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Promoting age friendly universities which are sustainable and open to all: a new challenge for the academy?

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Abstract The educational needs and interests of older adults have been largely overlooked by universities. Traditionally, universities have geared their curriculum and recruitment drive towards younger adults, yet the number of older adults, as a proportion of the total population, is growing. Many of these older adults want to remain in work longer whether in a paid or voluntary capacity. This article argues that universities have the potential to play a major role in innovation through increasing and widening participation of older adults. It outlines an approach, the Age Friendly University (AFU) which highlights ten principles that offer a possible guide for innovation and institutional change. The integration of AFU's mission and principles is reflected in cases from Ireland and the UK. It argues the AFU has the potential to bring social, personal and economic benefits to older adults and universities alike.

Key words Age-Friendly; Older Adults; Community Engagement; Universities; Lifelong Learning.

Introduction

Older people form an increasing proportion of the global population and as society is reshaped, educationalists are challenged to consider how to respond to an ageing population through new pedagogies and practices of teaching, research and community engagement (Withnall, 2002). Universities as major educational providers can and should adapt to fully address the challenges and barriers faced by older adults through the creation of appropriate opportunities for later-life learning. Universities have the potential to bridge

disciplinary and geographic barriers to overcome the intellectual compartmentalisation that has often impeded later-life learning research and practice (Field & Schuller, 1999). In this article, I outline a vision for the development of later-life learning within universities using the concept and strategic focus of the Age Friendly University (AFU).

The article examines how universities are engaging older adults in two universities. It looks at how the universities have developed policies and practices that engage with older adult's needs and interests and examines how they are responding to the challenge of researching later-life learning.

Generations of reflection and response around later life learning

When seeking answers to the question, how should universities respond to the needs of older adults, it is important to be clear about what the purposes of learning are as they ultimately influence the learning that transpires. Rubenson (1998; 2000) identifies an early generation of ideas about lifelong learning with its roots in humanistic traditions and utopian visions. This assumes that people live in a world where the individual is highly motivated to learn, constantly seeking new knowledge. These visions were followed by a new generation of ideas from the late 1980s of lifelong learning, which appeared to be structured around an economic worldview (p. 2). Here the focus is on supporting the needs of the economy, and education is focused on providing training and qualifications to meet perceived labour market demand.

A further generation of concern has emerged based on the connections between learning and wellbeing. Older people are more vulnerable to diminished health and wellbeing and may hold limited access to the learning and life skills necessary to stay well (Ludescher, 2016; Schmidt-Hertha, 2016; Selwyn et al., 2003). There are large political and pedagogical issues that must be considered by universities and communities engaged together in later-life learning (Borg & Formosa, 2016). Our focus is on this fourth generation of concern around later life learning and its potential for overcoming the hurdles between older adults and higher education; however, we reach a step further.

Across these generations, we find the premise that learning throughout life is a human right as a cornerstone of adult education and later life learning (Schuller & Watson, 2009). This premise is held by this article's authors drawing on lessons from those like Schuller and Watson (2009). They offer ten proposals for upholding the human right to learn throughout life, but among their proposals are a call for the strengthening of choice and motivation to learn, a framework to give people control over their own lives as citizens, and strategising on local, regional, and national levels. Modern learning theories and practice must do more to not see education as a commodity to be bought (Kolland, Ludescher, & Waxenegger, 2016). These notions can be seen by our principles for and work towards the Age Friendly University (AFU).

The Age Friendly University (AFU): new beginnings

In 2012, the Ministers of Education from the 47 members of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) issued a proclamation that the student body entering and graduating from higher education institutions should reflect Europe's diverse population, from which a commitment was made that included a focus on the ageing population. The year 2012 was deemed the *European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations* (Withnall, 2016). While in the United States of America, organisations like the National Council on the Ageing and events such as the White House Conference on Ageing continue to emphasise the empowering role of education (Manheimer, 1998; 2005) the connection between higher education and older adults remains insufficiently legitimated.

The story of the Age Friendly University began at Dublin City University. Researchers, adult learners and external partners representing older adults' interests together developed ten principles (see Table 1) that underpin the AFU (DCU 2016a).

