



Productive Ageing
PASSION GROWTH EXPERIENCE

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Active and Productive Ageing: What is the Real Experience of Australians?

Summary of the Australian Active Ageing (Triple A) Study an initiative of Queensland University of Technology (QUT) and supported by the National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre. The study was conducted by L. Buys, J. Lovie-Kitchin, J. Barnett, N. David, D. Anderson, G. Boulton-Lewis, M. Courtney, H. Edwards, J. Tedman-Jones, R. Nayak and M. Zlobicki.

Background

Populations in developed countries have been steadily ageing as a result of better health and medical care and economic growth neither of which is inherently a bad thing. Yet, as a broad social and demographic trend, the ageing of the population receives a lot of negative press. Much of the media and research interest on the population ageing trend has focused on declining health, loss of control and the cost to the state of providing support services.

The medical model of ageing focuses on declines in body and mind and has had a strong influence on general expectations and fears about the later years of life. Loss of physical and mental abilities with the associated loss of personal independence is frightening, yet, for most people this outcome is far from reality. So what does “ageing” actually mean for Australians in the twenty first century?

The alternate more positive view of ageing as a time of activity, social engagement and productivity is encapsulated in the World Health Organization’s statement “Years have been added to life; now we must add life to years.”

The Australian Active Ageing (Triple A) Study attempts to bring balance into the discussion of ageing. The study surveyed those who are in the ageing demographic about a range of lifestyle issues to give a clearer perspective of what it really means to be “ageing” in contemporary Australia.

The Issues

Consistent with the United Nations focus on a broad interpretation of active ageing is the view that “older people are considered to be sources of valuable knowledge, experience and support” contributing significantly to the labour force, and through volunteer activities, to the wider community. Active ageing provides a conceptual framework for investigating and understanding

how the multiple aspects of older adults’ activities impact on quality of life as they age.

The Triple A Study, inspired by the United Nations definition of active ageing, incorporates a wide scope of issues in order to identify what contributes most significantly to quality of life for older people.

The overall aim of the research is to give an overview of the current state of active ageing in Australia and, as a result, be able to forecast the factors that are influential to achieving active ageing.

The Survey

A comprehensive 177 question survey was sent out to National Seniors’ members nation wide. While most of the questions in the survey were taken from existing international studies to allow for direct comparisons, some sections, including the work, spiritual and demographic questions, are unique to this study.

The survey reviewed 10 different dimensions of life for older Australians covered by the following headings:

- paid and voluntary work;
- learning;
- social;
- spiritual;
- emotional;
- health;
- vision;
- home;
- life events; and
- demographics.

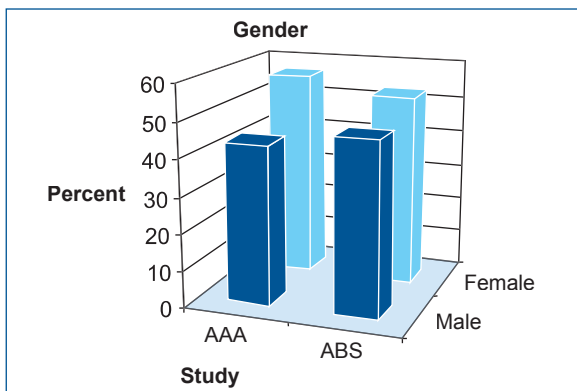
To get a better feel for how respondents thought about their lifestyles, the survey also included a final open-ended question asking them to briefly describe what being actively engaged in life meant to them.

Who the Respondents Are

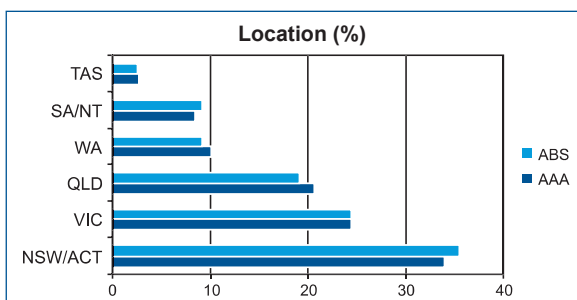
To counteract the popular tendency to group “seniors” into a single category, the Triple A Study is designed to clearly differentiate between age groupings within the over 50 age group. It includes participants from the important “baby boomer” group, recognising the impact that this group is predicted to have on future policy and services for an ageing population, as well as those in the 60s, 70s and beyond.

