

## Enriching later life through higher education: what can Spain teach Britain?

Chris Ring (Senior Lecturer in Social Work and Professional Practice), Nottingham Trent University

Claire de Motte (Research Assistant), Nottingham Trent University

### Abstract

*Social, technological, and environmental change presents Europeans of all ages with the need to engage in diverse forms of learning to survive, thrive and enhance their quality of life. Progressive reductions in state support for older people across Europe requires them to become more resilient and adaptable, and better able to care for themselves and one another. Diverse forms of learning can contribute to this, as well as being intrinsically valuable. Modern technology, the range of learning provision, and older people's sustained motivation to learn all favour their engagement in this.*

*Evidence from the UK shows significant changes in patterns of learning by older people, with increasing participation in more community-based provision, and on-line and independent learning, and substantial disengagement from higher education. In Spain, by contrast, extensive development of university level provision for older people has taken place. Combining subject expertise, an adapted pedagogy, and intergenerational learning opportunities, such programmes offer older people a distinctive experience, with evidence of significant benefit.*

*In the UK very few universities have developed such programmes. However, a survey of older people in Nottingham indicates significant interest in such provision.*

*Limited evidence of benefit and of expertise are barriers to its development in the UK. But both are available from countries such as Spain with greater experience of such provision. International transfer of these assets promises substantial benefits to older people and universities in many developed societies in Europe and elsewhere.*

## **Introduction**

Current social and economic circumstances, and older people's aspirations and resources call for a transformation in the ways in which later life is experienced and perceived in post-industrial societies. There are strong reasons to believe that many forms of learning in later life can and are contributing to this process. But older peoples' declining participation in higher education suggests that British universities are failing to meet their needs. Trends in higher education elsewhere, particularly in Spain, suggest that this has a significant contribution to make to positive ageing. Distinctive university-level programmes for older people in Spain provide some unique advantages, with good evidence of benefit, and UK universities would do well to emulate their examples.

## **Learning in later life and the role of higher education**

Whereas the role of learning in strengthening older people's individual and community resilience has been largely neglected in British social policy, this is by no means true elsewhere. There are strong a priori reasons, explored in greater depth by Boulton-Lewis (2010), for public policy, education providers, and older people to recognise the continued importance of learning in later life, and to create many more opportunities for this. There are several associated features of developed societies including the UK which support this view, which are summarised below.

Retirement releases time, energy, and often financial resources to explore new or older areas of interest and/or acquire valued skills (such as pottery, or playing an instrument). Increasing numbers of people now occupy the stage of life described first by Laslett (1991) as the “third age”. Commonly in their late 50s to late 70s, even if retired, they are increasingly likely to be physically and mentally fit, are often relatively affluent, engage in a wide range of pursuits, and actively contribute to society in many ways.

While there is a long-standing association of entry into the “third age” with a renewed enthusiasm for learning of all types, the rapid expansion of higher education in the UK in the 1960s means that a very significant minority of newly-retired people are now educated to university or professional level. In 2011, 20% of people over 50 in the East Midlands are qualified at University undergraduate level or its equivalent – level 4 (GREAT BRITAIN, Office for National Statistics), N.D). As previous educational level is one of the strongest predictors of engagement in later-life learning by older people, newly-retired people in 2015 are now in a stronger position than ever before to engage with and benefit from learning, particularly at a higher level.

The public appetite for learning has also been stimulated by the rapidly increasing range of broadcast media, from TV to iPads and similar devices. These provide factual information about the social and physical worlds, news and current affairs, and personal opinions and experiences, which have stimulated the desire to learn about a range of topics and issues.

Yet social, economic, and technical changes also mean skills and knowledge acquired in youth must be continually refreshed. Social changes resulting in the wider dispersal of family members require new ways of maintaining the social contacts which are one of the key features of a happy old age. Changing means of communication, and information provision, mean that skills and knowledge for day-to-day living acquired earlier in life e.g. map-reading, writing letters and mental arithmetic, have become obsolete, and new skills are

needed for everyday life (texting, using the internet, and using GPS systems). Increasing concern has arisen about the extent of "digital exclusion" of older people and others, associated with the "digital by default" provision of public and commercial services (Flood, 2013).

