



AGEING HORIZONS

Policies for ageing societies

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The Promise of Lifelong Learning

Recent policy discourse has carved out an ambitious role for the lifelong learning agenda. The claim is that the payoff from putting more resources into education and training over the lifecourse, and in particular for adults who have already left school or university, is potentially very large. Not only is it the key to maintaining economic competitiveness in an increasingly globalised world (so that 'upskilling' and 'reskilling' across all age groups have been transformed into policy imperatives), but it also promises to lay the groundwork for a more actively engaged 'citizenship' (see DIUS, 2007, 2008; EC, 2006, 2007; The Council of the European Union, 2002).

Ongoing demographic shifts towards population ageing have lent an added sense of urgency to arguments about increased investments in lifelong learning. The 50+ age groups are a key target, for at least two reasons. First, economic engagement at older ages and the maintenance of work ability are seen as a solution to a looming pensions crisis. A deficit model of an older workforce sees the training or re-training of older workers as crucial for productive ageing, in the sense of both maintaining the productivity of the ageing workforce, and enabling people (partly) withdrawn from the workforce to contribute economically to society. A consequence of this is an increased emphasis on one particular aspect of lifelong learning, that is, later-life learning, and especially the component of it which is geared towards the acquisition of employment-relevant skills and knowledge.

Second, the concept of retirement itself has evolved with the demographic shifts (and the associated extended average duration of retirement) to include a growing emphasis on engagement and responsibility. It is now widely accepted that passivity and disengagement increase the risk of chronic health problems in retirement, and that the promotion of social engagement among older people is a sensible component of public health strategies designed to contain rising health and social care costs. Government should help older people to maintain and further develop social networks, to engage in fulfilling social interaction

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outside and beyond the workplace, and to contribute to society outside their immediate family setting. This may take the form of older people's engagement in formal or non-formal learning, as participants but also as providers of education or training.

At national and European level, a comprehensive concept of lifelong learning is expected to answer, at least in part, such concerns, by balancing upskilling, economic engagement, civic participation, and social and educational interaction. This issue of Ageing Horizons considers the policy challenges posed by such ambitious expectations. To what extent can education and training help ageing societies cope with the economic, social and political challenges posed by ageing workforces, extended retirement, and extended healthy life expectancy? Is the current lifelong learning agenda, particularly at European level, likely to deliver the solutions promised by its official rhetoric?

The need for lifelong learning is often linked to the decline of productivity with age, perhaps compounded by lack of skills, particularly in the context of technological change. The paper by Skirbekk reviews the existent research on age and productivity, and reflects on its significance for policy. Skirbekk notes that most studies plot the relationship between job performance and age as a "humped" curve, but also that the evidence available is not entirely conclusive. While the decline in physical abilities with age is undeniable, cognitive abilities are a mixed picture, with verbal/communication abilities and tacit, procedural knowledge remaining highly functional in later life, and even strengthened by experience. Policy, Skirbekk argues, needs to take into account the many facets of the relationship between productivity and ageing (from selection, promotion, earning profiles, and retirement age, to technological change, training and experience, and to health, exercise and nutrition). For example, he suggests that expectations of later retirement and involvement in targeted training programmes within a mixed-age environment at the level of the firm may be associated with productivity preservation and/ or increase.

A question emerging from this is: if the evidence points to such decline, what is the actual extent to which further formal learning may contribute to compensating for it/ slowing it down, and what should the role of the state be in dealing with this problem? While skill gaps and skills obsolescence are not specific to older workers, in the context of population ageing this group becomes particularly significant economically. Is increased training provision for workers 50+ likely to enhance the mutual attractiveness of employers and older workers? What potential does this have to alleviate the skills problem in the medium term? Not a great deal, is Mayhew, Elliott, and Rijker's answer. Their paper on upskilling older workers gives a stark view on the potential of further training (and thus enhancement of knowledge and skills) to improve the labour market position of older workers and provide a strategy for avoiding a "pension crisis". There is indeed evidence of skills decline with age, as well as of lower participation of older workers in formal training. But lack of human capital is only one amongst several possible explanations of the "disadvantaged" position of older workers in the labour market (age discrimination and the presence of restrictive regulations and of incentive systems supporting early retirement being some of the alternatives), and the case for prioritising supply-side interventions is "mixed at best". As such, the evidence on the contribution of later-age training to improved aggregate employment or even individual employment prospects, Mayhew *et al.* conclude, does not warrant strong government training intervention.

At least in theory, an extended concept of lifelong learning, which is the strategy embraced by the European Union and the OECD, would hope to go beyond “training” in its technical sense, and combine economic benefits with social, civic, and educational gains (including active citizenship). In the European Union, the remarkable ascension of the lifelong learning agenda over the past decade occurred in the context of tensions between efforts towards cross-national harmonization, and the very pronounced differences between the countries in this particular area. The paper by Slowey offers a critical reading of recent policy documents on lifelong learning from the EU and the OECD, but also in individual European countries. She acknowledges the difficulty in producing a coherent and balanced rationale for increased investments in the lifelong learning agenda. Her answer is to advocate a “lifecourse perspective” articulated around three concepts: access; intergenerational learning; and facilitating fourth-age learning.

The case for further learning in terms of employment-related gains may be mixed, but, there is slightly more agreement in relation to its civic, social and individual well-being benefits. Newman and Hatton-Yeo note a growth in intergenerational learning policy initiatives in recent years, and move towards building a case for further support of such programs. They link intergenerational and lifelong learning within a social capital perspective and a life span approach to individual development. Given the changed

patterns of family structures in contemporary societies, which arguably provide fewer opportunities for older people to make a contribution than traditional structures, how can the potential contributions of older people be harnessed and supported outside family settings and paid employment? This prompts Newman and Hatton-Yeo to argue for government interventions that prioritise the educational contributions of older people, rather than casting them as recipients of employment-oriented training.

All in all, the papers in this special issue recommend a cautious reading of the available research evidence on late-life training and re-training. Studies reviewed in this issue suggest that, at aggregate levels, early (initial) education and training potentially may weigh more than later changes in training, in relation to later-life employability, productivity, and well-being (see paper by Mayhew *et al.*, this issue, and also Joung *et al.*, 2000). Demographic shifts are already having an impact on initial education (for example, in budgetary terms) (EC, 2003; Sommestad, 2001), and this is bound to increase if education and training in later life are further prioritised in policy. The concept of lifelong learning currently embraced in the documents of international organisations is an attempt to broaden the focus to include personal, civic, and social gains across the lifespan, but remains fraught with tensions and hovers between impractical generality and burdensome prescription.

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