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Our sincere thanks to Roger Harris and ALA, for agreeing to devote this edition of the Australian Journal of Adult Learning to one research theme, 'Learning to be drier'. It contains a set of six papers, generated in 2009 through a collaborative University of Ballarat—Deakin University research project. The project involved eight researchers in each university's school of education, working in two person teams, in four sites in the southern Murray-Darling Basin. We sought, in our research, to investigate the interface between public and popular learning, and the protracted drying of the southern part of the Basin in recent decades. In essence, we report on evidence from interviews with adults in four water-dependent communities. We identify people struggling, with limited or problematic access to the necessary adult or community learning opportunities, to understand or adequately respond, in rapidly changing, complex and adverse circumstances, to protracted drought, climate change, or a combination of both.

We were keen to step aside from the usual technical and scientific reports about water and climate, and register the felt experiences of learning about drying of adults located across the southern part of the vast and water-stressed Murray-Darling Basin, widely regarded as
'Australia's food bowl'. Our intention was to explore the phenomenon of the drying of the Basin, exploring learned responses to drying, but without presupposing causality. Our method was empirical but qualitative, by listening to people's stories and constructing narratives in four different sites across three Australian states.

I will not dwell in detail, in this brief guest editorial, on what is in each of our six papers, since the first paper is itself introductory. Our final, joint paper attempts to pull some of the diverse threads together. While created from a common research theme, using common research questions and a shared method, the papers, as a set, illustrate the important point that adult and community learning is not experienced or understood in the same way across different communities. The papers include perspectives from different communities of agricultural, business, adult learning and research practice. While the four 'site papers' coalesce around three common themes related to learning about drying, they illustrate that place (including State) does matter in this huge and diverse Australian continent. Experiences of and opportunities for learning about drying in the Basin are shown to be different in Victorian Alpine communities, irrigation communities in New South Wales and South Australia, and dryland communities in Victoria. Importantly, drying is learned about, experienced and understood in very different ways across the Basin.

All narratives in our site papers identify the importance of social learning: to be productive, to be efficient, to survive, to live with uncertainty, to be sustainable and to share. They also illustrate the importance of hearing and considering diverse values and theoretical positions about the same problem. This diversity was found between the team as researchers, as well as within the narratives collected from individuals in diverse communities.

Looking beyond these Basin-specific studies, there is evidence that we are at a point in our development as humans, nationally and globally,
where we know too much about the consequences of our actions *not to act* to minimise the consequences of human-induced changes, including but extending beyond climate change. We are perhaps re-learning the difficult truths about global interconnectedness. Theories and predictions about climate change reconnect the old idea of the three, fundamental elements: ‘air, fire and water’. Einstein was the first to connect energy, mass and light in a neat, quantitative theory and equation, $E= mc^2$. The atmosphere is too complex to find a similarly uncomplicated equation to connect air, energy and water in the earth’s thin lithosphere and atmosphere.

While it is too difficult to predict confidently what will happen and where, as the climate changes, there is a growing realisation of a fundamental interconnectedness, in an atmospheric and community sense. There is also a sense that we are dealing here with a ‘super-wicked’ problem, as alluded to in the ‘wicked’ or messy problem literature, referred to in our final paper. This is because time is running out, there is no central authority over the atmosphere, and some of those seeking to solve the problem are also involved in causing it. Our interest in studying four southern Murray-Darling Basin communities, at this very difficult time, is to help us all to learn to care about and respond to changes, in this case, to a climate that is likely to be generally warmer and drier.

