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Active ageing and older learners – skills, employability and continued learning

Richard Desjardins, Dorothy Sutherland Olsen & Tove Midtsundstad

National governments in European and OECD countries are concerned about how to deal with rapidly ageing populations. Due to rising life expectancy combined with declining birth rates, the global share of population aged 60 years or over is predicted to double, reaching more than 20 per cent by 2050 (United Nations, 2013). These developments have introduced an array of economic and social challenges, but increased life expectancy should also be regarded as a triumph and a potential asset, provided that societies are able to ensure a healthy and active ageing.

Perhaps not surprisingly, *active ageing* has gained widespread currency as a policy concept across Europe since the beginning of the new millennium (Cedefop, 2012; Eurostat, 2011). It is thought to lead to positive outcomes such as increased employment, productivity, health and other well being into older ages (MacArthur Foundation, 2012). However, according to Foster (2012), there are two different approaches to active ageing: a narrow economic and productivist approach focusing on participation in the labour market, advocated by the OECD (OECD 2006) and the EU (EU 2012), and a more comprehensive and multidimensional approach advocated by the WHO (2002). In particular, the former has brought the need to reduce early retirement and prolong employee's working lives to the fore as major goals on social policy agendas (Hasselhorn & Apt 2015). While a broader focus also has clear economic implications including for the public purse in terms of health care costs, it can be more comprehensive by taking into account quality of life and the continued potential for productivity and contributions of older adults beyond the age of retirement in terms of social, civic, cultural and other outcomes relevant to our societies.

One of the policy concepts most commonly linked to active ageing is *lifelong learning*, which can be seen to have been originally developed to deal with the increasing rate of change in the workplace and in society in general (Field 2006). Indeed, it has been embraced by governments and educators as a concept allowing for more flexible forms of learning throughout life. Continued learning, either through formal or non-formal means, or informally, through a variety of means that foster the continued practice of cognition, continued social interaction and continued physical activity, all of which can encompass an important learning component, is an integral part of active ageing. But some have argued that it might be more productive to have a separate policy focus on learning for older people as part of active ageing, because the imperatives of employment and earning have to a large extent overshadowed the holistic dimensions of lifelong learning (e.g. Istance, 2015; Schuller this issue). As a recent example, one of OECD's recommendations (2013) to improve the employability of older workers is to ensure a high level of learning throughout their working career i.e. lifelong learning in working life. In other words, active ageing may help to provide a broader focus on the needs and aspirations of older adults, one that extends beyond an exclusive emphasis on employability. As Schuller (this issue) notes, however, clearly the two concepts are not mutually exclusive. Perhaps, the use of both policy concepts is appropriate simply to emphasize older workers and older adults, and to

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focus on their learning opportunities, their level of engagement at work, at home, in the community and in leisure along with their concomitant outcomes.

In keeping with these considerations we have invited contributions for this issue that consider the relationships between lifelong learning and the employability of older adults, as well as other outcomes that are important for a broader notion of active ageing such as the maintenance of cognitive skills into older ages. Admittedly, the final selection of contributions has a strong focus on learning opportunities available to older workers and associated outcomes such as the probability to remain employed into older ages. However, we feel this is important because many late career aged adults do not receive support to participate in continued learning and this can negatively impact active ageing including beyond retirement. Better and more targeted measures addressing late career learners may increase their employability and their motivation to postpone retirement, on the one hand, but on the other, may contribute to active ageing, more generally.

In this issue

As in the past couple years, we have included in addition to longer, more academic articles (original articles), two shorter, more personal reflection pieces (thought pieces), which are written in a freer style and take whatever angle the author chooses, in addressing an important but simple question. For this particular issue, the question was:

What role is there for active ageing vs lifelong learning in making the case for thinking about learning for older adults?

We think these two reflections gathered at the beginning add substantially to the broader notion of active ageing, one that encompasses a broader focus on the needs and aspirations of older adults and extends beyond an exclusive emphasis on employability.