Table 1. The Age Friendly University (AFU) Principles:

1	To encourage the participation of older adults in all the core activities of the university, including educational and research programmes.
2	To promote personal and career development in the second half of life and to support those who wish to pursue ‘second careers’.
3	To recognise the range of educational needs of older adults (from those who were early school-leavers through to those who wish to pursue Master’s or PhD qualifications).
4	To promote intergenerational learning to facilitate the reciprocal sharing of expertise between learners of all ages.
5	To widen access to online educational opportunities for older adults to ensure a diversity of routes to participation.
6	To ensure that the university’s research agenda is informed by the needs of an ageing society and to promote public discourse on how higher education can better respond to the varied interests and needs of older adults.
7	To increase the understanding of students of the longevity dividend and the increasing complexity and richness that ageing brings to our society.
8	To enhance access for older adults to the university’s range of health and wellness programmes and its arts and cultural activities.
9	To engage actively with the university’s own retired community.
10	To ensure regular dialogue with organisations representing the interests of the ageing population.

These design principles set the challenge incorporating the interests of older adults into a university’s core teaching, research and engagement (civic) activities. The AFU seeks to play a leadership role in strategically addressing the challenges of an ageing population through its research agenda, curriculum development, engagement with the ageing community and relationship to its own academic and support staff and students. This requires an interdisciplinary perspective harnessing the institution’s expertise and resources to investigate and address older adults’ interests in relation to larger societal issues. The AFU approach also includes intergenerational learning

programming that brings together younger and older students, learning from each other for their mutual benefit (for example, Corrigan et al., 2013).

The AFU represents one example of a strategic response on the part of higher education to the changing nature of the life-course from a linear to a more dynamic and complex model. Increased longevity, coupled with the changing nature of work (e.g., more IT and home-based), employment (e.g., insecurity) and family structures (e.g., more single households and 'patchwork' families) suggest the need for a new view of the stages of life.

The impact of the AFU's dialogue between universities and the germination of its principles within the universities remains uncharted; The word 'dialogue' is used above to signal that higher education institutions are places not only for the exchanges of thought, but also places for mutual learning (Kolland, Ludescher, & Waxenegger, 2016). Although in its beginnings, the stories show AFU's commitment at the highest level of these universities to widen the participation of older adults in universities, there is no single blueprint on how the AFU might be developed (Slowey, 2015). This article will examine how the AFU concept has developed in two – Dublin City University and the University of Strathclyde. The author has worked as a teacher and researcher in both universities. There were three founding partners in the project, the third partner being Arizona State University. The universities were committed to promoting age friendly initiatives and to sharing knowledge about progress in putting principles into practice, and the partnership has been extended to include other universities through a mutually recognised agreement.

This article focusses solely on two universities which adopted the age friendly principles – Dublin City University in Ireland and Strathclyde University, Glasgow in the UK. These universities were chosen as the author was involved in implementing principles and practices in both universities. Dublin City University is located in a suburb of Dublin close to Ballymun, one of the city's most disadvantaged housing estates. It does not have a centre or department of lifelong learning or later-life learning. Strathclyde University is located in Glasgow's City centre. The University has had a Centre for Lifelong Learning from the 1960s where later-life learning programmes are located (through what was a Senior Studies Institute, and recently renamed a Later-Life Academy). Both universities seek to encourage adults from disadvantaged groups to attend programmes. In Scotland, the government provides a subsidy for students who have not studied at the same

level before and in Dublin some assistance is given to students with limited resources. In both universities, the student cohort in later-life programmes are largely fee paying though the fee often does not reflect the true cost of provision. Student data on fees and social and community background was not available at the time of writing.

A case study approach is used to demonstrate how the two universities have chosen to implement an age friendly strategy and engage with older learners. The article then compares the two approaches taken and draws conclusions about the extent to which these universities could be said to be age friendly universities.

The article introduces the reader to the idea of an ‘age friendly university’ shedding some light on how the concept has developed. The two case studies below demonstrate different and unique approaches which emerged in the search for what makes a university age-friendly. The author hopes that by providing two illuminating examples of how these universities are engaging with the concept of the ‘age friendly university’ that this might in turn provoke discussion and debate among other providers on how the ‘age friendly university concept’ might be further developed in the future.

