



Briefing Paper 13

Learning Later: responding to the evolving educational needs of older people

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Executive Summary

The proportion of older people in many countries is increasing and will continue to play an important future role in policy. Policy debates focus on how to address the widespread needs of older adults, which include economic security, health, work, and leisure. We highlight the debate in the field of education and focus on the emerging approaches and locales for responding to the learning needs of older adults if they are to receive appropriate response by policy formation. We also emphasize the important role lifelong learning can serve in policies enacted across the communities and societies.

New aspirations for policies to support older adults¹

Defining or identifying a person as an older adult is problematic. Chronological age will not suffice (Phillipson, 1998). Additionally, deficit models of ageing focusing on physiological decline fail to capture the richness of older adulthood. Fields such as critical educational gerontology strive for more holistic, nuanced understandings of ageing and its possibilities (Findsen, 2005; Laslett, 1991; Phillipson, 2000; Tornstam, 2011).

Ageing is also differently experienced across the globe and across cultures. Legal definitions based on awarding pensions or retiring from work are culture- and country-based on their respective norms. Some have turned to Laslett's (1991) more positive concept of the third age, where older adults responsibilities towards work and childrearing decrease and leisure time increases. In this context, caricatures of older adults as actors in search of maintenance become replaced by caricatures of older adults in lifelong pursuit of growth and abundance.

Recent trends

Lifelong learning as a concept has replaced the adult education concept in many societies (see Findsen & Formosa, 2011; Findsen & Mark, 2016; Mark, 2013; Ogden, 2010). Lifelong learning has become asserted as a right by some nations through governmental policy. This has been seen as a convenient political rhetoric that is often unaccompanied by funding for lifelong learning (for more, see Bowl 2014; Findsen & Mark, 2016; Schuller & Watson, 2009). Still, many governmental bodies in countries and regions across the world, such as Eastern Africa, do not fully understand or recognize lifelong learning in their policy work (see for example, Openjuru, 2011).

Internationally, four main themes regarding lifelong learning and policy pervade with variations in geographies and culture. Additionally, collisions occur between these four themes regarding implementation and sustainability (see Findsen & Mark, 2016).

The economic imperative: Policy aims to enhance the economic capacity of individuals, communities and societies. Lifelong learning is a point of leverage for policy allowing cities, regions, and countries to compete in the global marketplace (Davey & Cornwall, 2003; Rothwell, Sterns, Spokus, & Reaser, 2008). Governments supply resources for the enhancement of vocational and technical skills, so that individuals may increase their earning potentials, saving potentials, and economic security and resilience. Additionally, enterprise and innovation are valued in new global, knowledge economies (Findsen & Mark, 2016); however, much of the accumulated knowledge of older adults is likely not captured or shared with a younger generation of workers. Older people are often given only token mention for their potential contributions for economic engines, as these populations have

¹ Much of this work is adapted from Findsen & Mark, 2016. We thank them for their references and foundations for this policy briefing paper continuing their work.

already been marginalized or excluded in the workforce (for more, see Longworth, 2006). Additionally, governments across the world are concerned about rising pension costs with individuals living longer on such support. Furthermore, questions arise whether such pension support is adequate coverage for older adults (for more, see Croissant, 2004; Rofman, Fajnzylber, & Herrera, 2010). In the UK, the Marmot Report (see Marmot, Allen, Goldblatt, Boyce, McNeish, Grady & Geddes, 2010) revealed that despite 20-year movement in reducing pension poverty, a number of older adults in the UK are likely to remain impoverished.

Personal development: Previously linked to liberal (adult) education, personal development is often not a prerogative for governmental policy because of its individualized nature. Still, knowledge for the sake of knowledge remains an important ethos for individuals (Findsen & Mark, 2016). The responsibility of individual development is passed to independent providers or networks of providers to offer courses at appropriate costs and in appropriate fashions. These providers are often, but do not have to be, associated with local colleges and universities, such as the Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes in the United States or universities involved in the Age Friendly University movement (Pstross, Corrigan, Knopf, Sung, Talmage, Conroy & Fowley, 2017; Talmage, Mark, Slowey, & Knopf, 2016). These providers' aims for personal development range from helping older adults to meet their own needs (e.g., teaching them how to use technological devices) to empowering them with knowledge and experiences that positively transform their lives (e.g., Talmage, Lacher, Pstross, Knopf, & Burkhart, 2015; Tornstam, 2011; Pstross, Talmage, Peterson, & Knopf, 2017). These providers also need to network and collaborate with institutions, governments, donors, and foundations to support their various aims to provide for older adults (Kawachi, 2010; Longworth, 2006).

The active citizen: Democracies and democratic policies are reliant on informed and critical citizens. Strong democracies rely upon both self-expression and elite-challenging action (Findsen & Mark, 2016; Welzel, Inglehart, & Deutsch, 2005). Critical thinking is thus important to inform a voter or activist, and communication skills are needed to effectively express opinion. Furthermore, community engagement and democratic participation are not limited to the ballot box, but also to participation and service in respective of local neighbourhoods, municipalities, and regions. Learning serves as a tool for older adults to gain knowledge and skills to be effective leaders and volunteers (for more, see Jackson, 2012; Pstross, Talmage, Peterson, & Knopf, 2017).

