The general focus in this paper fits well with the NCVER 2008 Conference Theme 5, VET in Context: 
*Education and training is increasingly viewed in terms of a broader system involving workplaces, educational institutions, and other government and community organisations,*

and with Objective 3 of the National Strategy, which is “explicitly concerned with the contribution of VET”:
*Communities and regions will be strengthened economically and socially through learning and employment.*

The paper looks at issues and implications affecting an ever increasing number of ‘third age’ active elderly men and women learning about and via new technology with prospects of long post-retirement age years stretching ahead,. The specific focus is on equity of access to vocational education, training and support as well as to opportunities for recreational online social interaction for those older adults who postpone their retirement by choice or necessity to remain in, or to enter or return to the paid or volunteer workforce.

Australia’s population is ageing as a result of the increased life expectancy of both men and women in retirement. This is due in part to medical advances and healthy lifestyle choices. At the same time the falling birth rate and immigration is impacting on the percentages of the old and the young in the population. This national trend parallels the global ageing demographic and is particularly noticeable in Tasmania, which state has overtaken South Australia as the State with the highest proportion of people over sixty years of age.

The population ageing demographic in Tasmania already indicates that not enough ICT literate adults will be available to fill the expected job vacancies. There is an urgent need to harness the experience of post-retirement third age learners by providing appropriate
and affordable training and support, whether the ensuing ICT literacy is used for personal enrichment or in the paid or the volunteer workforce. ANTA (2003, p.6), in mounting an argument for vocational training and re-training throughout the lifespan, notes that the number of white collar jobs, which increasingly require ICT literacy, has overtaken that of blue collar jobs and predicts that community service and leisure-related jobs will continue to grow strongly as will volunteer involvement. It is vital that all stakeholders are aware of the needs of older later technology adopter learners and understand how to facilitate their uptake of ICT as the contribution of older adults to the economy through volunteer effort is considerable.

The cost of training and support programs for those not in the paid workforce is often prohibitive and this leads to the demise of groups which cannot recruit younger members with ICT skills. Another need is for automatic rather than occasional or non existent reimbursement of out-of-pocket expenses, for those unwaged and unable to claim costs as tax deductions. Many older adults on fixed income and dwindling savings are precluded from volunteer contribution due to financial constraints resulting in disengagement from activities, including attendance at conferences and seminars as those attending as part of their paid employment are reimbursed for out of pocket expenses. Cost in setting-up and upgrading computer hardware and software and connecting to the Internet where this is not subsidised by NGOs is a also reported to be an issue as volunteers use their new ICT knowledge and skills in fundraising and working to better the conditions of both their members and the less advantaged in their communities.

One result of these inequities is a growing number of socially isolated older people not able to be catered for by limited government/private service provision and therefore further stretching the volunteer service sector. Statistics of the greying of the globe indicate that even though both men and women are living longer, some into eventual frail old age, women still outlive men resulting in increasing numbers of women living alone. Women are usually the carers in society and following the death of a spouse or close relative, are often isolated as they lack physical mobility and are prone to withdrawal from community activities.
Volunteer Access to VET Training and Support
NCVER Conference, Launceston, Tasmania

The 2001 International Year of the Volunteer helped to raise the profile of volunteers, many of whom reside in the third age of active retirement. Older people are being called on to enter or continue to be involved in the volunteer workforce, but many, though willing, lack the knowledge and skills to accept executive roles in this technological age when reporting has long passed pen and paper and snail mail communication.

The numbers in the third age are continually increasing and the age range is extending as entry is gained through early retirement and premature workplace redundancy and exit into the fourth age of dependency is delayed. Third age ranks are further swelled by post World War II baby boomers—those born between the mid-1940s and the mid-1960s. The resulting population age imbalance is increasingly looked upon as a disaster that will impact on the young, who are expected to carry the economic burden of this increased longevity of the aged. Horst (1999), for example, states that this imbalance means that there will be fewer workers, who will be expected to support future retirees.

NGO executive roles often call for sophisticated technical expertise to manage not-for-profit organisations, some with a shoe-string grant-dependent budget; others with large complex budgets, either of which require special skills. These mentally stimulating challenges are valuable in combatting the social isolation that results from disengagement from the community in this technological age.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS

The implication for policy makers is the importance of providing resources for the computer and Internet skills training needed in all spheres of contemporary community volunteer involvement. Training and support is needed for both older adult ICT learners and trainers who provide many hours of volunteer service in the community. It is clear that up-skilling older adults to be effective in an ICT-dominated society will have benefits that extend to the wider community.