In order to ensure a representative sample of older people in Australia potential participants were selected according to Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) population ratios. The following graphs show selected characteristics of the survey respondents and compare these with the national average to give an overview of how representative the sample is.

In terms of gender slightly more women (56.6%) than men responded which is consistent with the national average for gender breakdown.

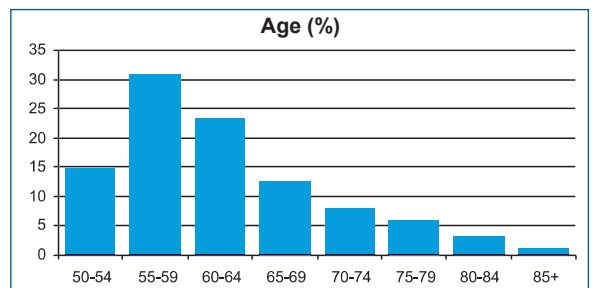


Geographically respondents from all states were represented on a similar to national average basis.



The age distribution of respondents shows a distinct skew toward younger members of the National Seniors with 69% aged under 65 compared to the general population at 56.6%. However, given the large number of participants in the study, there is still strong representation from the over 75s with 286 respondents in this category.

Most respondents had a moderate to high combined income with a third of respondents reporting a household income of over \$50,000. Approximately a fifth of households (20.3%), however, were on or below the poverty line with combined household incomes of less than \$20,000.



Overall the 2,620 participants in this research reported a wide range of demographic characteristics consistent with the national diversity of people in the over 50 demographic.

Profile of A Lifestyle

Effective social policy development requires not only knowledge about the facts of the population involved, but also understanding. The results of this study contribute to the policy agenda by providing a more holistic perspective on the lifestyles and perceptions of the over 50 population in Australia.

Paid and Voluntary Work

Retirement from the workforce is one of the key events and expectations of the over 50s. Incentives for early retirement from the mid 50s onwards co-exist with laws which outlaw age based discrimination and compulsory retirement. Given the concerns about the long term cost of supporting the ageing population via the pension system it is important to understand not only who is participating in the workforce, but what their experience is.

Participants in this survey were asked a range of questions focusing not only on the number of hours they spent in paid employment in the preceding week but also the extent to which they participated in voluntary work or mentoring activities. They were also questioned on how much they enjoyed working in either a paid or volunteer capacity and whether or not they were undertaking any professional development or education programs.

About 50% of the respondents were engaged in full-time or part-time paid work and 56% of them have worked more than 30 hours in the last week, reporting that they have enjoyed their work a great deal (43%). More than 60% of respondents did not do any kind of voluntary work activity.

Most of them were not undertaking any educational or personal development courses. But 62% of them have used a little to a great deal of their abilities and skills to help others achieve their goals.

Learning

Using an existing scale designed to measure the learning needs of older adults, participants were asked to indicate their interest in learning new things, the kinds of things they believed they needed to learn, what they wanted to learn and what kept them from learning.

“Years have been added to life; now we must add life to years.”

Although few respondents were engaged in formal educational or training programs as indicated above, most agreed to being interested in learning new things. They also agreed that they needed to learn and wanted to learn new things, for example, new technology, new activities and leisure interests. Overall they identified few barriers to learning.

Social

One of the fears associated with growing older is social isolation and loneliness. To counteract this older Australians need to stay engaged and active in their community. Participants in this study were asked to report on how much social support they received and the extent of their social interactions.

Overall the response was positive and not consistent with stereotypes. Respondents reported receiving support from other people, including family and friends. They also reported having very positive social relationships and interactions with family and friends. Most (63%) reported some form of participation in group activity.

Home

More than two thirds of participants in this study lived with their spouse or partner (65.6%) while just under a third (23.9%) lived alone accounting for approximately 90% of respondents living arrangements. The next most common arrangement was for a friend or relative to live with the respondent in their own home (5.2%).

Home ownership dominates this group with 88.9% owning their own home and only 6.0% living in rental accommodation.

