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Supporting older learners in open and distance learning

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Older learners in distance education

This chapter will look at the emergence of people over 60 years old as a group of learners within the open and distance learning setting, together with their needs and potential achievements as a discrete group within the general student body. It will go on to consider whether the educational needs of older learners differ significantly from those of younger people, and how far educational methods in teaching them have been influenced by stereotyping and expectations about their abilities. The chapter concludes with some consideration of how teaching might address these needs to enhance the potential of older learners for improved functioning and greater personal satisfaction.

Older learners form a small but increasingly significant group of the learning population. In 1992 it was estimated that about three-quarters-of-a-million third-agers enrol annually in some kind of formal education, and a similar figure receive some kind of organised training (Schuller and Bostyn, 1992). These developments are significant first because they suggest need and demand, both present and potential, and second, because they question the whole basis of the design of education programmes for older people. Open and distance learning is a particularly suitable educational medium for this group because it removes many of the obvious access problems.

Life expectancy has risen steadily through the twentieth century, and by the year 2000 it is estimated that 20 per cent of the total population will be over 60 (Central Statistical Office, 1982; 1983). They form a generation which has benefited from advances in medical science, improved public health, hospital and state welfare systems. For many, their quality of life at home and at work has risen well above that of their own parents, and they see their adult children and grandchildren taking full advantage of even better educational, training and social opportunities than they managed for themselves.

Thus education for older people has to be seen in the wider context of how education is perceived in contemporary society. Social change in the second part of the twentieth century offers the possibility of education as a leisure activity as distinct from preparation for a job. Significantly, education, other than for formal or functional purposes, has scarcely featured as a legitimate personal objective for older people in their lifetime. Yet economic, technological and demographic changes mean that, for some people, paid employment ends in their fifties and, for many of these, the third age can last almost as long as their working years. As Kelly (1992) points out the main goal of social policy for the general population for much of this century has been to raise the standard of living and improve the quality of life, and yet little thought has been given to how this extended third age could be spent.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, older people as a group have increased their participation in education and training, but as Schuller and Bostyn (1992) point out, it remains fragmentary. All the research which has taken place suggests that social class and educational background play an important part in access to educational opportunities, strongly favouring those with higher educational qualifications, and thus men rather than women. One-third of BA graduates and 46 per cent of Open University Honours graduates over the age of 60 are drawn from the professions, compared with one in ten who were clerical and office workers, and only 5 per cent from the skilled and semiskilled manual occupations (Kelly, 1992).

Retirement 'voluntary or involuntary - can take place at any age from about 50 to 65 or over, and many of those who retire from full-time work are in good physical and mental health, with many years of active life in view. Some have held responsible technical or professional jobs, others have management expertise, and all have acquired life experience. Yet their place in society is largely determined by social expectations of a Generation of older people and the widely held notion of a demographic time bomb. Older people are regarded as a steadily increasing burden on a steadily decreasing working Generation. Little distinction seems to exist in the popular mind between the young-old and the old-old. Cultural expectations of age anticipate the steady attrition of physical and intellectual powers, and steadily increasing demand on the already overburdened medical and social services.

These stereotypes are gradually beginning to change both in this country and in Europe. They have been challenged by much of the research which has been carried out over the past fifteen years. Not all older people are a drain on scarce resources and, in fact many make a significant contribution to social and economic life. A study of students over the age of 50 in four European countries (Clennell *et al.*, 1993) surveyed 1853 people in Britain, France, Germany and Belgium. The objective was to establish whether or not there was a link between current learning activities and their quality of life. Their responses give clear evidence of active social and civic responsibility in the broad categories of helping the sick and disabled, the elderly, prisoners, women with problems, refugees and the educationally deprived, to mention just a few. In Britain the high level of participation in voluntary activities was particularly noticeable. Over half (54 per cent) said they had administrative, secretarial or committee skills to offer the voluntary sector, and nearly two-thirds (59 per cent) mentioned three or more different kinds of activity, of which domestic activity was only one: nearly half (46 per cent) were engaged in voluntary work outside the home. A collection of reports from the same four countries on the training opportunities for over-50s has given a picture of older people actively engaged in voluntary work for which they are required to follow programmes of training (Clennell *et al.*, 1995).

