

Learning and older rural people: interest, opportunity and benefits to health and wellbeing

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Background

Despite much myth and misperception it is increasingly recognised that many older people are interested in participating in education and learning. There is now a potentially greater opportunity to do so given our lengthening lifespan and the interest in encouraging older people to stay active and involved in the community to protect and maintain their health and wellbeing. The benefits accruing from lifelong learning are well documented. Older people's participation in education and learning is likely to promote a healthy lifestyle, assist their preparation for dealing with the changes and challenges of ageing, raise their awareness of community support resources and encourage positive attitudes to ageing. However, there are considerable spatial differences in educational provision for adults, with opportunities in rural areas likely to be fewer than in metropolitan and urban areas.

Aims

This research aimed to establish the extent of formal and informal learning opportunities that were available to a sample of Tasmanian older rural people and their level of take-up of both types of opportunity, and to explore some of the benefits of participation on the wellbeing of these individuals.

Methods

The paper draws on data from semi-structured interviews with 69 older rural people from six localities in Tasmania collected as part of an Australian Research Council Linkage grant project, and data from public documents regarding formal education opportunities available.

Results

Findings revealed that formal education opportunities were restricted and informal learning opportunities, although more numerous, were not extensive. Older rural people were participating to a limited extent in formal education, though taking greater advantage of informal learning opportunities. All of these opportunities were important to them because they provided a chance for cognitive stimulation and allowed them to continue to be socially engaged and involved in their communities, both of which contributed to their wellbeing and quality of life. A mismatch was identified between older people's interest levels and opportunities available.

Conclusion

There is great potential for participation in education and learning to contribute further to older rural people's quality of life given that the individual benefits from learning extend beyond the acquisition of knowledge and contribute more broadly to health and wellbeing. The number of formal and informal learning opportunities in rural areas needs to be increased and improving older people's access to these opportunities should be a policy priority.