Demographic change combined with declining public spending mean that older people will be increasingly dependent on collective knowledge and skills rather than these being the sole province of professionals. The coincidence of reductions in public spending associated with the financial crises of 2008, and the increased globalisation of the world economy, combined with the needs for care and support associated with the increasing proportion of the total population over retirement age, suggest that measures are needed to limit the latter, and to provide this in less resource-intensive ways. Crudely speaking, older people's quality of life will increasingly depend on how well they can look after themselves (and so avert age-related problems such as dementia), and care for one another when these do encroach upon them.

So several demographic, social and technological trends in modern societies suggest that the need and demand for learning in later life are greater than ever before. But have opportunities for this expanded to provide these?

## **Recent changes in provision and uptake of opportunities for older learners in the UK**

Opportunities to learn in later life have emerged in numerous forms, especially during the later 20<sup>th</sup> century. The variety of modes employed by older people in the UK have been illustrated by recent surveys by MacNair (2012), in Spain by Socios, Braga, and Gama (2005), in Italy by Principi and Lamura (2009). In the UK these include the following:

- Adult and community education opportunities, available to all ages, and commonly funded by local authorities.
- Provision by voluntary and community organisations (including trade unions and pensioners associations). These include the Workers Educational Association) in the UK - used extensively but not exclusively by older people
- Mutual learning provision organised primarily by older people themselves – known in the UK as “Universities of the Third Age”, although this term is used in other European countries to refer to provision more closely associated with established universities (with which we are mainly concerned here). In Britain, U3A groups are long-established and very popular. More recent developments, such as “Mens Sheds” (Jenn, 2015), provide opportunities for older men to maintain and share existing practical skills in a workshop-like environment, as well as providing important social benefits
- University-level provision, not explicitly for older people: some courses, e.g. those run by the Open University, have been particularly popular with them: increasingly subjects are being offered on-line, and also on an international basis - sometimes as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs).

- University-level courses deliberately designed for older people. While continuing (non-vocational) higher education of the type appealing to older learners, has declined greatly over the years, a few universities are now developing courses specifically for older people, including Strathclyde, Lancaster, and Leeds (Beckett), where the Cinage Project (Granville, 2015), involving universities in four different countries, enlists older people in the scrutiny and development of film depicting ageing in a positive light.

The growing number of reasons for learning in later life, combined with the diversity of provision described, might suggest that older populations in the developed economies of Europe and North America are well-served by the diverse range of available provision. But closer scrutiny of recent trends in higher education in the UK and Europe calls this into question.

Contrasting the striking recent increases in “Programas para Personas Mayores” in Spanish universities, with the dramatically declining levels of participation of older people in higher education in the UK, suggests they may be increasingly excluded from this – or are choosing not to participate. Recent increases in university fees, and the closure of Departments of Adult and Continuing Education in recent years, seem plausible explanations for their reduced participation.

Evidence from Spain relating to university courses designed specifically for older people suggests strongly that their unique features of subject expertise, a pedagogy adapted for older learners, and intergenerational learning opportunities, provide distinctive advantages for older learners. Much more active engagement between British universities and older learners appears to offer considerable mutual benefit. Closer scrutiny of trends in older people’s engagement in different forms of learning in the UK provides the context to examine this proposal more fully.

## **Older people learning in the UK: recent trends and explanations**

Two surveys of older people by National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education, carried out in 2005 and 2012, provide the most useful data for considering older people's current involvement in learning and changes over time. The 2012 survey (MacNair 2012) will be used as the main source of data on current learning, comparing this with that in 2005 to highlight recent trends. Both surveys involved large samples of people over 50, representative in terms of age, gender, employment status and ethnicity. Learning was defined as

*"Learning can mean practising, studying, or reading about something. It can also mean being taught, instructed or coached. This is so you can develop skills, knowledge, abilities or understanding of something. Learning can also be called education or training"* (MacNair, 2012, p.11).