Safety in the home is a major concern as the population ages. To assess the physical environment in which respondents live a self assessment guide of the home environment was included which covered issues such as whether the participants experienced difficulties with getting to the home's front or back door, hearing a knock on the door, keeping up home maintenance such as pest control and so on.

In this study the home was considered safe as more than 91% of the respondents are not experiencing any difficulties in terms of accessibility (mobility), visibility, safety, usability, maintenance and comfort.

Health

Many of the negative perceptions of the ageing of the population are based on concerns regarding the anticipated sharp increase in health costs.

To determine how healthy the sample group was an established international scale of questions was used which measures a range of different health aspects including physical functioning, the extent to which health issues interfered with other

activities as well as emotional and mental health.

About 83% of the respondents are in good to excellent health and 68% said that they are as healthy as they were a year ago. Most of them (82%) said that their health limits them from doing vigorous activities but more than 51% of them said that their health do not limit them from doing moderate activities.

Physical health and emotional problems did not affect their work or other daily activities, nor did it interfere with social activities with family, friends, neighbours, or groups for most people. They were generally feeling very well but 40% of them felt a little worn out or tired. Most were positive about their health in general and relative to others.

Vision

Vision as a component of physical health and sign of deterioration is important in the ageing cohort and again was measured using established reporting techniques.

About 62% of respondents have no difficulty reading ordinary print in newspapers and 28% have a little difficulty. Most of them (91%) have no difficulty driving during the daytime in familiar places. Their vision did not limit them from accomplishing what they would like (74%).

Life Events

Regardless of age, significant life events can impact on emotional and physical well being. Nine life events were identified for this survey and participants were asked to report on whether or not these had occurred over the past two years, and what the impact of these events were.

More than 69% of the respondents did not experience any of the nine stressful or life-changing events, such as death of a spouse or partner, a major personal illness or injury, or major unexpected financial hardship, mentioned in the survey.

Emotional

As well as physical well being, it is important to examine intangible elements of lifestyle such as emotional and spiritual well being to get a clear picture of the overall experience of being over 50 in contemporary Australian society.

Emotional wellbeing is a broad concept and was measured in terms of six different elements:

- autonomy or the ability to make independent decisions;
- environmental mastery which in broad terms relates to the idea that we are in charge of our lives, not our life in charge of us;
- self acceptance or the ability to value ourselves;
- personal growth
- positive relations with others and
- purpose in life.



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Mostly positive responses were received in relation to all of the categories of well being. Although they were evenly divided about worrying about what other people thought of them, most had confidence in their own opinions (60%), and were still trying to make improvements and changes in their lives (60%).

Spiritual

Finally, the survey investigated the spirituality of respondents both in terms of behavior (praying) and the importance of spirituality in life.

About 88% of the respondents have a little to a great deal of belief in a higher being and 70% pray a little to a great deal. More than 70% of them rely on their intuition and personal ethics in making decisions. Most of them report being in control, contented with life, felt that life is well-spent and felt that their personal beliefs gave meaning to their life. About 69% of them are searching for personal meaning ranging from a little to a great deal.

In summary the initial results show that the over 50s in this study are happy, healthy and active with 80% reporting excellent or good health consistent with 80% of respondents being happy "all or most" of the time. The majority of respondents are very satisfied with their lives, with 70% feeling "contented" and reporting that "their life is useful and well-spent".

Implications for Policy

This Australia Active Ageing Study presents a portrait of the Australian seniors that is distinctly different from the stereotype generated by models which negatively portray ageing as a process of decline.

If national policy directed at the ageing of the population is to be effective and relevant, programs must address the real needs of the older population, and operate from a realistic and empirical base. This study makes a substantial contribution to understanding the complex lives of the over 50s in Australia today.

Overall the people in the study were happy, healthy actively engaged in, and productively contributing to, the community.

National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre

National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre (NSPAC) was established by National Seniors in 2002, in partnership with the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing and the University of the Sunshine Coast.

The Centre's annual program consists of consumer research and policy forums, cross-sectoral research collaborations, development of productive ageing research products and innovative use of a range of media to disseminate research widely.

The National Seniors Association and the National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre gratefully acknowledge the financial and other support provided by the Australian Government to the National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre Project.

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National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre for consistency with the National Seniors membership base uses the term 'senior' to describe an individual aged 50 years and over.