A training and support implication for policy makers and funding bodies is that subsidised ‘on the job’ vocational education training—even commercial work experience—is just as important for older adult volunteers, who are responsible in many cases for running small NGO ‘businesses’ as it is for older adult employees in the paid
workforce (Osborne 2002). Some older men and women who wish to remain in or re-enter the workplace will be disadvantaged by lack of adequate ICT literacy skills to fill the expected baby bust paid and volunteer employment gap (Wagner 2000). Many third age learners have shown that they are employable, not through traditional formal pathways, but via the informal ACE sector and through volunteer service as they gain the competence and confidence to move on to formal study and/or back into the paid workforce.

AN AGEING WORKFORCE

Kearns (2004) suggests that the major opportunities provided by the emergence of the “global knowledge society” are offset by threats of exclusion for those left behind and unable to cope with change. He sees a “razor’s edge of opportunity and threat” and the danger of exclusion of a “two-thirds society” as increasingly evident. Kearns lists the key drivers to provide a framework for the future development of lifelong learning as:

- Globalisation – Australia must adapt to a more interconnected, interdependent and globalised world;
- Knowledge economy - economic and technological change . . . growing imperatives for learning, creativity, and innovation;
- Demography – the ageing of the population and workforce has major implications for learning throughout life and meeting skill needs.
- Technology - new learning strategies are required. Shifting skill requirements easily lead to skill shortages;
- Work and Labour Market - new attributes and skills are required to maintain employability throughout life; and
- Sustainable Communities.

THE WORKPLACE AND ECONOMY

The impact of the global knowledge economy has enhanced the significance of the workplace as a key learning environment with an enhanced significance for industry in adapting to change, generating new knowledge, maintaining skill levels, and building a capacity for continuous innovation. (Kearns 2005).
Kearns suggests that “technology and innovative approaches to e-learning, is providing new ways to strengthen workplace learning in strategic ways”. He advocates closer links to overall business strategy and objectives, industry in general appearing to concentrate more on short term issues of skills shortages.

INTEGRATING LEARNING AND SKILL STRATEGIES

Boosting the skills, knowledge, capability and understanding of adults has become an increasing priority for government, industry and community groups (ACE Policy 2002).

Recognising that personal attributes and values underpin other skills, Kearns reports that generic skills have largely replaced core skills, key competencies, underpinning skills and capabilities, recently including personal attributes linked to values and identity. According to Kearns, a currently accepted definition of generic skills is “those transferable skills which are essential for employability at some level for most”. Curtis and McKenzie (2001) note that the term employability is more attractive as a descriptor than employment-related since it conveys a greater sense of an individual’s long-term capacity to build a career and to prosper in a dynamic labour market. They stress that workers “require the capacity to adapt and continually upgrade through sets of generic skills that can be readily transferred across different settings”. The shift from ‘skills for employment’ to ‘skills for employability’ is seen as significant. Australian industry is locked into struggles for profit and survival with their global competitors, high rates of unemployment have become a permanent feature, and commitment to training has waned. Seen in this context, the discourse of ‘generic skills for employability’ raises the bar for who gets in and who gets looked out of work. (Sanguinetti, 2004).

THE POLICY MAKER

The implication here for policy makers is that there is a continuing interest by government bodies who see a clear need to ensure that older adults are given the opportunity to acquire ICT literacy in order to function in the technological knowledge society. The focus in this thesis is on ‘third age’ learning, implying a group of active elderly (Paul and Stegbauer 2005) men and women with prospects of long retirement years stretching ahead. There is an urgent need to harness the experience of third age
learners by providing appropriate and affordable training and support, whether the ensuing ICT literacy is used for personal enrichment or in the paid or the volunteer workforce. It is vital that all concerned are aware of the needs of third age learners and understand how to facilitate their uptake of ICT. The contribution of older adults to the economy through volunteer effort is considerable.

NEW TECHNOLOGY LEARNING FOR OLDER ADULTS

Traditional social justice concerns are being joined by economic arguments for raising participation in education and training. This must happen if Australia's human capital needs are to be met when its population and workforce are ageing.

(Kearns 2006)

Kearns makes the case for “a new approach to equity more in tune with the socio-economic realities of 21st century Australia”. Kearns continues that there is growing international experience that equity objectives will be best achieved through a more holistic and systemic approach, integrating social and economic objectives, with a focus on the learner. Kearns acknowledges the assistance of “the excellent set of Research Readings on Equity in Vocational Education and Training published by NCVER in 2004. He reports that while progress has been made towards more equitable participation in VET major barriers remain.

