

HIGHER EDUCATION IN LATER LIFE: 'CUI BONO'?

Literature on life long learning is predominantly concerned with the utility of learning in relation to work and training. This narrow conceptualisation of lifelong learning-work nexus marginalizes and almost invalidates the idea that learning can be done for pleasure or sapiential reasons. When focussing on lifelong learners other than those involved for some vocational/meritorcatic intent, the dominant approach is concerned with learning for remediation of some kind of deficit or for assisting with social skills that help in the adaptation to changing life and health circumstances. This situation raises the question; what about older people who are relatively 'healthy, wealthy, and wise' who engage in learning for pleasure or for non utilitarian aims?

This trend may be revelatory of the shift in "social facts" about human ageing that may now be understood less as chronologically and milestone driven, and be more a reflection of comprehending the human lifespan in terms of a quality of life paradigm. Undertaking education for its own sake by older adults reflects research about the need for "self-actualisation" in later life and the concomitant desire for intergenerational interaction and transfer of knowledge and experience.

This paper discusses and analyses the issues surrounding the changing nature and meaning of later life learning with a focus on Higher Education.

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Who is a university for?

Cardinal John Henry Newman's seminal work *The Idea of a University* follows the medieval scholastic tradition of the purpose of a university.¹ Knowledge itself is valued and growth in wisdom rather than vocational training is treasured as an outcome of a university education. German and American universities of the 19th century focussed on research and academic freedom, underwritten by 'practical' studies such as Science and Philosophy. Karl Jaspers believed that there was a place for professional education at a university, but that the main thrust of a university should be that it is a place where a community of scholars can work for an independent seeking of truth and knowledge and help to transmit culture based on critical inquiry.² Rather than be beholden to the community and demonstrate utility of education, particularly by vocational training, universities should be places of top quality research³. A model of a university designed to encompass a wide variety of interest groups such as students, staff, administration, and community that is accountable to government called a 'multiversity' gained currency in the late 20th century.⁴

The modern challenge to the medieval institution of the university has turned about; universities find themselves faced with demands for life-long learning, but this time there are demands for education to be made available easily and cheaply and sold to a commercial market⁵

Could contemporary Higher Education be considered like a case of *Procrustes bed* where students are made to conform to an unreasonable model of education? How does the contemporary focus by universities impact on Senior Adult Learners {those students aged 60 years and older} who attend university for personal non-vocational reasons? This paper will analyse and discuss issues surrounding the changing nature of Higher Education in relation to senior adults who choose university as a cynosure for

activity in their later life years. There will be a consideration of contemporary universities, a look at the nature of involvement of Senior Adult Learners at university, an examination of the intersection between the institution and the individual, followed by a general discussion.

What is the contemporary shape of universities?

The notion of universities being a place of non-instrumental liberal education where an ideal of “education for its own sake” may be sustained has been subsumed and transformed by market driven imperatives and governmental directives. The shift from social democratic ideals to the rhetoric of efficiency and economic probity has seen an intensifying of the idea of a university education as a means of social mobility to the weakening of any sense that it could be a means of self-direction and self realisation.⁶ Increased managerialism in universities has reduced the power and influence of academics within and throughout universities creating a tension about how a university should operate and progress⁷. This reduction of academics’ voice in the direction and operation of a university may explain the move away from a broad liberal based education to an education that is based on the primacy of the economic viability of courses. Perhaps the increasing perception of universities as a product provider and students as ‘consumers’ has in part contributed to a different dynamic between students and faculty evident in 21st century university life⁸.

Imperatives such as fiscal self sufficiency, economic rationalistic management and accountability to government, drive a university’s focus when developing and delivering educational resources and priorities. The ‘creeping credentialism’ that has discoloured the concept of a liberal education underlies the delivery of courses that increasingly have a vocationally oriented focus. The push-pull forces of government policies and funding, changing demographics, e-education systems are some elements that are helping to create what Assiter terms as the inauguration of a ‘post-modern’ university.⁹ The “massification” of higher education, where courses and degrees are commodified for ‘clients’ and sold in an ever increasingly competitive market place, is a recognisable characteristic of ‘post-modern’ universities.¹⁰

It may be suggested then that universities are entities that exist for themselves as businesses that provide a product for a market and less a meeting place where users employ the services of the university to develop themselves and the entity as they do so. This representation suggests that current practices and directions of universities are increasingly becoming outdated and in need of review and concomitant reform.

