only welcomes men and around six out of ten agree that their shed is equally welcoming of male and female members.

In addition to the positive personal outcomes reported by men in terms of health, happiness and wellbeing, men's sheds in Australia clearly have the potential to have an impact on families, including children and grandchildren. Six out of ten men still live with a wife or partner. Eight out of ten are fathers and more than one-half are grandfathers. Men are particularly enthused by the opportunity to give back to, and feel more accepted by, the community by sharing and mentoring as well as through the products and services they contribute to the community.

Around four out of ten men appear to have a reasonable knowledge of the local TAFE, most have relatively positive attitudes towards the local TAFE provider and seven out of ten men considered it offered something they needed to learn. If they were to further their learning, almost all men would choose learning in and through their men's shed, preferably from a member of their own shed with the necessary knowledge. There is some interest, from around one-half of men, in more 'special interest courses', including a limited interest, from around one in five men, for learning through the shed that might lead to a qualification.

Men participate not primarily because they have lost access to tools, a shed or a work space—though one in ten have lost such access in the last five years—but because of social reasons, a desire to informally learn hobby and leisure skills with other men and to learn to stay fit and healthy. They are overwhelmingly keen to learn more, to improve their skills and become actively involved in the men's shed and the communities to which many of the sheds are already strongly attached. The particular pedagogical strength of men's sheds is that the learning is social, informal, but engaging, by being situated in communities of men's workshop practice closely matched to a lifetime of hands-on experiences and practice by older former workers and tradesmen.

This research confirms the high potential of men's sheds, if carefully customised and managed to fit the profile of men who participate, to include and support men experiencing issues associated with physical and psychological health issues, difficulties expressing needs, positive self-image, retirement, mental illness, disability, social isolation, ageing and significant change. What men's sheds provide is connection to other men in a safe, mutually supportive and inclusive environment where learning and health are fostered informally, without subverting the main reason for men coming to the shed. Men's sheds essentially have to do with men's happiness, connection to community, and social and emotional wellbeing. A shed environment creates a familiar space in which most men feel valued and at home, particularly but not necessarily with other men.

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# Support document details

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Additional information relating to this research is available in *Men's sheds in Australia: Learning through community contexts—Support document*. It can be accessed from NCVER's website <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1780.html>> and contains:

## Appendices

- 1 Survey instruments
- 2 Interview and survey protocols
- 3 Location of men's sheds in community contexts
- 4 Brief insights from the interview data



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