This paper touches on issues of an ageing population and the impending imbalance in the workplace resulting in older adults needing to postpone their retirement and making the acquisition of ICT literacy socially responsible. The increased life expectancy of both men and women adds weight to this argument as older adults use new technology knowledge and skills gained in retirement, if not in the paid workplace, in volunteer community service. The ever-changing nature of new technology reinforces the need for research into new learning approaches to enable those who have not grown up with technology to keep pace with an increasingly complex knowledge society.
INVESTING IN OUR FUTURE
A Statement of Vocational Education and Training Priorities 2006

The priorities in *Investing in our future – A statement of the Tasmanian Vocational Education and Training Priorities (VET) 2006* [PDF 215KB] support government policy outcomes. The priorities are drawn from those established in *Tasmania: A State of Learning*, the *Tasmanian VET Plan 2006-2008* [PDF 833KB], nationally agreed priorities, *Tasmania Together* and *Learning Together* and are informed by the *Office of Post-Compulsory Education and Training* (OPCET) industry advice and other information.

This comprehensive Tasmanian VET ‘statement’ is a valuable equity of access document in its own right and also provides links to related material. Of particular relevance to this paper is the Skills Equip competitive tendering program which is part of the Tasmanian Priority 4. It offers funding specifically for equity focused training - *The program training participants are most likely to include people with a disability (particularly those people with acquired brain injury or with mental illnesses), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, women, parents returning to work, older people who wish to re-enter the workforce, older workers, migrants, people living in rural areas and prisoners.*

CONCLUSION

An Australian Knowledge Centre on Equity and Participation could link the growing evidence base across sectoral divides to foster more coherence and continuity in the work of schools, VET and ACE in promoting equity and participation. It might be supported by a consortium that included research organisations such as NCVER and ACER as well as a broad spectrum of community organisations and special interests.

Kearns (2006)

STOP PRESS - A Clever, Kind and Connected Tasmania initiative announced

The Tasmania State Government 2008-09 Budget is about “seizing good ideas and delivering them into action”. The causes of social exclusion are stated to be varied and complex and require innovative and comprehensive solutions that draw on the best available knowledge and research
Volunteer Access to VET Training and Support  
NCVER Conference, Launceston, Tasmania

A Clever Society:
  o One which invests in education, infrastructure and the skills that equip Tasmanians to grab the opportunities of tomorrow with both hands;

A Kind Society:
  o One which extends a supportive hand to people when they need world class health services, access to housing and community support;

A Connected Society:
  o One that realises we must all take action together to combat the big challenges of the 21st Century – from climate change to telecommunications.

These are all statements which suggest inclusion rather than exclusion in VET and echo the slogan of IYOP, the 1999 International Year of the Older Person, introduced by the then UN Secretary General (Annan 1998):

A society for all ages is multi-generational. It is not fragmented, with youths, adults and older persons going their separate ways, rather it is age-inclusive, with different generations recognising and acting upon their commonality of interests.

A 2000 United Nations World Population Ageing Wall Chart amplifies this declaration as it includes rural and city dwellers, public and private sector identities, families and individuals, old and young alike. It states that it is “critical that societies adjust to this human paradigm as record numbers of people live into very old age, if we are to move towards a society for all ages.

Throssell (2004) also considers society as age inclusive in his study of people who “conduct their lives in ways that are not chronologically age stereotypical in relation to the culture they live in. He remarks that these people are sometimes referred to as possessing agelessness, an attribute that enables them to choose lifelong learning options as these present themselves.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX: VOLUNTEER SUPPORTED eLEARNING

The association between TAFE and the Launceston Seniors OPEN Computer Club began when several members undertook a formal 2-unit accredited course at TAFE with an offer to use the club between classes to practice what was learned. One by one these potential ICT learners returned with stories of loss of confidence and self esteem as they found the classes too large and the pace too fast in the mixed age class.

The eLearn online course material includes hard copy and online components - word processing, spread sheets, e-mail and Internet searching, chat and discussion boards, downloading text and graphics from the Internet and uploading assignments to TAFE. Evaluation includes conversations with e-Learn participants, tutors and assistants, end-of-course written evaluations and reflective journal comments by course graduates. The OPEN eLearn program also had an outside evaluation during a collaborative research project with Melbourne-based Australian Multicultural Education Services (AMES) researchers (Taylor, Rose & Wiyono, 2004).

The eLearn course was conducted in the familiar environment of the Computer Club. The online TAFE teacher was assisted by the volunteer tutors who acted as support to these keen ICT learners who wanted the challenge of a more structured course than was available at informal club sessions. This government/NGO collaboration works very well as each intake of 25 older men and women is divided into smaller groups. Following a face to face induction for Computer Centre volunteer tutors by the TAFE online teacher, one tutor to each two students smooth the e-Learn path. More than 50% of each of the three intakes to date have graduated at the end of each twelve week course. A social function attended by the TAFE teacher and students’ family and friends marks each graduation certificate presentation. Those who do not complete the assignments due to family commitments or a need to progress more slowly are able to enrol in a subsequent course after a period of consolidating and practising skills learned. The implication for policy makers, who have expressed a wish to engage the disengaged who are at risk of becoming socially isolated, is to initiate research and fund ways of helping older learners who need specialised help to enable them to overcome problems with learning to use computer technology.