Levels of learning (so defined) by older people appear to have been maintained in recent years: around 1/5 of older people surveyed in 2012 reported learning during the past 3 years – a similar proportion to those responding in 2005 (although significant recent changes are apparent in what older people learn and where they do so – see below). The 2012 survey showed declining levels of learning with age, and retired people are considerably less likely to have done any learning recently than older people who are working or seeking work. Recent or current learning is also much more common among older members of the higher socio-economic groups, although levels of learning are similar for older men and women.

The reasons older people give for learning change as they get older. People between 50 and 65 were much more likely to cite work-related reasons ("to get a better job") than those

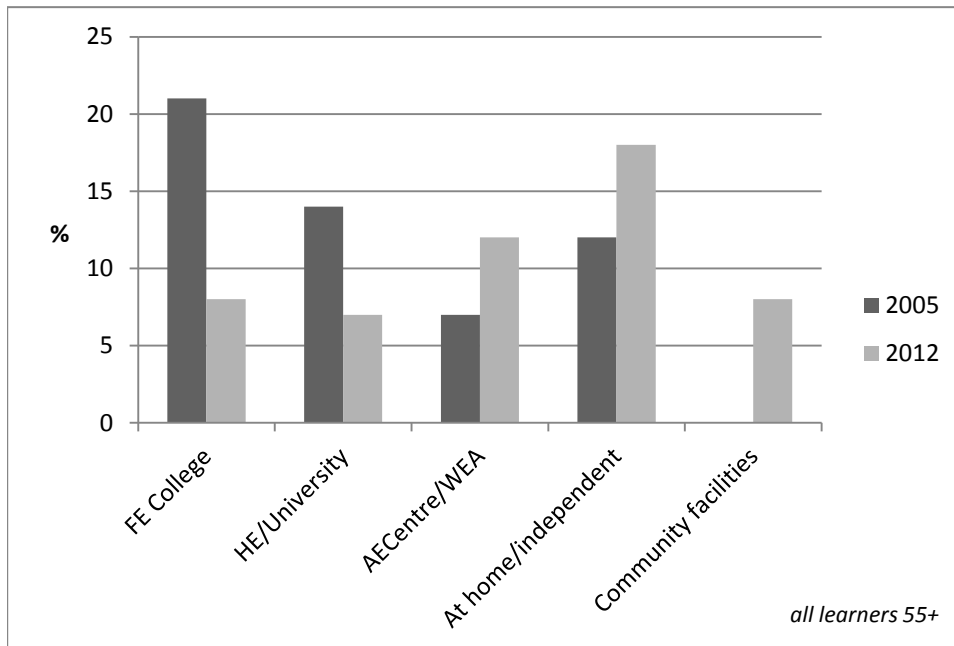
over 65, although the younger group commonly cited non-work-related reasons for learning (such as “improving self-confidence”). The desired content of learning also changes strikingly with age: overall, computing and ICT is the most popular subject, followed by health/medicine, social work/care, languages, and the humanities: however, ICT, languages, and arts are the most common topics for people over 65, whereas ICT, and health and social work are most common for those under 65. While this may reflect the continuing need to develop knowledge and skills in these areas for employment purposes, other factors may be at work.

ICT-related learning has shown some important changes between 2005-12: while still the most popular topic overall for older learners, this is becoming less prominent, and is more popular among older learners (over 65) than in younger people (aged 50-64). This is likely to be a cohort effect, with people still working or recently retired having already acquired ICT skills in the course of employment, while many retired older people – who may also share a more varied employment history – are less likely to have done so, and feel the need to “catch up”. The need for this is currently being accentuated by the “digital by default” provision of public and commercial services (Flood 2013), which will increasingly exclude those lacking ICT skills.

The survey showed striking recent changes in the main providers of learning for older people, and media in which this is delivered (see Figure 1, below). Many more older learners were learning at work, or in Adult Education centres. Learning through Further Education colleges (a significant provider in 2005) fell by almost 2/3 between 2005 and 2012, and the proportion of older learners at University declined by 50% during the same period. Rather more people are studying independently, and (in 2012 at least) many did so on-line. There are therefore indications of a move to less social forms of learning, although independent learning is not necessarily a solitary activity.



