

Academic writing in old age: How retired academics can make considerable contributions to their institutions

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James Hartley outlines two studies on academic writing in retirement and argues that many retired academics can contribute a good deal to research and practice.



There have been two recent studies of the academic writing of retired academics. The first of these (Thody, 2011) examined the writing activities of 41 emeritus professors in a single university. 23 of them were scientists, seven were social scientists, five were from the arts and six reported no discipline. The respondents' sex and ages were not provided – only how long they had been emeriti.

The second study (Hartley, 2012) looked at the experiences of 88 retired academics, 72 men and 16 women (not all emeriti) aged 63-93 in over 30 institutions. There were 18 of these from the arts, 52 from the social sciences and 18 from the sciences. Putting these disparate studies together provides some interesting findings.

Thody (2011), using questionnaires and interviews, concentrated on the professional activities of her emeriti, listing 41 such activities undertaken by at least one of her sample, including publishing, editing, reviewing and giving conference papers. She showed that many of the emeriti who responded to her questionnaire had made an enormous contribution to their university.

Hartley (2012), using a different questionnaire, focused in particular on the experiences of academic writing in his sample of 88 retired academics (not all emeriti) from 37 institutions. In addition he distinguished between the responses of those who had retired early as well as those who had retired at the conventional age of 65. In this study approximately 80 per cent of the sample came from the social sciences and 20 per cent from each of the arts and sciences, and approximately 80 per cent of the sample was male.

What are some of the benefits of retirement?

Both Thody and Hartley found respondents whose research benefited from retirement:

“One of the best things to have happened to me was to retire. I now do not have to participate in the target-obsessed (numerical performance indicators, box filling, teaching/research activities of the department/university, and I can devote myself full-time to research which I can control to my satisfaction and in directions I consider are most important”.

“I get great pleasure out of working with my younger colleagues”.

Hartley found that many of his respondents had not changed their ways of writing very much during retirement, despite being assisted by the Internet and personal computers. Most continued to use the technology they were familiar with before they retired, and few changed these technologies or adopted new techniques to cope with difficulties associated with increasing age. However, more time was spent on *non-academic* writing than before (for example, on local histories), and there was a gradual slowing down in publication rates with increasing age.

“I’ve been lucky to have kept reasonably fit, but my energy now (as I approach 90) is fading. In the first 20 years of retirement I published 20 journal papers. 4 books and 11 book chapters. Now I am

| *content to have just one job a year”.*

And, as in Thody’s research, many of these retired academics widened their focus to make many considerable (and unpaid) contributions to their institutions and society at large, for example:

“I am the founder and director of a local community arts centre”.

“I have served as a member of various government committees and am a chairman/member of various trusts”.

“I am a school governor (deputy chair), which involves a lot of work... And I am trustee of several mental health charities (which also involves a lot of work)”.

How might institutions make better use of their retired staff?

Both studies showed that institutions could be very different in how they treated their retired academics. In Thody’s study significantly more help was given to the scientists – perhaps because her institution particularly supported scientists. By way of contrast, in Hartley’s study, the 18 arts scholars reported most support – perhaps because they did not expect much anyway!

In Hartley’s study some individuals reported receiving no support from their institutions (and they had to leave as soon as they retired) whilst others enjoyed a considerable amount of support. It is perhaps this aspect of the findings that is most disturbing, and it replicates findings from earlier studies (e.g., Tizard, 2004).

“Alas no office and departmental facilities provided”.

“As an emeritus professor I have first use of a desk, a computer, full library membership, and certain other rights”.

“In the first five years of my retirement I maintained an office and then I moved into a shared office with three other emeriti”.

Hartley described three different kinds of possible support: specific departmental support; shared facilities across related departments; and separate institutes for senior scholars. He comments that in each of these situations one would not expect the retired scholars to draw any salary, to undertake any paid teaching/marking, or to reduce the resources available for beginning academics.

Universities currently reviewing the level of support they provide for their retirees might like to consider these possibilities – and others.

Note: This article gives the views of the author(s), and not the position of the Impact of Social Sciences blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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