Representations of ‘ageing’

Just as the shape and dynamic of universities has changed in the ‘post-modern era’, so too has the understanding about getting old and being old. Media discussions and the portrayal of chronologically older people consider ageing in narrow terms focussing on a sense of loss of physical and mental faculties that require costly social services.¹¹ Stereotyping of older people in pejorative terms such as useless; prescriptive terms such as a burden; and in economic terms like unproductive perpetuate untrue myths about being old and underpin ageist attitudes and behaviours toward them.¹² A by-product of stereotyping older people is the practice of ageism,¹³ “...the process of systematic stereotyping and discrimination against people on the basis of age”¹⁴

Terminology related to ‘ageing’ and being old often falls short of reality and is indicative of how difficult it is to simply define older people as a homogeneous group of people who are chronologically old¹⁵ The term ‘older people’ is one of chronological relativity, as the continuity of self transcends time or body limitations. Identity is a cumulative process where ageing *per se* is not a substantive issue in the lives of older people as “the concept of aging is too abstract, too impersonal to be an integral part of identity”.¹⁶ The continuum of human lives can be considered as an accumulation of phases of existence, each having its particular orientation.¹⁷ Accordingly, human identity is personal, authentic, unique yet valid and heterogeneous.

Senior adults are now more affluent, healthier, longer living and better educated than previous cohorts and have a “... greater awareness that retirement can mean a new beginning rather than a sad ending”.¹⁸ The emerging dominant paradigm toward the growing numbers of older people in society is the concept and practice of individual and communal “quality of life” concerns and applications. The quality of life paradigm is focussed on self-perception and the sociological concept of ‘reflexivity’, where one’s identity is reworked to help with well-being and social behaviour, “...particularly at critical transition points such as ...moving into retirement and old age”.¹⁹ The literature on human development discusses

how engagement in education is seen to assist in adding to the quality of life for retirees. It is suggested that participation in education promotes health by increasing participants' self-esteem, self-efficacy, problem-solving skills, aspirations, future orientation, interpersonal trust, social competency, anti-discriminatory attitudes, and sense of belonging.²⁰ The motivational desire to be involved in learning at a university could be attributed to life needs that older people want to have satisfied. Expressive needs involve participation in an activity for enjoyment or socialisation that may be met not only in the context of a university course, but in the social realm outside formal class activities. Contributive needs are those which are altruistic in nature and designed to assist others such as classmates. Transcendence needs that involve gaining a deeper understanding of the self and a meaning of a life that is nearing its completion covered through the process or content of a university course.²¹

For senior adults who have their health and mobility, participating in learning within the context of a university offers a locus for intellectual and social interaction that the literature notes as important for a good quality of life.

Post-modern universities and the Senior Adult Learners

Senior Adult Learners studying in formal academic courses at university do not fit into a stereotypical mould about being old. Senior Adult Learners undertaking, attending or completing university courses are generally positively portrayed in the media, yet there are negative stereotypical inferences in that these senior adult learners are portrayed as an exception to what a senior adult typically does in retirement. Drawn to formal academic classes at a university out of a desire for self-transcendence that makes sense and meaning of the here and now and the immanent here ever after, a senior adult learner will bring a different quality to their learning than if they were just pursuing academic qualifications. The learning activity may be above the sensory world of acquiring data to a transcendent world of meaning and intelligibility. The human subjectivity embedded in a senior's historical and social experiences of their learning is not only concerned with the consumption of content, but also with a desire to reflect, question, probe, research and rework to find a deeper meaning of self both in the act of discovering and in the discoveries made by engagement in learning. Whether conscious of these outcomes or not, more and more senior adults are choosing to spend some part of their later years engaged in education at university.²²

One thing that universities and seniors have in common is that they have to face change and reassess their role and meaning in a world that no longer has former assumptions and certainties. The increasing number of senior adults desiring a university education to meet their learning needs coupled with a growing commercialisation of universities as a business sets up a situation that calls for change and understanding. The paradigm of lifelong learning holds that education is no longer linear and that students can be of any age, studying at anytime in their lifespan, now as 'clients' not just as students only. This is contiguous with the shift in the understanding of "social facts" about human ageing that may now be understood less as chronologically and milestone driven, and be more a reflection of comprehending the human lifespan in terms of a quality of life paradigm.²³ Locating senior adult learners in the context of lifelong learning establishes a perspective that reframes learners involved in Higher Education into a broader context of the human lifespan, and within the concept of 'quality of life' during the later years of human existence.

Lifelong learning is simply defined as, learning that is pursued throughout life in a variety of places and sectors for various reasons such as learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and with others, learning to be or any combination of these.²⁴ Conceptualisations of lifelong learning as being primarily concerned with work and training only marginalize and almost invalidate the idea that learning can be pursued as a means of pleasure without having any particular ultimate vocational goal.²⁵ In fact, senior adult learners are characterised more by self-development, recreation or the pursuit of their own interests, rather than credentialism or scholarly accreditation.²⁶ The increasing numbers of senior adult learners undertaking postgraduate studies across all categories reflects findings that the amount of formal education completed by an individual acts as a predictor for the pursuit of further education as the more learning experiences you have, the more learning you want to do.²⁷

Situating a person's participation in learning in their senior years within the concept of lifelong learning can also be seen to be consistent with the cumulative unfolding project that is human life. Instead of seeing learning as a successive string of disconnected discrete events, learning is considered as a cumulative chain that links and builds into the present moment and looks forward to the future.