**FIGURE 1: Changes in the use by older learners of different forms of learning provision in the UK (2005 – 2012)**



(Reproduced with permission from MacNair, 2012, p.28).

Other recent surveys of , such as the BIS National Adult Learners Survey carried out by the Department of Business, Information and Skills (Great Britain, 2012), suggest considerably higher overall levels of learning by – 69%- by adults of all ages, than the 19% of adults over 50 found in 2012 by McNair. This may be due to a broader definition of learning by the BIS survey (“A learner is defined as a respondent who has left continuous full-time education and has taken part in at least one formal, non-formal or informal learning activity within the three years prior to the survey or since leaving continuous full-time education”) and its inclusion of adults of all ages. However, this survey revealed an overall drop of around 11% between 2005 and 2010 including a more dramatic decline in informal learning and may be attributable to a decline in work-based learning (at least for younger people).

But overall there seems little evidence of a decline in demand for learning by older people, although significant changes have clearly taken place in the pattern of provision. These seem likely to reflect three factors: the effects of the economic crisis of 2008 on older

people's ability to pay: major changes in the targeting and quantity of public funding for universities and FE colleges, and the increasing availability of on-line provision.

But have these changes adversely affected the range and quality of available opportunities?

Quite probably yes. Arguably, the declining participation of older people in structured higher and further education is of significant concern. The distinctive features of both include high levels of subject expertise, expertise in adult learning and (particularly in universities) technology-enhanced pedagogy), and unique opportunities for intergenerational learning at a high level. The establishment of the Open University in the UK in 1971 initially provided a unique opportunity for people entering later life to recapture missed opportunities for post-school education. Adult and Continuing Education departments also provided for their needs at more local level. While the OU continues to thrive (albeit with a significant shift towards vocational learning), only 9% of its students are now over 50 (Open University, 2015, online). Overall there has been a major decline in the provision of continuing education in UK universities. The progressive withdrawal of public funding for higher education, and its concentration on the subjects of most immediate economic benefit, has resulted in major increases in university fees, and disinvestment by individual universities from the very areas which older people are generally most attracted to – arts, culture, and languages. The changing range and increased cost of higher education are increasingly excluding older people from its benefits. Not only does this disadvantage them as individuals: it deprives older people collectively of the “social capital” accrued through higher education. Higher education policy in the UK appears currently to be operating to their collective disadvantage. In the face of an increasing older population this seems also to be disadvantaging society as a whole,

Phillipson and Ogg (2010), in their report commissioned by Universities UK on the engagement of older learners in higher education, also argue robustly for UK universities to take a more proactive approach to engaging older learners: “current policy has not taken

account of the reality that older people will be living longer and more actively. Investment now in education, and in higher education in particular, is likely to have major benefits for individuals and society, as it will help older people remain economically and socially engaged” (Ibid., p.39). They outline four broad approaches which universities can adopt in response to this reality. But a stronger case is also needed that higher education (in contrast to other forms of learning provision) has a distinctive contribution to their achievement.

### **Implications for higher education policy in the United Kingdom**

The long-term benefits for individual older people of mental activity such as structured learning are less well quantified than those of physical exercise, but a significant evidence base is emerging (see below) . This is an argument for “widening participation (of older people)” in higher education - in a new way. But doing so promises to benefit wider society in two respects.

It allows for older peoples’ collective engagement in addressing the distinctive challenges of an ageing society per se, and as members of an enlarged learning community. Issues of longevity, how society and individuals respond to the very challenging issues of cognitive decline, dementia, and achieving a “good death”, demand much more widespread public understanding and debate than have been apparent so far. Universities are in an expert position to form local learning communities to collectively address these issues, in which older people themselves will play a leading part alongside care professionals and the wider public, drawing upon the disciplinary understandings of social sciences, philosophy, clinical science and the humanities.