Those readers familiar with my own research journey will be aware of my protracted passion for researching equity in, and accessibility to, lifelong and lifewide learning for adults of all ages, across Australia. I have tended to ‘graze’ from vocational to adult and community education, and most recently to consider learning by adults *through* diverse community contexts. Most recently, my interest has been in learning experienced by men, particularly by older men, including through community-based men’s sheds. Most of these studies (unlike the one featured in this Journal) have involved mixed methods, with surveys as well as interviews. What is
common to many of my research designs, as in the current research project, is an emphasis on careful site selection, diverse and multiple sites, and on-site data collection. Wherever possible, my preference is for working closely with local people and organisations, after an initial reconnaissance visit, with a strong emphasis on the ethic of 'going lightly' and 'giving back'. This Learning to be drier research involves some grazing back to roots. It connects me back, in some ways, to my earlier interests and qualifications in geology and environmental science, and also to my family roots in the drylands of north-western Victoria, where rain on the corrugated iron roof was always a community delight.

This and other studies of adult and community learning, in situ, raise many of the often heard and interesting questions discussed in most papers in this Journal, about what constitutes adult learning, how to collect and report data, and which theoretical perspectives are appropriate to answer particular research questions. My wider interest and particular concern is in what I perceive to be a lack of recognition, in public policy and across the Australian community, of the importance and value of lifelong and lifewide learning to wellbeing. I perceive that accredited education and training 'off-the-shelf' are often irrelevant to, inappropriate for, or inaccessible to the needs and interests of many groups across the community in Australia. My research, in its totality, identifies an almost universal interest to learn through shared participation. It also identifies the significant wellbeing benefits that accrue from ensuring that the diverse members of all communities are somehow connected and participating in learning, for reasons that include, but extend well beyond, paid work.

For all of these reasons, there is a need for fearless and independent research into adult and community learning, and important roles for national organisations like Adult Learning Australia to play. This research and these roles should go beyond the small, publicly funded
remnant, after vocational learning for work has been subtracted. It should be directed towards the huge amount of learning essential for people's personal and family lives, identities, health and wellbeing, community and cultural lives, spirituality, recreation and environment. These needs have become more acute as neo-liberal agendas in all states, nationally, and most recently in Aotearoa/New Zealand, have progressively sought to put adult education either into the workplace, or onto the market, as a 'service' for 'clients' and 'customers'.

It is important to make two important points about the limited availability of community-owned-and-managed adult and community education in Australia in 2009. First, in 2006, New South Wales and Victoria were the only states in Australia where community education, as defined in Bardon's study of Community education and national reform, still had 'well-developed capabilities across all three tiers' (p. 24). The tiers were defined as community VET (vocational education and training), community participation and community learning. Some of these tiers have recently been further eroded through a range of state 'reforms'. Second, community education provision was found to be around twice as likely, in Bardon's (2006: 5) study, to occur in a rural or remote area than the VET average. However in many such areas of Australia, as in our 2009 men's learning studies\(^2\), adult and community education was also missing in several tiers and states in regional as well as rural and

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2. Senior men's learning and wellbeing through community participation in Australia, B. Golding, A. Foley, M. Brown & J. Harvey, report to National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre, October, Ballarat: University of Ballarat; Men's learning and wellbeing through community organisations in Western Australia, B. Golding, M. Brown, A. Foley & J. Harvey, report to the Western Australia Department of Education and Training, October, Ballarat: University of Ballarat.
remote areas. While VET was available in some cases, we concluded that it was often inappropriate for older adults, particularly for adults who were not in work or retired.

Finally, I perceive, as the Director of the Institute of Lifelong Learning within UNESCO recently put it, of a need to recognise that we are not simply producers and consumers, but citizens with families and personal lives. We are also participants in diverse communities of practice. We need to learn in these communities: across the lifespan: about health and wellbeing; to re-create lives beyond work; to age, to enhance social, civic and family roles and responsibilities; to strengthen and develop personal identities, family, community, national and international relationships. In the case of this Journal issue, there is evidence of our urgent need to learn about and consider the myriad, downstream effects of changes, that we all make daily, by our own actions, to the global balance between air, fire and water.

Barry Golding with Coral Campbell
Guest Editors

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3 A. Ouane (2009). Director UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning, Confintea VI 2009, 6th International Adult Learning Conference, Brazil.