Case Study 1: The University of Strathclyde

The University of Strathclyde is one of a small number of universities in the UK, which is growing a special focus on providing for the educational needs of older adults. The University’s egalitarian ethos dates back to the late 18th century when John Anderson, the founding father, set out in his will a vision of a new democratic university with part-time education for non-traditional students, including artisans and women – ‘a place of useful learning’ – now the University motto. Through public subscription, the John Anderson University came into being – now the University of Strathclyde.

Inclusivity and community outreach have characterised the development of the institution. By the mid-eighties, the university embraced the Learning in Later Life (3L) idea based largely on the University of the Third Age. As it was the first targeted 3L programme in Scotland, it gave birth to a wide-range of teaching, research and practical activities targeted to the needs of older adults. The flourishing 3L programme was formalised by the institution as the Centre for Lifelong Learning (CLL) in 1996. A broad range of public

programmes were offered including languages, history, the arts, and natural and social sciences at all levels geared towards the needs and interests of older adults.

Currently, around 1,500 learners aged over 50 are enrolled in targeted programmes. The learning programmes are wide-ranging and flexible, with a great many other non-formal activities through self-help clubs and groups. On-going support and encouragement is also provided for teachers and tutors through non-formal training and workshops, especially addressing how to develop better ways of learning. Not only was the initiative the first in Scotland, but also it remains one of the largest and most sustainable in Europe.

CLL staff are often asked to identify the factors contributing to its sustainability, and three aspects have emerged. These are linked to the collaborative nature of the venture involving partnerships both within and outside the university in the development and delivery of programmes, support from the university for the work of CLL at the highest level and most importantly the engagement of older students in decision making and in the development of extra-curricular activities through a student association, some of which are discussed below.

The centre, since beginning, has developed initiatives that cultivated the context for the creation of the AFU concept and principles. Five arenas for innovative practices for older adult learning follow.

First, the programme offers bridges between generations enabling young people to learn from therein seniors and vice versa. The intergenerational contact has been useful in promoting new images of both older and younger people, placing young people at the forefront of challenging ageism.

Second, the centre targets older adults in the 50–59-year-old age range, recognising the burgeoning older adult population in part brought about by employer restructuring and downsizing. For example, one-day workshops were developed, half-day taster seminars, study trips, summer courses and lunchtime talks. Skills-based classes – especially information technology – have expanded exponentially, both for personal enrichment, and also for work readiness. An overall uptake of optional university credits has also demonstrated that some students wanted official acknowledgement, while others have seen these as enhancing job opportunities.

The third hallmark of centre development is that older adults have been integrally involved in defining its offerings. Despite the sociable nature of classes, it is the personal connection to each other that enhances the experience. Tutors are engaged for three hours per class, two for teaching and a third for social interaction. Over refreshments in a pleasant room, tutors and students mingled. This strategy enables barriers to be lifted and enriching relationships to thrive. A 3L Students Association (3Ls) was formed in 1998 and has a current membership of over 900. It organises social events including lunches, theatre trips and study weekends. It also supports 16 special interest clubs, which are open for those registered in the programme and who are student association members. It works in parallel with the classes to ensure formal learning is supported by informal activities. Furthermore, it helps to integrate students into university life with members encouraged to take part in other events, such as university public lectures, intergenerational debates, concerts and art exhibitions. This involvement has raised the 3L student profile throughout the university, as well as engendering a sense of belonging to university.

Fourth, a host of older adult volunteer groups have been created to carry out the centre's mission. Exemplars include: University Guides (campus tours), Computer Buddies (one-to-one learning) and the Spinal Injuries Support Network (social support). These projects have allowed students to apply their learning and to benefit the community. '50+ Challenge', set up in 1997, supported students in their search for paid employment. One-to-one mentoring, help with CV writing and interview skills were supplemented with study for the European Computer Driving Licence. Over the years the centre has built considerable expertise in older adult employment, which is of increasing relevance.

Fifth, pathways have been built to facilitate older adults' sense of belonging and access to university facilities. Such engagement has contributed to the programme's success through the range of informal activities running in tandem with the volunteer projects. The work done over the years includes mailing promotional material, assisting at open days, staffing exhibition stands, community group talks, conference registrations, cataloguing books, hanging art exhibitions – and not least, welcoming visitors and new students to the programme.

In line with the AFU's mission, the centre has broadened its mission in two significant ways. First, it has built significant expertise in employment and

skills related training to encourage older adults to improve career prospects. It has worked with employers, trade unions and other business organisations to explore productive and flexible ways of integrating and maintaining older adults in the workforce. Additional funding from the local authority and the European Union has largely supported these programmes.