Another distinctive benefit of university expansion for older people is intergenerational learning. In an ageing society, public and commercial services are having to adapt to the new demands and opportunities presented by population ageing. Younger members of the

workforce are increasingly employed in roles providing goods and services to older people; while avoiding ageism, younger people do need to be able to attune themselves to common features of ageing (such as differing technical expertise, declining hearing and vision, and very diverse world views). This is one potential benefit of intergenerational training, providing younger workers with the skills and insights enabling them to provide older people with a better service. However, this can also work in reverse, with younger people learning coping strategies and perspectives from older people which enhance their resilience and social competence.

Despite these arguments, refocusing university policy and practice to attract much larger numbers of older learners appears very challenging at this time in the UK. The progressive withdrawal of public funding from higher education, its focus on employability, and the differing motivations, preferences, and resources of older people and younger people, appear to make this an unattractive business proposition. But experience from Spain suggests that even in a time of severe economic crisis, higher education can progressively expand provision for older people with evident benefits. Examining the recent history of Spanish universities distinctive provision for older people suggests this can be adapted successfully to the UK context.

### **Higher education for older people in Spain and elsewhere in Europe**

Learning opportunities in later life have greatly expanded outside the UK, supported by key developments at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While Spain is a conspicuous example of this, global recognition of societal ageing, for instance in the form of the Madrid International Action Plan on Ageing (Annan, 2002) and the establishment of European Programmes for lifelong learning, such as Grundtvig and Socrates, made the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century something of a "golden age" for older people in many countries. The European Cinema for Active Ageing (Granville, 2015) provides an outstanding example of these, involving older

students from Slovenia, Portugal, the U K and Italy in critiquing films with an “old age” theme, and beginning to make their own versions.

Spanish social policy regards lifelong learning as important feature of active ageing (IMSERSO, 2011), equipping older learners first and foremost with “competencies for living” – conceptualised as the synthesis of knowledge, behaviour, attitudes and values needed to pursue personal goals, and engage with and participate in contemporary society. Secondly, lifelong learning is seen as a gateway providing access to rich variety of recreational and leisure opportunities, envisaged not as diversionary activities, but as a means of personal development and continued growth.

Following the establishment of democracy in Spain the mid-'70s, adult education centres expanded enormously in the 1980s, providing discrete spaces for adult learning and greatly broadening the range and volume of content (IMSERSO, 2011). “Aulas de la Tercera Edad” (Third Age Classrooms) were established on a voluntary basis in a wide variety of settings (similar to the University of the Third Age in countries such as Britain). “Universidades Populares” (first established in Oviedo in 1901) expanded greatly, incorporating the principle that the process of learning is as important as the content. In the mid-90s many university-level programmes specifically for older people (Programas Universitarias de Mayores – PUM) were established, leading to the formation in 2004 of a national association of programmes for older people (Asociación Estatal de Programas de Personas Mayores: AUPEM). Scrutiny of its membership and content provides a rich picture of the range of programmes currently offered in Spain. In 2014-15, 43,292 students enrolled in 43 university programmes for older people in that country (AUPEM 2015).

Socias, Brage, and Garma (2004) provided an extensive analysis of the aims, content, and student body of PUMs operating up to that time. Their long duration (of 3 years or more), and broad range of content are very striking: around 70% of students were between 50 and

65 (although in most cases 55 was the minimum entry age), and most were women. 30% of older Spanish students then had a university diploma or degree prior to entry, but very few universities required specific qualifications for older people to enrol.

The three most common aims of the programmes surveyed were to integrate older people into the university life, to enhance intergenerational learning, and to develop positive attitudes to ageing. Students' aims may not coincide with these: Villar, Triado, Pinazo et al. (2010) found that participants in a programme for older people in Barcelona mentioned "expressive" aims (an interest in learning as an activity, or in particular subjects) much more often than "instrumental" aims (e.g. to meet new people). However, this leaves open the possibility that some reasons given for studying (e.g. to keep on learning), might be regarded as instrumental, being seen as mentally-healthy, as well as possessing intrinsic appeal and so "expressive" in nature.

