



## Future of Education in an Ageing Population

Expert meeting – York Centre for Lifelong Learning  
13th July 2015

### Summary

- **Working lives are getting longer, but participation in adult learning is falling** (particularly amongst older people) and **funding is being reduced**.
- To address this we need a **mixed economy of learning and of funding for learning**, in which the allocation of public money for adult education needs to take account of deprivation and demography.
- It is important to consider how best to **incentivise learning**, particularly for people in low-skilled work, or who do not want to engage with adult education. Mid-life career reviews and new forms of learning can be important here.
- Alongside falling participation rates in adult education, we are seeing the **growth of some informal community learning organisations** such as Men's Sheds and U3A. The conditions required to facilitate such movements should be captured and replicated.
- Additional training will be required for the **increased need for care provision** as the population ages.
- **The concept of 'age' is changing**. How do you think about education for older people in a context where the meaning of 'age' is changing, and the experience of a particular age is far from homogeneous?
- **Health outcomes can be achieved through learning interventions**.
- The development of certain "**life skills**", such as financial literacy, managing transitions in the ageing process, and the ability to recognise and explain your own skill set, will become additionally important in the context of fuller working lives and pension reforms.

### What particular challenges for education arise from increasing longevity?

1. **Working lives are getting longer, but participation in adult learning is falling** (particularly amongst older people) and **funding is being reduced**.
  - a. There has been an assumption that funding lifelong learning is the state's responsibility; this is changing as budgetary pressures increase. There has been a reduction in funding for adult education, with particular pressures on Further Education.
  - b. Those who are in work or who want to be working can be overlooked, with funding for training focused on younger people.

- c. Lifelong Learning institutions can also be under threat because of budget pressures on universities.
  - d. However, austerity also means that transferring the responsibility to individuals to pay for their own lifelong learning may be unrealistic.
2. **The concept of ‘age’ is changing**, and the experience of a particular age differs hugely between individuals.
- a. Some organisations are now finding biological age a more useful indicator than chronological age.
  - b. There are differences in the ageing experience between cohorts, socioeconomic groups, genders, ethnicities. The ethnic diversity of older cohorts is increasing as the population ages.

### **Education and the evolving nature of work across the longer life course**

- 3. **As working lives are getting longer and the pace of technological change is increasing**, the number of significant changes an individual will have to adapt to during their working life will increase. It is as much about the world changing as it is about people getting older.
- 4. There are some jobs (e.g. manual work) for which extending working life is problematic; people in these roles will have to **re-train** for work that is less physically demanding in order to work to an older age.
- 5. Additional training will be required to satisfy the **increased need for care provision** as the population ages.
  - a. It will be important to consider who will be expected to deliver these care services to older people, and what will be required. For example, what kind of professional services will be being delivered? What role will volunteers and family members play in service delivery?
  - b. This will impact the training needs, which could include both formal and informal learning. For example, informal education for partners of people with dementia.
- 6. Once people have become unemployed it is less likely that skills and education will help them get back into work, especially for people in their 40s and 50s. This suggests the **need for education for people *in* work** at this stage of life, not just those who are out of work.
  - a. This is particularly important in the context of the projected increased computerisation of jobs in certain sectors
- 7. Evidence on the role of training in returning unemployed older people to the labour market suggests that training is only helpful if linked to other strategies, such as work placements.