Second, pathways have been developed for engaging older adults with the university's research agenda. Older adults are now engaging in research that will (a) inform the university's ambition to provide more responsive programmes for older people and (b) inform public policy makers about the educational needs of older people. An initial task was to prepare an historical record of the growth of provision for older learners over a 25-year period, to review existing provision and make recommendations for future development from the perspective of these older learners. The research, all conceptualised and executed by older adults, has informed the development of many university projects on inter-generational learning and on the potential for older adults (grandparents and other community members) to contribute to children's learning. This new departure provides a way for learners to identify their own learning needs and provide evidence on what works.

Today, the importance of learning in later life is now recognised as an integral part of the mission of the University of Strathclyde in its quest to enhance and promote active healthy ageing. It is also seen as an integral part of the university's strategy to widen access through encouraging older people from all backgrounds to engage in formal and non-formal learning within a university context.

Case Study 2: Dublin City University

Dublin City University (DCU) is a young university with a distinctive mission, which aims to transform lives and societies through education, research and innovation. DCU has responded to global challenges posed by demographic changes by becoming an 'Age Friendly University'. In this, the university has built directly on its existing track record of research, educational innovation, widening access and community engagement in areas such as intergenerational learning, innovative delivery of lifelong education, health and wellness, social enterprise, support of non-traditional learners, careers, business and technology.

The AFU concept moved the university to a wider, strategic focus, incorporating the needs of older adults into the development of new opportunities and synergies locally, nationally and internationally. Under the auspices of the University President, a university-wide, interdisciplinary working group was established with the brief of engaging directly with older adults and their representatives to identify ways in which DCU, and higher education more generally, might best contribute to meeting their interests and needs: short, medium and longer term. Those involved included older adult learners from DCU's long established Intergenerational Learning Programme (Corrigan et al., 2013) and major agencies such as: Age Action Ireland, Age and Opportunity, AONTAS – the (Irish) National Adult Learning Association, the Senior Citizens Parliament, the Retirement Planning Council of Ireland, the Third Age Foundation, prominent experts (e.g., a social-gerontologist), U3A (University of the Third Age), various active retirement associations, representatives of the university's own retired community, and relevant public authorities.

In 2012, as DCU launched AFU and incorporated the ten principles into its mission. A subsequent Age-Friendly Implementation Action Team was established representing six 'pillars' of areas of work across the university: (1) Research and Innovation; (2) Teaching and Learning; (3) Lifelong Learning; (4) Intergenerational Learning; (5) 'Encore' Careers and Enterprise; and, (6) Civic Engagement. This work was supported by the coherence of core strategies of DCU relating to educational innovation, widening access, civic engagement and research.

From a myriad of areas of development at DCU, four are highlighted here as illustrative of the range encompassed under the AFU concept. First, lifelong learning was further developed through the offering of flexible learning programmes (part-time or e-learning particularly at the postgraduate level), which address current research, identifying the challenges faced by relatively younger adult students (30-50s) engaging with full-time study (Slowey, Murphy, & Politis, 2014). For example, DCU is host to Ireland's National Centre for Digital Learning. Also, DCU in the Dublin community offers shorter programmes targeted particularly at widening access to adults who did not previously regard higher education as 'being for them'. Arguably, however, at the core of provision for older adults lies DCU's Intergenerational Learning Programme (IGLP), which is directly centred on the identified needs and interests of older learners. This is done not in

isolation, but in close collaboration with younger students with an educational approach designed to encourage each to learn from the other (Corrigan et al., 2013).

Second, DCU has taken a lead in research on implications of specific aspects of ageing. For example, DCU has set a major focus on early onset dementia, getting involved with EU projects such as In-MINDD (innovative midlife intervention for dementia deterrence) and an Elevator Project supporting awareness raising and training in relation to dementia.

Third, DCU has developed programmes around health and wellness. DCU hosts a MedEx programme, which under the care of a medical director, brings several thousand older adults to the DCU campus for a wide range of programmes aimed at supporting healthy living including: HeartSmart – cardiac rehabilitation; BreatheSmart – pulmonary rehabilitation; SmartSteps – vascular rehabilitation; Diabetes Health Steps – diabetes; Move On –cancer rehabilitation; and, Living Life –for people living with advanced/secondary cancer.