Older learners do not appear to make demands for specialist or age-related support. This is the more striking since it is evident that this is an age group which includes many who are too old to have enjoyed the benefits of improved educational opportunities in the second half of the century. Clennell *et al.* (1984) considered the educational support needs of nearly 3000 students of over 60 currently studying with the Open University. The OU's distance learning mode of delivery is augmented by some face-to-face tutorials, day and summer schools, and some individual student-tutor contact. Responses showed that the over-60s made rather better use of tutors, counsellors and summer school staff than students under 60, except where there were transport or other logistical difficulties. Fewer of them dropped out of their courses and their overall performance was strikingly similar to that of younger students. The picture which emerged was of older learners, nearing retirement, or already retired, who were taking on difficult courses and persisting with them. The report concluded that to make special provision for over-60s within the student body was not appropriate, though full- and part-time staff and other students should be made more alert to some of the particular concerns of older people. Another survey of older students in four European countries (Clennell *et al.*, 1990) reached the same conclusion, based on evidence from 4461 students who were studying in a range of institutions in France, Belgium, Germany and the United Kingdom.

Who are the older learners?

Today's older learners come from the Generation which was at school either between the wars or during the Second World War, when educational opportunities were limited by social and financial considerations. Some of these, particularly the older women, missed out on higher education in their youth because they were victims of cultural beliefs about the value of educating girls. The war disrupted the aspirations of others and prevented them achieving their ambitions. A number have seen their children graduate and this has roused a mixture of pride and mild envy: the feeling, as one respondent put it of '*wanting to be able to hold my own at the table when the family gets together*'. Others have continued a lifelong habit of study, or have studied to get qualifications for their job. In the distance lean-Ling institutions (such as London University Extra-Mural Department, the National Extension College and Wolsey Hall) two-thirds (63 per cent) of the students already had certificates or degrees. In this country, people over 60 with the ambition to study for a degree by distance learning can do so through the Open University. As Midwinter pointed out (1989), more than 90 per cent of the older students in the UK taking higher level courses were studying with the OU and, despite the lapse of a decade, it is unlikely that this has changed.

Why are they wanting to learn now?

The principal reasons given by older people for wanting to study are remarkably consistent. '*To make up for lost opportunities*', '*to keep my mind active*', '*to develop as a person*' are responses which show just how strong is the quest for personal fulfilment once the days of dedicated wage earning are over. '*Wanted to widen my horizons*', '*my father said educating girls was a waste of time and money*', '*the war made it impossible for me*': all suggest that education in retirement is perceived as a personal benefit to make up for earlier deprivation or misfortune or perhaps as a reward for earlier self-denial. Coming just behind such reasons are others concerned with developing new interests and meeting new friends to enhance their lives (Clennell *et al.*, 1984).

Schuller and Bostyn (1992) detect a strongly rising demand for learning amongst older people, for several distinct but related reasons. One is what they describe as an inbuilt momentum towards third-age education from a Generation which has enjoyed increasing levels of initial education. As succeeding generations of children enjoy better educational opportunities, they approach their own third age with higher expectations, making higher demands on an educational system which, being unaware of their presence, has not surprisingly failed to provide for their needs. One of the weaknesses of our understanding of the needs of older learners in open and distance education is that we have no information about those who drop out or indeed have been deterred from entering the system in the first place.

Stereotypes about older adults and their ability and willingness to learn are gradually being eroded but they have drawn from two very powerful sources. First educationalists and psychologists have traditionally been sceptical about the capacity of older people to take in new information. Memory tends to decline with increasing age, and studies which concentrate on the deficits of cognitive ageing confirm the impression of decreasing cognitive ability. Since the 1970s, studies have relied less on the efficiency of quick and detailed recall and have considered instead some of the ways in which adults select store and use existing knowledge (Labouvie-Vief and Blanchard-Fields, 1982). In practical terms this suggests that, although memory function changes from middle life onwards, what is lost in active recall is compensated for by a more efficient use of retrieved knowledge and wider knowledge sources (Johnson, 1995). Second, powerful political pressures in some countries have increased resistance to educating older people, and these values have been incorporated into the thinking of older people themselves, who hesitate to claim opportunities which they fear might lead to the educational deprivation of younger people. Even where external students are admitted to

undergraduate lectures, for example in some European universities, they have traditionally not been assimilated into the undergraduate group, with consequent tensions, although there are signs that this is changing and in some places intergenerational studies are beginning to appear.

