

Workshop An ageing Europe and the role of University Lifelong Learning

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Notes taken

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The presentations covered a range of perspectives that can be grouped into three categories based on their point of focus, their level of investigation and the underlying assumptions. The first presentation addressed the topic from an economic perspective. The impacts of an ageing population on different economic sectors and the implications arising for business and employers, as well as issues regarding employability of older people, were taken into account. The second presentation looked at the subject of employability of older people more from the individual's perspective, but still focusing on the consequences and challenges arising from employability issues in old age. However, it was shifting – with the progress of the presented projects – from this labor market and economy driven focus to a broader concept of life transitions in older age, of which retirement or unemployment is only one. The third presentation followed a completely student-centered, and not employability-centered, approach.

The main discussion points following the presentations can be summarized under three topics: the *perspective* taken, *barriers* to lifelong learning and *generational* differences.

1. The perspective taken: Employability-centered and individual-centered approaches

The workshop participants were critical about approaches that would take only economic processes and the employer's requirements into consideration. Thus, they also critically called the principal of the presented projects into question, wanting to know whether funding was provided by the public or the private sector. This relates to the discussion that took place earlier during the Business Panel, where the purpose of universities – ensuring and increasing the public good – was accentuated against a purely economic purpose. It was agreed that older adults should be able to stay with their employer if they wanted to and be provided a meaningful task. Still retirement should be understood more as a process than as a sudden event. The possibility of "landing jobs" – more flexible models of working hours and the gradual transfer of the older person's knowledge to the younger generation – was proposed.

Finally the participants agreed that the topic of "long life learning" can be approached from different perspectives, but that the main factors of each perspective are interrelated and might be mutually causal to those of the other perspective. For example, if a person is facing challenges in his/her private life, this has an effect on his/her performance at work; work related factors such as retirement or unemployment have an effect on one's private life. The participants identified competences as a crucial link between work and private sphere. These competences should be sustainable and flexible so that they can serve as resources in all life spheres and all ages. Meta-competences, such as organizing skills or presenting oneself, were considered to be very important.

2. Barriers to Lifelong Learning

The presenters and the participants emphasized focusing on the social context. With this, the question of stereotypes of ageing – both on the side of the employer as on that of the older employees themselves – arose. This question is important for lifelong learning: On the one hand it is the responsibility of lifelong learning institutions to correct negative images of ageing and offer alternatives. On the other hand, negative images of ageing can function as a barrier to lifelong learning and explain in part why not more old people participate in lifelong learning. The discussion also evolved around other barriers, such as the financing of the university courses or the formal qualifications required to attend them. However, also more subtle barriers were stated: elitist terms (“education”, “research”), elitist places such as universities, and certain required abilities such as writing in a scientific style. These barriers are more closely linked to what Bourdieu would frame as ‘cultural capital’. The presenters added that the older participants in their lifelong learning projects were mainly middle or upper class. Lower status groups shy away from learning and often do not even consider the possibility of learning at a university. However, being from the middle class doesn't necessarily entail having a higher education: many of the participants were said to be older women with a lower level of education, whose husband did have a higher education and income and/or a higher social origin.

3. Generational differences: Being 50+ in 2012

That older women often had no chance to pursue higher education when they were young is one aspect of what the participants framed as a ‘generational problem’. The people who are around 60 years old today were born after WWII before the democratization of higher education. It was still fairly easy for this generation to find employment. They expected to work in one and the same company all their lives, retire and receive a decent pension. But the changes in the labor market did not pass them, then in their 50s, unnoticed: prospective employers today consider diplomas and higher education as requirements also for older job-seekers. Beyond that, the disappointment of their expectations also imposes psychological challenges. Thus, the participants suggest that the EU should develop a system where work experience is recognized for postgraduate education. Older people with a lot of work experience should have the possibility to obtain the intellectual knowledge to complement their practical skills – and this should be certified with a diploma of equal value.