Fourth, DCU works to continue its collaborative research investigating learning among older adults. The use of innovative technology for learning holds potential for older adults who can otherwise be excluded from learning activities due to physical and social barriers. Working in partnership across a range of disciplines (e.g., technology, adult education, communications) and with other researchers internationally, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) explores the use of multiple representations of information through alternative modalities to create new interfaces to support older adult learning (Murphy, 2015).

Discussion

These case studies highlight two distinct approaches for promoting age-friendly universities.

While both universities have engaged with older learners, the process has been triggered from quite different starting points. In Dublin City University, an initial commitment from the President, who established an interdisciplinary partnership of senior people across the university to develop and promote an age friendly university policy, provided the initial impetus for

engagement right across the university. In contrast, in Strathclyde, the impetus for engagement came from staff in the Senior Studies Institute located within the Centre of Lifelong Learning. This unit worked in partnerships with older learners, through a Student Association (with over 1,000 members), to develop provision to meet older learner needs. Gradually both universities have sought to include senior and middle management as well as the learners working in partnership together.

The opportunity to learn through participation in formal courses as well as non-formal learning activities was evident in both universities. In the case of Dublin, the focus has been on engagement of adults in an intergenerational learning programme bringing together students of all ages, for example to share their personal memories through photographs and stories. The university also works in partnership with various subject disciplines to promote entry routes to established university courses. At Strathclyde, the focus is mainly on formal programmes specifically tailored to the needs of older adults. Staff are trained to use teaching and learning approaches suited to the cohort group and in providing advice and guidance to older students. The Student-Association organises non-formal learning activities to support formal learning, through ‘clubs,’ largely social and recreational in nature. In addition, there is a focus on voluntary activities which includes supporting learners outside the university (in schools, hospitals and in the community), fund raising and assisting the university with relevant tasks, for example, tour guiding which shows groups around the university. Both approaches have advantages and drawbacks – students sometimes find it difficult to integrate in classes populated by younger students. On the other hand, programmes for older adults tend to be introductory and often non-accredited and do not provide opportunities for older adults who want to study at a higher level.

Research and development activities focussed in both universities, again with a different slant in each. Both universities were engaged in research relevant to ageing depending on the research interests of the university. Dementia, social care, nursing, prosthetics and orthotics are just some examples of areas where research related to ageing is going on. The focus on an age friendly university has led to opportunities for collaboration both internally and through partnerships are now being further explored. In Strathclyde, a student research group has been set up. It carries out its own research and assists with other research activities across the university and in Dublin students have been encouraged to complete thesis and projects in this area as part of their studies. So AFU is both supporting research and

encouraging new cross disciplinary research as a direct result of a focus on the AFU concept.

These case studies show how universities can embrace age friendly principles and develop policies and practices which seek to bring about change by integrating older people into the life of universities and engaging in research which is relevant and useful to the needs of older people.

Conclusion

Experience shows how higher education institutions not only need to consider alternatives to their many systems geared towards full-time students, but they also must look outside of many conventional benchmarks which fail to capture the rich and diverse activities encompassed within the vision of the AFU. Additionally, there are challenges in discovering the types of learning which many older learners seek as opposed to prescribing how they should learn (Kolland, Ludescher, & Waxenegger, 2016). Universities are well placed to become leaders in addressing these challenges. The illustrations we have provided of AFU activities are, we suggest, building blocks, which are both relevant and correctly targeted at promoting the quality of life of older adults. They are firmly based on a partnership approach involving teachers, researchers, community organisations and learners working together in the delivery of programmes. Along with age-friendly initiatives in related areas (such as health and wellness, urban development, technological innovation and cultural activities), they are all part of what might be a part of an AFU trajectory. achieving a university that is age-friendly in practice will require nothing less than a cultural transformation for most higher education institutions. The challenges are clearly considerable for institutions with an educational mission centred on young adults. Experience suggests that there is much to be gained from even taking the first step of opening discussion and debate involving all interested parties. In these debates, the diverse voices of older members of our communities have an important role to play in bringing us back to central questions concerning the role of universities in contemporary society and issues of access to higher-level knowledge. The possibilities for mutual learning, dynamic development and innovative outcomes through AFU are there to be taken.

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