The University of the Third Age (U3A) movement which began at Toulouse in 1973 has done much to establish the importance of education for people over 60. In some places, initially in France, U3As were attached to existing universities through departments of extra-mural studies, thus giving many older people access to higher education for the first time in their lives. In Britain, the U3A movement has developed differently, with fewer institutional links with existing universities and much greater reliance on self-help.

How far do their needs differ from those of other students?

Students over 60 are distinguished from younger students largely because they are not preparing themselves for a future career; relatively few are working for vocational qualifications. They may be taking advantage of open and distance learning to acquire new skills to enable them to function in a new or unfamiliar setting, such as in the field of voluntary work, or they may have chosen to study for a degree. Thus their learning can be both instrumental and expressive: it enables them to acquire skills for work, for their general interest or for a chosen leisure pursuit and at the same time it offers them opportunities for personal fulfilment.

Unlike most younger students, many older students have to contend with external distractions. They may have to contend with caring for other family members (their own Partners, parents or grandchildren); their own health may be failing; or they may have to cope with financial problems.

Finance is a critical factor for students of all ages, but it is particularly relevant here to note the importance of pension income. Older people who receive an occupational pension are at a considerable advantage over those who are dependent solely on the state pension. Higher education is expensive and, even in the LEA sector, discounted fees for over 60s are by no means the norm. It is impossible to estimate how many older people are discouraged from studying for financial reasons. Kelly (1992) noted that the level of fees in the Open University is a deterrent for older people, as it is in other institutions. The availability of financial assistance has declined steadily in real terms over the past decade and little information is available about concessionary fee systems.

There is a strong link between the level of initial education and participation in learning activities later on in life, but it is not overwhelming. Kelly (1992) showed that although 10 in ten respondents had gone from school into higher education, a similar proportion had left school at 16 with no educational qualifications at all. There is, however, a link between those who enjoyed their school days and those who continue to enjoy learning in retirement. Their attitude towards learning in later life appears to be a reflection of positive educational experience in their youth. Clennell *et al.* (1984) noted that the Open University students over 60 made up a group of educational enthusiasts, most of whom had enjoyed school and had continued to learn on and off for the rest of their lives.

Motivation is a critical factor in all forms of higher education but nowhere more so than in open and distance education where students are isolated: getting a degree was a powerful goal in itself for many older students in the Open University (Clennell *et al.*, 1984; 1987). Nevertheless, their academic qualifications are low (Kelly, 1992) and this in itself has a knock-on effect on their confidence. The use of the Approaches to Study Inventory was used with older students in the Open University and in Europe (Clennell *et al.*, 1987; 1990). The Inventory contains 64 statements about approaches to academic work and was applied to students in a wide range of institutions studying different classes, including both leisure subjects and degree-level work. The findings of the Inventory suggest not only that all the older learners appear to have satisfactory approaches to study but that their approach is very similar to that of students of all ages. These findings were repeated in the European survey (Clennell *et al.*, 1990) and it was significant that both surveys stressed the

immense satisfaction which the older learners clearly got from their studies, the amount of effort they put into them, and the value which they appeared to gain as a result.

Tutorial support for older learners in open and distance education

Little or no time is spent on training teachers in open and distance learning for work with older students, and yet in teaching this age group the tutorial role is clearly critical and deserves further attention (Bilston, 1989). Some older learners seemed to feel they are not always taken seriously by younger tutors for reasons which, rightly or wrongly, they believe are age-related (Clennell *et al.*, 1987). For some, the critical written comments tutors put on their work makes them anxious. Women often have lower educational qualifications than men (Kelly, 1992) leading to lower self-esteem and greater self-doubt. Without close peer support, the isolated distance learner is at a disadvantage. There is thus an obvious need to make open and distance education more supportive and user-friendly for students of all ages, particularly perhaps for older women.