Social inclusion/exclusion: Governmental policies can aim to improve equality and equity regarding lifelong learning opportunities for their citizens. For many groups across the globe, access and participation in lifelong learning still fall short of such aims (Findsen & Mark, 2016). These groups can include ethnic minorities and immigrants, women and gender sexual minorities, disabled persons, and imprisoned persons (e.g., Findsen & Mark, 2016; Jackson, 2012; Patzelt, Williams, & Shepherd, 2014; Zoukis, 2014). For example, in the U.S. many colleges and universities offer courses to marginalized adult populations for college credit and some confer degrees to older imprisoned persons (Patzelt, Williams, & Shepherd, 2014; Zoukis, 2014).

Implications for policy and practice

There are and will be many older persons engaged in paid work as retirement is no longer compulsory and individuals are living longer across many nations. Governments will need to recognize this “new order” (and have been slow to do so) in order to take advantage of the time and talents of these individuals (Findsen & Mark, 2016). Therefore, policies should seek to encourage and provide professional development and training to workers of all ages (Lindberg & Marshallsay, 2007).

It is well-known that lifelong learning is beneficial to the health, generally the cognitive health, of older adults (e.g., Sloane-Seale & Kops, 2013). Fittingly, policy statements on ageing are commonplace and usually support terms such as “active ageing”, “productive ageing” or “successful ageing” in the interest of health promotion (Findsen & Mark, 2016; Gonzales, Matz-Costa, & Morrow-Howell, 2015; Sloane-Seale & Kops, 2013). Policies have sought and can seek to promulgate resilience and autonomy among older adults, so that they may be less dependent on state welfare programmes and services (Department of Social Welfare, 1999; Findsen & Mark, 2016). Additionally, policies can encourage older adults to civically engage more in society (Findsen & Mark, 2016).

What kind of adult learning?

Informal learning and non-formal education (e.g., ICT) pervade as common forms of learning for older adults demonstrating the changing character of lifelong learning in today’s societies. While formal education retains merits, great potential can be found in blended learning and intergenerational learning programmes. Such programmes may be gaining momentum across the globe; however, this notion necessitates further exploration (Findsen & Mark, 2016).

The narrative in societies embracing older adults has shifted from caretaking to productive engagement. The opportunities for older adults to productively engage in society through volunteering, entrepreneurship, artistic expression, and civic participation, for example, appear to be increasing. Support for older adult learning opportunities and relevant learning programmes are essential if such productivity and its personal, social and economic benefits are to be delivered (see Allen, 2008; Findsen & Mark, 2016; Pstross, Talmage, Peterson, & Knopf, 2017; Schuller & Watson, 2009).

Extending diversity

In lifelong learning programmes for older adults, demographic diversity generally remains low, especially in the United States. While women often make up most participants in

lifelong learning programmes, many programmes hosted by colleges and universities in the U.S. tend to consist of people who are well-educated, financially affluent, and white (Hansen, Brady, & Thaxton, 2016). In Taiwan, women of lower and middle socioeconomic statuses may be more likely to engage in lifelong learning (Chang, Wu, & Lin, 2012). Policy development is essential to distribute the transformative power of lifelong learning beyond the current predominant demographics (Pstross, Talmage, Peterson, & Knopf, 2017).

The role of cities and regions

In 2012, the U.S.-based MacArthur Foundation released a major policy brief on the role of cities and regions in promoting lifelong learning in an ageing society. It emphasises that societal institutions will have to change to support the emergence of an engaged, equitable ageing society. The brief draws attention to key aspects of policy and practice which require development, including:

- more support of community colleges and vocational training centers to train older adults for changing workforce technologies;
- re-constitute missions of community and senior centers to support lifelong learning and senior quality of life initiatives;
- restructure libraries as places for lifelong learning, workforce development and community building;
- re-envision health care settings as place of lifelong learning;
- establish cooperation networks to advance networking and agency-building among older adults as exemplified by the Age Friendly Communities initiatives;
- tap the potential of online education to bolster lifelong learning and life quality enhancement.

A place-based holistic approach

By creating change along these six dimensions, older adults will be better positioned to grow competitiveness in the growing technology-infused, global market – while enhancing social inclusion, personal fulfillment and health.

The fundamentals of such cross-regional, cross-institutional, cross-generational synchronization is now being manifested in the learning communities movement. Spearheaded by UNESCO, both skills-based and personal learning opportunities are catalyzed throughout all sectors, in a higher interlaced system ranging in focus ranging from micro-neighbourhood to towns and cities to broad regional scale.

Such structural changes in policy and strategy to benefit older adults demand additional investments of resources. As the MacArthur Foundation (2012) observes: “Despite its importance, education is fleeting for far too many and is stacked largely at the beginning of life.” Toward that end, it is essential that older adults be mobilized to encouraged heightened investments in lifelong learning programmes. Within the United States, at least, this presents a formidable challenge. Older adult participation in the voting process has been dropping compared to the rising rates of electoral participation of Millennial and Gen X voters (DeSilver, 2017; Fry, 2017). There remains a need for policy that is inclusive of both older and younger generations to be engaged in the democratic system, and intergenerational learning will be essential in that regard (Pstross, Corrigan, Knopf, Sung, Talmage, Conroy, & Fowley, 2017).

Lifelong learning is not momentary in older adults’ lives. It is a recurrent process and experience that often can and start at younger ages, but not necessarily for everyone. It is also well-known the education systems across the globe are front-ended (Bengtsson, 2009). Thus, there remain great challenges and opportunities regarding improving lifelong learning, especially learning later, across the globe through policy, research, and practice. We would urge cities and regions to tackle the agenda set out above.

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