

Workshop An ageing Europe and the role of ULLL

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Engaging older learners in self-development: the wider benefits of learning

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Abstract

This workshop will highlight the many benefits which can result from engaging older adults in their learning and self-development. It will highlight examples of different activities drawing on 25 years of experience at the Centre for Lifelong Learning, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow.

Background

In Scotland, as in other parts of Europe the population is ageing and is likely to increase by around two thirds in the next twenty years. In 2007, the Scottish Government published a report 'All Our Futures: Planning for a Scotland with an Ageing Population'. The report deals with issues around the demographic ageing of the population in Scotland and sets out a vision for a future Scotland which values and benefits from the talents and experience of older people. The report identifies improving health and well-being and providing learning opportunities in later life as two key priorities for action. These priorities are central to the work of the Centre for Lifelong Learning at the University of Strathclyde.

Aims of workshop

This workshop will seek to provide evidence from practice on how university lifelong learning (ULL) can provide for the personal, social and civic needs of older learners.

The workshop will look at existing provision at Strathclyde University, now in its 25th year of operation, examining the particular model for learning in later life which was developed there. This model is based on the motto of Strathclyde University as 'a place of useful learning' and this ethos runs through all the learning in later life provision. The learning offered to older adults at the University aims not just to encourage personal development but also to encourage the idea of older adults as positive and productive citizens contributing to society. Being based in a university has brought many benefits to the programme but the university has also gained by having such a large cohort of committed, loyal and productive students who daily act as enthusiastic ambassadors for lifelong learning.

This workshop will explore the many factors that have influenced the success and sustainability of this later life learning provision. It will identify and critically reflect on the main reasons for its longevity paying particular attention to:

The breadth and flexibility of its programming – which includes learning for personal development, social community learning, health and well-being and work – related training
The integral involvement of its students – as well as the formal programmes the students organise their own informal learning through a series of voluntary activities.

The workshop will look at some of the volunteering projects set up some within the university including a computer buddy group, a university visitors' guiding group, and support to a spinal injuries unit in a local hospital. These volunteering projects provide an excellent opportunity for older adults to apply their knowledge, skills and wisdom in socially useful settings.

In the late 1990s, students began to express their interest (and in some cases) their need to update their skills level in order to re-enter the employment market. Over the last decade, the Centre has built up significant expertise in employment and skills related training for older adults, not only for the unemployed but also for older individuals who are underemployed and who wish, whilst in work, to improve their career prospects. The Centre has also worked with employers, Trades Unions and other business organisations to explore productive and flexible ways of integrating and maintaining older adults in the workforce.

From the initial launch of classes, involvement of students has been regarded as integral to the on-going success of the later life learning programmes. The Learning in Later Life (3Ls) students association, formed in 1988, currently has just under 1,000 members and offers students the opportunity to expand their learning via specialist student led clubs. These clubs compliment the work of the university run classes and enable students to take more responsibility for their own learning. Most recently a working group led by students in collaboration with Centre staff has been established to explore the role of older adults as researchers. The group is engaged in activities which include researching into learner needs within the centre as well as providing support for research and knowledge exchange on ageing across the university.

The workshop will also encourage participants to share experiences from their own countries on best practice in learning in later life. It will seek to answer the question how best to respond effectively to older adults changing and varied learning needs as well as how ULLL can and empower older adults to remain active contributors to society.

References:

Centre for Lifelong Learning, University of Strathclyde, Learning in later Life Programme
<http://www.strath.ac.uk/cli/llp/>

Scottish Government/Riaghaltas na h-Alba (2007) 'All Our Futures: Planning for a Scotland with an Ageing Population'

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/People/Equality/18501/Experience>