Older learners are as heterogeneous a group as younger learners, and yet it is noticeable that many older learners do not identify themselves as 'students' at all; that is a term which they themselves seem to associate with instrumental learning earlier in life. Nor do they identify themselves as a separate group, and since many colleges do not record applicants' ages, information is hard to come by. Although some colleges do still offer concessionary fees, even this information is incomplete, since some pensioners do not opt to pay the concessionary rates even where these are offered.

Some of the principal areas in which tutorial support is of critical importance are listed below.

Memory

Memorizing is a cognitive skill. Many older learners are concerned about their memory and the common stereotype of older people is that they are forgetful. Clennell *et al.* (1984) found that to older Open University students memory was a cause for concern, but it was difficult to assess the extent to which learning difficulties and study problems generally can be attributed to failing memory. There was a striking contrast between the 47 per cent of students over 60 who expected to have trouble with their memory and the 26 per cent who did have problems. Nevertheless, it is important for tutors to recognise that the *fear* of memory problems is in itself enough to put some older students at a disadvantage. Kelly (1992) - noted that it was impossible to ascertain the accuracy of *perceptions* of memory loss. It was not clear how far older students were describing the pathological effects of ageing on themselves, or simply the difficulties that many students encounter. It may be that they lumped them together and simply attributed them to memory loss because of the prevalence of stereotypes which associate old age and forgetfulness. What may be more significant is how older learners attempt to counteract the effects of failing memory. Little is known about the remedial techniques which older people adopt but some individual learners (Clennell *et al.*, 1984; Kelly, 1992) mentioned regarding their memory as a skill to be acquired, rather than as an inherent biological problem. For certain others, memory loss was less significant than developing analytical skills, which could actually be enhanced by intellectual maturity and life experience. A student over 60 remarked:

what I lose in a less efficient memory for learning lists of facts I gain on a greater breadth of reading and experience ... incidentally, I recovered from a paralysing stroke five years ago, and had to learn to write again from scratch.

Since, in the 1985 report by Clennell *et al.*, students found memory loss less of a problem than they anticipated, it is possible that some older people devise successful strategies to overcome it. Studies

in the United States have suggested that a number of factors temper the effects of memory loss and reasoning power. Of these, the ones which concern us here are familiarity with the material being studied, and having more time allowed for learning. A more optimistic view suggests, that as people grow older they develop compensatory strategies, making up for what they have lost in abstract reasoning power by selective use of relevant life experience.

Study skills and examinations

Studies which invite older learners to describe their- study habits suggest that many appear to be struggling with study skills which are either inadequate or inappropriate for work at this level. Some have retained faulty habits from schooldays, such as revising for examinations by reading all their notes and trying to memorise chunks of material from them. Clennell *et al.* (1987) found that the single most important study aid mentioned was the learner's own written notes. A few used highlighters to emphasise key sections in written course materials as memory aids, but in general there is an impression that older students tend to rely heavily on traditional methods of memorising.

Nowhere is this approach more of a disadvantage than in examinations. Kelly (1992) mentions the examination as the single most intimidating aspect of Open University study. Clennell *et al.* (1984) found that while older students do much better than the under 60s in the middle range of continuous assessment scores, examinations are a serious hurdle. Although most of them get through, the experience is a difficult one, and the question of how far examinations are a reliable test of ability for older learners is one for further investigation and debate. Where exam scores count for 50 per cent of the final result, the examination can dominate the course. Plenty of anecdotal evidence exists which suggests that the same students over 60 who gain above average scores in continuous assessment get below average scores in examinations. Said one older student:

My professional work obviously gave me study training, but writing exam papers with a set time is quite taxing since and has no set approach to topics and a slower memory retention than when younger.

When asked about their revision techniques, just over six out of ten older Open University students (Clennell *et al.*, 1987) listed the following as their most important:

- going through their own notes thoroughly (22%)
- working through specimen exam papers (16%)
- memorising key facts and concepts (10%)
- going through assignments and tutors' comments (9%)
- increasing study time (8%).