Undertaking education for its own sake by older adults reflects research about the need for “self-actualisation” in later life and the concomitant desire for intergenerational interaction and transfer of knowledge and experience.²⁸ The gathering of and passing on of wisdom in older age as being intrinsic to later life education calls for a qualitative analysis of, and understanding of its implications in the delivery of education at university. As healthy and intelligent baby boomers move their demographic bubble evermore forward and choose to undertake learning at university, consideration of them and their needs and wants can no longer be ignored, especially in a market of competing institutions of higher learning.

Revitalising the raison d'être of university

Given that post-modern universities are being recast as enterprises with doors open to a myriad of ‘customers’, it makes sense to reevaluate its ‘client-base’ if for no other than the crass and pragmatic reason of profitability. Where can a senior adult who wishes to enjoy the serendipity of both the content and the process of learning at a university and who values knowledge for its intrinsic worth possibly more than its extrinsic application fit within an organisation focused on outputs? Perhaps closer scrutiny of how a university understands its role may offer some insight into this question. How do universities perceive themselves? An indication of a university’s corporate identity could be seen in their Mission statements. The question that can be asked in the light of the commercialisation of universities that are under the influence of market forces is that to what extent are universities living up to their Mission statements? The Mission statements and the growing demand for responding to community demands flag the need for an ongoing examination and renewal of university practices. In the quest for comprehensiveness, the revitalisation of the idea of a university cannot ignore the increasing number of Senior Adult Learners choosing university to meet their later life learning needs.

The changing nature of universities calls for the development of an evidence-based approach to inform and encourage positive attitudes and responses to senior adult learners. The rapid “massification”²⁹ of Higher Education has occurred with little or no strategic planning or vision that addresses qualitative issues that may affect senior adult learners.³⁰

Oblique references to Senior Adult Learners are generally tied to the “mature-aged” student model whose profile is linked with education for vocational qualifications. Tornstun states that:

Without an attempt to break free from the traditional, sometimes mythical gerontological presumptions, it might quite possibly be that we carry out research work and care that, in certain cases, are incompatible with the theoretical paradigm that defines reality for aging individuals in the real world. Perhaps we force upon some elderly people a paradigm that they, themselves, no longer inhabit.³¹

Older people at University tend to study primarily for the intrinsic value of the knowledge, and secondly for the social dimension that accompanied involvement in education.³² Moody³³ and Weaver³⁴ point out that the prevalence of institutional ageism amongst academics, is an inhibitor to senior adult learners. Structural phenomena such as credentialism and colonisation or appropriation by interest groups, discourage potential adult learners and fails to fully meet broader needs of the individual and the community.³⁵ How well are post-modern universities recruiting, looking after, encouraging and promoting the presence of senior adult learners within their ivory towers?

Revealing the extent of barriers to learning for senior adult learners at university in regards to situational barriers (those related to one’s life situation at a given time), dispositional barriers (attitudes to self as learner), and to institutional barriers (practices and procedures of the university) will assist in both the remediation and prevention of restrictions in the present and into the future.³⁶ In short, listening to the voices of a hitherto poorly represented group in university life will help to discover or further illuminate the experiences and needs of senior adult learners. In the domain of transition in life phases such as retirement and older age living, small group qualitative research into the meanings and experiences of Senior Adult Learners at university will help to reveal and to inform the university and the wider community features that restrict, enhance or encourage fruitful learning for this cohort, as well as assist in research-based policy making efforts.³⁷

In line with the call to reassess “for whose benefit is a university”, a Gerontagogical approach is favoured.³⁸ The use of educational intervention for the elderly, the hallmark of educational gerontology, while admirable and useful is problematic in that it links education to ageing rather than to older people

who are in an educational context. In the Gerontagogical approach, the interest is placed on the study by senior adult learners and of the educational practice for senior adult learners, and not as part of the aging processes. A Gerontagogical approach is appropriate as it is about people who have met the tertiary entrance requirements to study in formal academic university courses, and accordingly locates them as individual students within the student population rather than merely as an old person at university.