The first thought piece is by ***Tom Schuller*** who reflects on the learning trajectories and outcomes of older adults. He reflects on the key life course transition to life after work, and the fact that chronological age is a powerful shaper of our expectations and of our social and statistical categories. While recognizing that we have to use chronological age, he argues that we need to undermine its grip on how we see ourselves and others so that we are able to exploit the full range of human potential.

David Istance reflects on seniors' learning. He shares with us that while working at the OECD, he found that very few countries had expressed enthusiasm for a project on senior's learning and suggests that this short-sightedness is widely shared by the educational community at large, despite the recognition in our societies of the challenges associated with ageing populations. He goes on to discuss the general case that the concept of *lifelong learning* is perhaps too diffuse to enable traction of these issues, and that the broader yet age-targeted concept of *active ageing* is much more promising.

The first longer article is by ***Tove Midtsundstad*** who undertakes a review of the most recent literature since 2010 on employment outcomes of adult learning. The emphasis is on older adults' continuing participation in the labour force and the potential role of continued learning. Her review finds that there is some evidence that adult learning increases older workers' employability and work-related earnings, but also that those in most need of educational

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upgrading in order to be employable, e.g. low skilled, individuals with health problems who need to change jobs, and those in risk of losing their jobs, participate the least in adult learning.

In the second article, ***Richard Desjardins*** presents results of an analysis of the relationship between attaining qualifications at older ages and active ageing in later life, which is based on data made available by the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). The results show that adults who attain higher levels of qualifications in mid to later life are associated with an increased probability of, being employed, participating in continued learning, and scoring higher on the PIAAC literacy scale when they are older. The findings suggest that open and flexible formal education structures at all levels is good for activating the population to be employed, to engage in continued learning and to develop and maintain literacy skills into older ages.

Tove Midtsundstad and ***Roy Nielsen*** examine the relationship between adult education and the active participation of older adults in employment, using individual register data from Statistics Norway. The analysis is similar to Desjardins', but the data is more extensive and focused on a particular context, namely Norway. Their results are consistent with the findings that Desjardins finds on the basis of the PIAAC data, namely there is a substantial effect of upgrading formal education on subsequent labour market participation.

Garry Barrett and ***Craig Riddell*** summarize evidence on the relationship between ageing and skills that they find on the basis of a series of cross-sectional surveys which are representative at the population level and allow them to separately identify birth cohort and ageing effects. Their results show that literacy skills decline with age beginning in the mid-20s and that the cross-sectional pattern of literacy and age tends to understate the extent to which literacy declines with age. They argue that the extent to which skills depreciate at older ages is relevant to employers as well as to workers who might want to prolong their working lives. In discussing the implications of the evidence, they introduce the idea that cross-national variations in the extent to which literacy skills decline may be related to differences in retirement age and to financial incentives to retire early.

In the next article, ***Jorge Calero*** extends the analysis of Barrett and Riddell to include numeracy and emphasizes distinctions between intermediate and higher education. Using a different modelling approach than Barrett and Riddell, he also finds evidence of the negative effect of ageing on both literacy and numeracy skills as measured in PIAAC. In decomposing differences in the skill levels of older vs prime age generations, he finds evidence to suggest that the progressive expansion of schooling across younger generations partially offsets the negative effect of the ageing of society on skills.

In the final article within the theme of active ageing and older learners, ***Tone Cecilie Carlsten*** and ***Dorothy Sutherland Olsen*** aim to understand the usefulness of the concept of lifelong learning for a group of older employees (50+). This is done using interviews and a document study on the Church of Norway to understand how the concept is interpreted and acted upon by the employer and older pastors. They conclude that older pastors have benefited from lifelong learning initiatives in the workplace, however the importance of belonging to a profession with a conscious commitment to learning was also an important factor for their continued learning.

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Together, these articles provide important findings about the relationship between education, continued employment and the maintenance of foundation skills like literacy and numeracy as measured in PIAAC. They also confirm earlier studies on the reduced participation of older employees in courses and other initiatives designed to promote learning. As Schuller and Istance emphasize in their thought pieces, there is a need for a revitalised research agenda and policy effort to make learning genuinely lifelong, and not just for labour market purposes but also in life beyond work.

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