## **What is the role of non-traditional forms of education – especially for those who have experienced disadvantage?**

8. Alongside falling participation rates in adult education, we are seeing the **growth of some informal community learning organisations** such as Men's Sheds, and the U3A, and groups such as the WI increasingly attracting new younger members. It was suggested that the conditions required to facilitate such movements should be captured and replicated.
  - a. These community learning movements are picking up some but by no means all of the people who would previously have participated in more formal learning. It is important to look at which groups of people have been left out by these shifts.
  - b. Diversity issues: U3A is a very white, middle class organisation (an issue they are very aware of), which is two-thirds women. Men's Sheds attracts many members with little background in formal education. The WI is increasingly appealing to younger participants.
9. **Intergenerational or family learning** can be a very effective way of engaging adults who do not usually participate in formal learning.
10. It is important to consider how best to **incentivise learning**, particularly for people in low-skilled work, or who do not want to engage with adult education.
  - a. Policymaking needs to focus on people in low skilled work who are not engaging in education. For example, people who have been in one low-skilled role for a long period of time may be vulnerable to redundancy as sectors shift (due to developments such as large-scale computerisation), and may not have the skills to find employment elsewhere.
  - b. The greatest predictor of involvement in adult education is early education, pointing to the importance of a life course approach. However, the focus should not be limited to early education.
  - c. Research carried out by NIACE found that people at lower levels of perceived hierarchies were less interested in workplace training. For people in lower skilled work there is less incentive to undertake training if it is designed around their current role. Quality of work is an important factor.
  - d. There may be a problem with the words 'learning' and 'education'. In organisations such as Men's Sheds, the U3A and the WI, people may not perceive themselves as learning. The starting point is the thing they want to be able to do or understand, and the model is one of knowledge sharing.

## **Education as a route to maintaining engagement and increasing resilience**

11. Recent changes to pension policy have increased the need for developing financial literacy, particularly amongst older people. However, a life course approach is needed; the notion of working towards longer, more deferred outcomes can be difficult to grasp and many younger people do not fully understand the long-term implications of their financial decisions.
12. **Health outcomes can be achieved through learning interventions.**  
For example, the Australian Men's Sheds Association is funded by the Department of Health (via their National Male Health budget). The Australian government also funds the U3A.

## Policy ideas

*Note: This meeting was not primarily focused on creating policy ideas. The ideas below are thoughts from the concluding part of the discussion and are not meant to represent fully developed policy recommendations.*

- To address the decline in government funding for adult education, it was suggested that we need to develop a **mixed economy of learning and of funding for learning**, in which the allocation of public money for adult education needs to take account of deprivation and demography.
  - A mixed economy of learning would include a mixture of formal (structured, accredited), non-formal (structured but not accredited) and informal learning. Funding would come from government, local authorities, employers and individuals, with co-financing structures available.
  - Better mechanisms are needed to connect these different forms of learning together. For example, someone involved in a Men's Sheds group may be inspired to undertake more formal learning. The Plymouth U3A has encouraged this dynamic through its partnership with Plymouth University, which enables its members to access lectures, facilities and events .
  - It would be useful to examine the conditions needed for informal community learning groups to flourish, and how can these be fostered in a way that provides opportunities for groups who typically do not engage with the existing groups. Could the state have a role in this (for example, by providing seed funding)?
  - It was suggested that one potential source of funding for lifelong learning could be university tuition fees; part of the agreement that enables universities to charge £9000 per year is that they must take steps to encourage fair access to higher education. This could in theory include education of mature students at Higher Education institutions.
- **Midlife career reviews**, or a career advancement service, could be an effective way of helping people to think through their career and training options as they get older. These could be delivered by the National Careers Service.
- The psychology of health programmes (such as Change4Life) which **work through schools** but engage older generations could be applied to education.
- Schools could use their Pupil Premium to encourage 'trickle up effects' in families where the parents and grandparents may have lacked educational opportunities (e.g. through **family learning** programmes).
- Government funding for adult education could include **seed funding**; bids for government grants could include criteria for sustainability (i.e. learning projects that need start-up money but could become self-funding).

- A “**log book**” of learning could provide a personalised record of learning, recognising both formal and informal learning experiences, and could be used to help target resource. This would be something like the National Record of Achievement, and should be universal.
  - This could be linked to having a “**Learning Account**”; these were suggested as a potential mechanism for pooling funding from the government and employers to fund learning opportunities for individuals.
- **Training on recognising and explaining your own skill set** could be very useful for lower skilled workers who have been in one role for a long time, so that they are better able to demonstrate their employability as sectors evolve in the future.
- Education for **managing key transitions** in the ageing process (such as retirement) could be positive.
- It was suggested that government policy on **Fuller Working Lives** should be joined up with policies around **education across the life course**, for those in work as well as the unemployed.