This suggests that many of them adopt a very general strategy, with four out of ten relying on going through their notes and re-reading all the course material to get them through. Only one in four appeared to be taking a more selective approach. Certainly there is scope for many older students to be helped by tutors to develop a more cost-effective time routine.

It is thus conceivable that older learners taking courses which are formally examined may be at a double disadvantage. On the one hand, the examination system imposes a discipline which demands sustained mental and physical effort for a concentrated period of time, whilst at the same time students may lack the very revision skills which are demanded by the system. The implications for tutors of older learners in open and distance education are important. More

effective ways of maximising memory by teaching examination technique could shift the balance of advantage in the students' favour.

Pace of study

The pace of study varies: degree-level work is demanding, and distance learning, with the submission of regular assignments and an examination, imposes strict demands. Older learners worry about their ability to keep pace with a course, and yet in practice they keep up effectively. Some three-quarters of students in Open University and distance education were either on schedule or only a little behind (Clennell *et al.*, 1987). Forty-two per cent worried about continuous assessment and exams, yet only just over a quarter (27 per cent) found that they had a problem. Between 40 per cent and 60 per cent of those who fall behind believe in simply working harder to catch up. A few said they could re-schedule their work, but many were reticent and seemed to have no clear idea of how to solve the problem. Older students drive themselves hard, perhaps to compensate for what they perceive as their reduced cognitive capacity. The same report notes that two-thirds of distance education students, and 85 per cent of OU students, study from four to seven days a week, the majority putting in between two and six hours a day. Between 40 and 50 per cent reported that they could maintain concentrated study for one to two hours, and one in four said they were in the habit of studying continuously for up to three hours.

A striking finding was that older learners seem surprisingly reluctant to ask for help when in difficulties, and virtually none of them considered asking for tutorial help as a strategy. It is possible they have a very traditional concept of the tutor-student relationship which discourages them from seeking help in this kind of dilemma. Self-reliance is a quality which tends to be greatly valued in this age group, or they may see their tutor merely as a kind of academic referee. Interactive styles of learning are new to some, and although some may find them liberating, others can be made to feel uneasy when tutors are challenged by other students or when there does not seem to be a 'right' answer.

Conclusions

Older learners are a small but significant group of the total learning population. Their experiences of education have been different from those of younger people and many of them have been, and still are, lifelong learners. Studies in Europe have shown that there are striking similarities across national boundaries.

Patterns of educational provision make no concession to older learners. It is very clear, however, that the roles of tutors and counsellors are of critical importance in helping them to identify key skiffs and develop learning strategies which are suited to their experience and learning needs. This is particularly true of open and distance settings where students lack close peer support.

As a consequence of demographic trends, older people are likely to become a growing sector of the educational market. Spread as they are through all educational institutions, they should be identified as a significant group of consumers of educational services. There is no evidence, however, that they define themselves as a priority group: instead, they seem simply to regard themselves as independent and isolated learners in a system designed primarily for younger people. Without complaint they struggle to compete on equal terms.

Their attitudes serve to underline the need for more conscious attempts to accommodate them. There is nothing to suggest that large-scale provision of special institutions or courses for elderly people is desirable. Educational provision could nevertheless be substantially improved by imaginative and flexible tutoring, and in the development of more refined and efficient methods of examination preparation.

Older learners are people who have busy lives in which learning is but one activity amongst many. They do not in any sense retire from active life in society. Social and demographic change has meant that although 'productive' work is decreasing, there is an increasing amount of 'social' activity which will not be done unless people volunteer to do it. Associated with this is the importance of the right to a pension which gives people a degree of freedom of choice in what they want to do, which may not have been there when they had to work for a living.

A small but important group of people choose to study for a degree. For this group the rewards of higher education can bring intense satisfaction. As one student wrote:

When ... I received official notification I had a First Class Honours degree, I spent the whole day walking on clouds ... My success enhanced the realisation that after my retirement, when my career is over, my husband has died, my family all living away from home, then there is still a future, so much to learn and to do and so many new openings available. I shall not use my degree in any practical sense. It will not result in increased income or status. But the studies involved in obtaining it have made me a new person, more mature in outlook and more confident in approach to others, also more ready to realise how little I actually know and to listen to the opinions of others. (quoted in Kelly, 1992)

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