The outcomes of PUMs have been quite widely studied. Villar, Pinazo et al. (2011) compared the experience of students attending "older people's classrooms" (organised by older people's associations with support from the University of Barcelona) with Universities of Experience (courses designed by the University of Valencia for older people – which would qualify as true "Programas Universitarias de Mayores"). Students on both types of programmes expressed high levels of satisfaction, with those from the "Experience University" expressing more satisfaction with the organisation and facilities; content tended to be especially highly-rated in the "older people's classrooms", although teaching and student engagement were more positively rated in the "experience university".

Personal benefits were examined by Villar, Pinazo, et al. (2006), in three different types of university-level programmes for older people: extension classes run by three universities (Barcelona, Girona, and Tarragona); a distinct university programme for older people (Universidad Miguel Hernandez); and a hybrid programme for older people which included

intergenerational study with other students (Valencia). Over 50% of participants reported improvements in self-esteem, activity levels, friendships, quality of life, and feelings of usefulness associated with their course, with higher percentages of those attending the Valencia programme reporting improvements in self-esteem and activity levels.

Similar benefits were reported by Fernandez-Ballesteros, Caprara, Schettini et al. (2013) in a trans-national study of PUMs in Spain, Mexico, Chile and Cuba. Using a more rigorous (pre-post) design, with control groups, significant improvements were found in self-perception of ageing, stereotypes held about older people, and the balance of positive over negative feelings. However, perceptions of societal views of older people became more negative – possibly reflecting increased awareness of ageism in wider society

In summary, the last 30 years have seen extensive growth a wide range of lifelong learning provision for older people in Spain, with universities playing a very significant part. The variety of organisational arrangements, and broad range of content, appear to offer extensive opportunities for those older people motivated to study at this level – and there is little evidence of a decline of interest following the 2008 financial crisis. Available evaluations suggest high levels of satisfaction, and personal benefit, and there is plausible, but inconclusive evidence that more integrated programmes offer greater benefits. Spanish universities' continued success in attracting older students can reasonably be attributed to their deployment of subject expertise, and the opportunities provided for older people to become full members of a diverse academic community.

Universities in Spain and Latin American countries such as Cuba (see Yuni and Urbano, 2014) have been particularly proactive in developing educational provision of older people. Those in other countries with ageing populations have developed comparable provision, but to varying degrees . A number of American universities have offered programmes for older people, and Fishman (2010) discusses the challenges of increasing uptake for these in Ohio.

A number of Canadian universities have also developed provision specifically for older people. However, in Italy, Principi and Lamura's (2009) survey of opportunities for people over 65 makes no reference to established universities, but notes the very small proportion (1.4%) of older people enrolled in adult education programmes, contrasting this with the 32% of people over 65 enrolled in programmes provided by local Universities of the Third Age.

The examples from Spain and Latin American countries as Cuba suggest that universities in the countries such as the UK with ageing populations requiring the "competencies for living" and seeking new goals to pursue in retirement, would do well to explore the scope to emulate successful examples from Spain and elsewhere

### **Older people's views in the United Kingdom: evidence from the English midlands**

The long-standing success of Spanish universities in engaging with older learners provides an interesting example for HEIs elsewhere to explore, despite differences between countries in the profile of their older populations and in university policy and practice. A small scale study in the Nottingham (United Kingdom) is described below which suggests that a significant demand does exist for university level provision, adapted particularly to the needs and concerns of older people in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Nottingham is a medium-sized city in the British Midlands, population 350,000. Historically much of the employed population worked in light industry and commerce, but recently there has been a significant growth of the "knowledge economy", with a rapid expansion of the higher education, science, and ICT sectors.