Discussion

. With the growing presence of students sixty years and older at Universities and the projected increase in 'leading edge' baby boomers(1946-1955) desiring educational opportunities at a University, it is important for not only equity and justice reasons, but also for pragmatic application, to develop and have an understanding and appreciation of their wants and needs.³⁹ Discovering what these older students think about their University experience will help inform stakeholders in Higher Education about appropriate policies and practices for this growing cohort. Accountability of the university as a public resource in respect of use and funding practices that scrutinize and underpin university activities and funding, means that the Senior Adult Learner sector of the university, a generation who funded academics and the institutions, cannot be ignored, overlooked or have decisions about their education made in a vacuum. A student responsive curriculum that is based on sound educational principles and an understanding of the changing social context of a university will help in the effective addressing of student needs and concerns.⁴⁰ Universities should not become like a qualification drive-thru of devalued credentialism, but rather an institution of flexible authority and integrity. "Students are active subjects in their educational experiences, as well as objects in relationship between institutions and government or commerce entities".⁴¹ Adopting a "client-centred" approach that seeks to discover, understand and act upon the needs and wants of the "end-user" of the educational "product" not only makes commercial sense, but also is a sound philosophical and ethical approach to meeting the objectives of the university as presented in the corporate 'Mission statement'. Consulting with senior students about their university experience is not about handing over control to an interest group. It is about fine tuning those areas of university education that attract them and lessening those areas that inhibit them.

The managerial model of universities is one that may have to be lived with, so by discovering through qualitative research about the experiences, wants, and needs of Senior Adult Learners at university, a deeper picture will emerge about them and inform the development and actioning of appropriate and efficacious policies within the enterprise. Findings from such research may assist in the development of an ecological approach to strategies, services and programs that enhance the quality of provision and delivery of educational services to Senior Adult Learners, as it will be grounded in qualitative evidence and not based on ontological assumption or frequency of responses to arbitrary questioning. The process of developing a new narrative about Senior Adult Learners at university may in itself be an important process as universities confront what their *raison d'être* may be. Adjustment of university policies and practices does not mean the "ghettoisation" of Senior Adult learners who are shepherded and corralled into protective enclaves. Rather, it is an acknowledgement of their presence, a remediation of inhibitors to a full participation in university life, and an invitation to participate fully within the university community.

Marketing and promoting educational opportunities to senior adult learners based on viewing them only as consumers would be flawed, because it not only lacks vision and leadership, but it may also have an opposite effect of deterring the older learner from engaging in with that university. This idea is considered by Manheimer who notes that:

Those educational organisations that can generate an image of creative or productive aging either by being associated with institutions primarily serving younger generations such as Colleges or universities ... will attract seniors who seek continued learning but who shun identification with being old, infirm or needy. Opportunity to learn together with younger people through formal courses and informal exchange will be attractive to a subset of these older learners who prefer intergenerational and age-integrated experience⁴²

In the United States of America, the commercial world is acknowledging the importance of engaging senior adults in education as there are growing instances where developers and Universities are collaborating in having retirement villages built on or nearby campuses to promote educational interchange where "...for those who can afford higher quality and service, they specialize in emphasizing active living, and other wellness programs to promote vitality into the residents' later years."⁴³

The idea of university students as clients puts pressure on academics and administrators to provide a service to them. “Student centeredness means educators making informed decisions in relation to students’ developmental needs and placing the best interests of students at the heart of planning”.⁴⁴ University staff may need to understand their professional responsibilities and to keep up to date with ‘best practice’ ways of delivering this service. Staff may also need to acknowledge the diversity of the student population by taking a ‘pastoral care’ approach to dealing with issues that affect their learning, not just as a safety net or an add-on, but as connected to key learning outcomes.⁴⁵

Summary

Many countries throughout the world are experiencing a significant demographic shift toward an ageing society new and positive understandings about ageing and being old are changing the way society and older people see themselves. At the later stage of human development, individuals are turning to considerations in their life and interests in learning that are not linked to vocational or material needs. Participation in education is one way of dealing with and understanding this new way of being

Numerous personal benefits are a hallmark of engagement in education by older people. Theories about senior adult learners point to the need for closer examination of their learning needs, with a view to improving content and delivery for effective and suitable educational programs to meet those needs. University is one location where senior adult learners can have their educational needs met. There are indications that 21st century universities are less than fully in tune with the implications of increasing numbers of senior adult learners engaging in a university education.

In order to attract and sustain senior adult learners at university, and in order to help them to engage in meaningful educational activities, a re-examination of the *raison d’être* of a university may help the university to thrive and develop through the presence and involvement of older learners within their community.

Educational opportunities for mature-age people will become ever more important.... This has implications for Education and Training systems traditionally geared towards young people entering the workplace for the first time.⁴⁶

Encouragement of engagement in university education by senior adult learners is expedient as the “...higher education system has a future if it develops along adult continuing education lines, attracting adults from a wide social spectrum”.⁴⁷ Succinctly, the question “*cui bono*”, for whose benefit, does a university exist may be asked. Taking the approach that a publicly funded institution is for the benefit of all the community, then consideration must surely be given to the growing number of Senior Adult Learners who are choosing a university as a site for their educational needs.

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