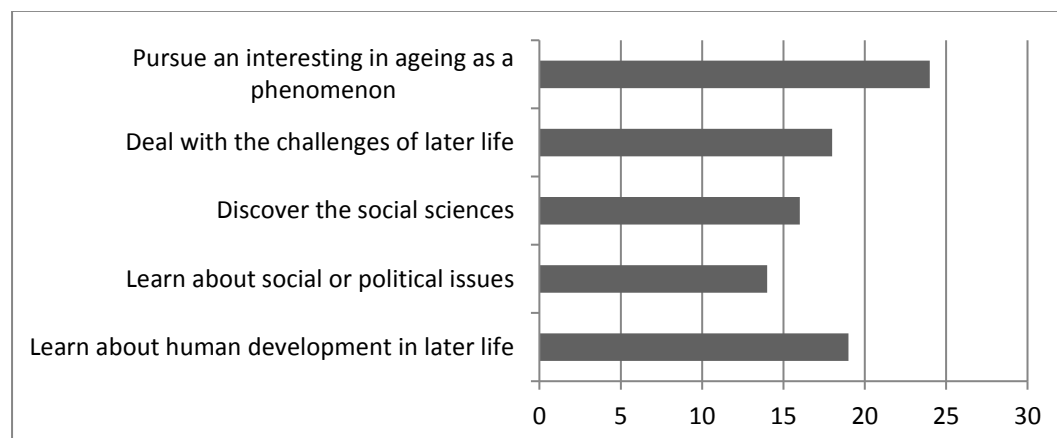
A small survey was conducted in winter 2014/15 of residents aged 55 or more living in or within travelling distance of the city. A structured questionnaire with 30 respondents, combined with a small number of focus groups involving 12 people in all, was used to



explore their level of interest in a course in social sciences applied to later life. This provided an outline of their views on the aims, preferred content, and delivery model for such a course. Participants were recruited opportunistically, through local organisations, such as the Nottingham branches of Age UK and the University of the Third Age. Ethical scrutiny was provided by Nottingham Trent University's Research Ethics Committee, and all data was collected by the first author and a research assistant.

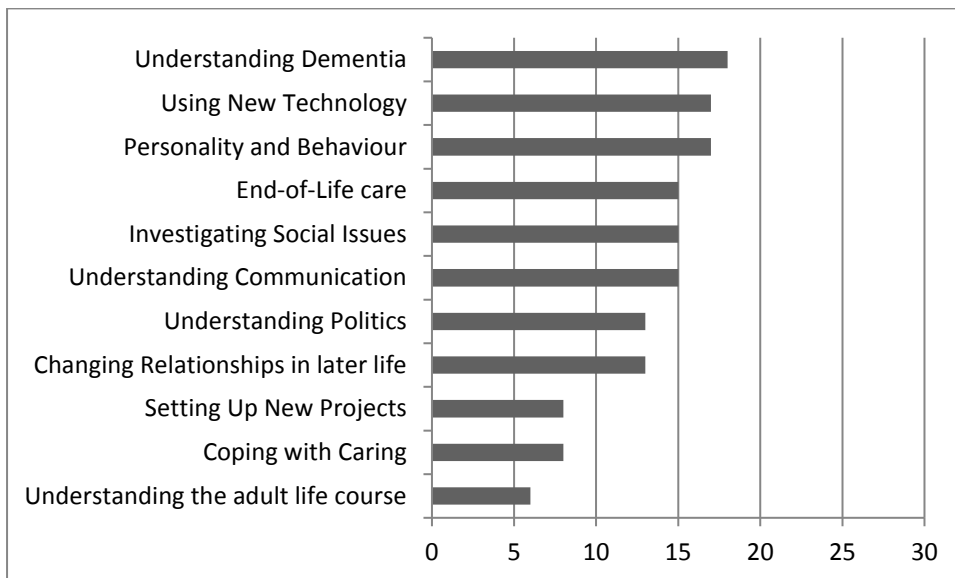
Figure 3 shows the main learning aims chosen by respondents from a series of options related to the content and application of social science to late life. This suggested a preference in favour of the personal and practical application of social sciences to individual and collective ageing, rather than an interest in them as academic subjects.

**Figure 2. Number of respondents (out of 30) selecting each of 5 possible aims for the course**



However, while Figure 3 (below), which summarises respondents' choices from topics proposed for course content, tends to confirm this, it also suggests that potential students were interested in broader aspects of social sciences (such as personality and behaviour)

**Figure 3. Number of respondents (out of 30) selecting each of 13 subjects proposed**



Potential students' views on course duration, and on the timing and length of classes, provided valuable information for planning purposes. The optimum course length appeared to be two years and while many people did not feel motivated to study for a qualification, 60% of those who did wanted this at postgraduate level.

The focus groups provided limited, but interesting information about the learning preferences of older people. There was a strong interest in diversity in the classroom: opportunities to meet with younger students were valued:

*"I think I'd like to see the shared modules with younger students, maybe you could be the first university to try that " (A)*

*Yes, I think working with younger people is very, very good for both; for the younger people and for the elderly people [G]*

A range of teaching methods were desired; lectures should certainly not be the exclusive method of teaching

*"It's like being talked at although there are a place for lectures but I wouldn't say a lot of lectures, they need to be balanced out with the other forms of learning [A]"*

Willingness to commit to the challenges of higher education varied greatly:

*"I'm not sure I want to take higher education, I've done that bit, I've done the studying and the worrying about getting exams and such and I'm quite happy to just coast along and learn what I want to learn and no (sic) experience is a learning experience, you know, and that's how I see life really [Participant G]"*

*"I wouldn't want to commit myself to more than I felt I could achieve, I'd rather do a small amount, you know, not tie myself up with too many [E]"*

Several respondents felt that on-line learning responded well to this need for flexibility:

*"What I found with online learning if I do one of the OU Open Learning courses or future learning, I can do an hour now and then I can go off and do something different and come back and do another hour, I don't have to concentrate for long periods. So online learning has a lot of flexibility but on the other hand, I like meeting and discussing ideas and thoughts, so the seminars appeal [C]"*

These findings are of interest in two ways. On a practical level they can be used to inform course design, and are reflected in the plans we currently have to develop higher education for older people in Nottingham. But comparison with the learning aims and content desired by older learners in England as a whole suggests a common concern for learning to be of practical use – in everyday life even in not at work. The value attached to “learning for its own sake” – expanding subject knowledge – appears to be more highly valued by older Spanish learners. This may account in part for the distinctive advantage enjoyed by Spanish

universities, whose repository of subject expertise is unavailable elsewhere: this advantage may not apply in the UK (at least to the same extent) if subject expertise is less highly rated by the UK population.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

The small-scale exploration of the scope for specialist higher education for older people in the English midlands confirms that a demand exists for this in at least one locality in the United Kingdom, although such provision is only likely to form a small proportion of lifelong learning opportunities needed by older people. The emphasis on the practical application of knowledge needs to guide course design and content for specialist programmes for older people, especially if subject knowledge is less valued in per se than in countries such as Spain. However, features of some Spanish examples of higher education for older people may well lend themselves to transfer to the UK. The evidence of significant local interest by older people in higher education in a provincial UK city, and the success of programmes elsewhere in Spain and S.America suggests there is a significant and unique role for higher education in later life.

This is likely to apply not just in the UK, but in many other post-industrialised countries in Europe and beyond. Three features of higher education support this argument; many modern universities now possess an extensive range of teaching and learning resources and associated pedagogies; their current focus on younger adults suggests that recruitment of much older students provides valuable opportunities for intergenerational learning benefiting both groups; and Universities' high level of subject expertise and collective understanding provide a unique resource which old as well as young people have the right to benefit from.

A small number of British universities have successfully maintained their provision for older learners in the face of adverse circumstances, and/or have developed new courses and opportunities especially for them, but in the absence of substantial policy initiatives in the UK favouring this.

Phillipson and Ogg (2010) appropriately highlight the need for better evidence of beneficial effects of higher education on individual and collective wellbeing to attract public and private investment in this in the UK, and the need to explore new teaching methods adapted to the needs of older learners. Yet much of the evidence and expertise needed is already available in in countries such as Spain, which are more advanced in this respect.

The success of the Spanish programmes described above therefore demands much greater consideration by universities and governments in other countries with ageing societies.

Despite the very real challenges apparent in the contemporary climate for higher education in many of them, these arguments suggest there is considerable value developing a much more extensive range of higher education provision for older people. This promises benefits to them, to academic communities, and to ageing societies as a whole.

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