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Age Friendly Universities and engagement with older adults: moving from principles to practice

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ABSTRACT

The global society is facing a new burgeoning element: an ageing population. Response to the educational needs and interests of older adults requires innovative pedagogies and practices of teaching, research, and community engagement. While traditionally geared towards provision for younger adults, the case is presented that universities have the potential to play a major role in innovation for later life learning for older adults. This article outlines one approach, the Age Friendly University (AFU) and highlights 10 principles that offer a possible guide for innovation and institutional change. The integration of AFU's mission and principles into three universities is reflected in stories from three university cases in Ireland, the UK (Scotland) and the USA exploring potential merits and also major challenges. It is argued the AFU has the potential to bring social, personal and economic benefits to older adults and universities alike.

KEYWORDS

Age-friendly; Third Age; community engagement; universities; higher education; lifelong learning

Older people form an increasing proportion of the global population, and are playing an increasingly important role in global prosperity, challenges, and policy. As society is reshaped as a result of their burgeoning presence in the population, educational institutions such as universities are challenged to consider how to respond to an ageing population through new pedagogies and practices of teaching, research, and community engagement (Withnall, 2002). Even today, the literature on the benefits of later life learning is scant in the lifelong learning field compared to the research on benefits for young and mid-life adults (Jenkins & Mostafa, 2015; Jenkins & Wiggins, 2015; Withnall, 2016). Additionally, Withnall (2016) notes the youthfulness of the later life learning field in research tracing the increased focus on such learning in later life and benefits back only around 40 years.

Universities as major educational providers can and should adapt to fully address the challenges and barriers faced by older adults through the creation of appropriate opportunities for later life learning. Universities have the potential to bridge disciplinary and geographic barriers to overcome the intellectual compartmentalisation that has often impeded

later life learning research and practice (Field & Schuller, 1999). Here, we outline a vision for the development of later life learning within the university using the concept and strategic focus of the *Age Friendly University* (AFU).

We begin by reflecting on the traditions of thought around learning in later life. Subsequently, we examine how universities are responding to the older adult needs within three different countries – Ireland, the UK (Scotland), and the USA. The examination is conducted by the sharing of reflections from this article's co-authors who contribute to the development of the AFU movement at three different universities. We conclude by considering some of the challenges involved and asking what the potential is for further development of the concept and practice of the AFU.

Conceptualising later life learning for older adults

The later life literature contains a wealth of empirical evidence regarding the benefits of learning to older adults (e.g. Field, 2006; Mark, Bissland, & Hart, 2016; Mark & Hart, 2013). Many scholars in later life learning have drawn on Laslett's (1989) classic *four phase* ageing concept, which may be primarily characterised by dependency rather than by chronological age: first-age individuals depend on parents or caretakers; second-age individuals care for children and work; third agers lessen in care demands around children and work; and the fourth age requires care from children or caretakers (see also Findsen, 2002, 2006; Glendenning, 2001; Withnall, 2000). Findsen (2002) describes the Third Age as a time 'for the greatest achievement of humanistic ideals' (p. 47), including later life learning achievements. However, learning in the fourth age should not be overlooked (see Slowey, 2008).

Later life learning may be one of the threads that weaves the two ages together, especially today when the majority of older adults appear to experience active and healthy lives (Borg & Formosa, 2016; Withnall, 2016). Withnall (2016) notes that later life learning might be better called 'longlife learning' (p. 158) because of its benefits and the increased longevity we have seen in demographic trends. For the sake of clarity in this article, we assert that later life learning, which is learning for older adults, applies to persons who are 50 years of age or older (see concept by Withnall, 2010, 2016). General approaches to later life learning and explorations of its sources and benefits for older adults have typically fallen within four broad areas: (1) behaviourist; (2) cognitivist; (3) social or situational; and, (4) humanist (Bynum & Seaman, 1993; Kim & Merriam, 2004; Parks, Evans, & Getch, 2013).

From a *behaviourist perspective*, older adults can learn to adjust to life transitions through later life learning (e.g. Timmermann, 1998). Fittingly, the interaction of older adults with technology and the benefits of technology use and competency among older adults has gained increasing interest (Berkowsky, Cotton, Yost, & Winstead, 2013). Some do question too great of a focus on life skills when it comes to adult education at universities, because some have found that older adults participating in university programmes appear less interested in life skills topics (Talmage, Lacher, Pstross, Knopf, & Burkhart, 2015). Nevertheless, adjustment to life's transitions as we age remains an important area of inquiry.

From a *cognitivist perspective*, later life learning may have a protective effect on mental power and memory (Boulton-Lewis, 2010). Later life learning is intellectually stimulating; it keeps the mind active by helping older adults acquire new knowledge, which they may have not thought to pursue earlier in life (Withnall, 2010). Withnall (2016) writes, 'If we consider issues of teaching and learning, psychological research has suggested that older

people benefit from being challenged to solve increasingly unfamiliar problems or to grasp new concepts as a way of maintaining fluid intelligence' (p. 164). Although his findings were not salient, Jenkins (2012) found that later life learning holds a small protective role in lowering older adults' risk of depression.

From a *social or situational perspective*, learning builds networks, trust, reciprocity, and social connections (Field, 2006). Increased social contacts and connections are benefits of later life learning (Jenkins & Mostafa, 2015; Withnall, 2010). Later life learning can facilitate civic engagement, spur social involvement, and help older adults build supportive and nurturing communities (Bennett & Wells, 2009; Lamb & Brady, 2005). Empowering adults with the desire and opportunities to learn and to contribute to families, partners, and communities across the life-course, including beyond paid work, is clearly beneficial to overall quality of life (Jarvis, 2001/2012; Kump & Krašovec, 2007).

From a *humanist perspective*, later life learning fulfils older adults' self-actualisation needs (Bynum & Seaman, 1993). The connections of later life learning to increased well-being in older adults are evident and remains under continued investigation in research (Jenkins, 2011). Later life learning has been connected to greater life satisfaction (Feinstein & Hammond, 2004) and greater well-being in general (Field, 2009).

More recently, Jenkins and Mostafa (2015) found that informal forms of learning, as contrasted to formal education or training courses or qualification attainment, predicted higher levels of well-being for older adults. Informal forms of learning included education, music, and arts groups and evening classes as well as sports clubs, gym classes, and exercise classes. These findings added to Jenkins's (2011) previous work that found that music, arts, and evening classes were related to well-being; however, formal courses, and gym and exercise classes were not related.

Education providers can thus be seen as hubs for promulgating well-being in society. However, as the financial and organisational systems, curricula, pedagogic approaches and support services are orientated towards younger (usually full-time) students, significant institutional chance is involved if the interests and preferences of older adults are to be addressed. Additionally, it is also problematic if only a few, overly assertive and politicised learners, make decisions for their fellow older adult learners (see Findsen, 2006). Findsen (2006) writes of a balance that needs to be struck:

Older adults ... want to take greater charge of their own educational affairs. When the involvement of seniors in their own administration, programme planning, and pedagogical practices occurs, there is a strong tendency to avoid bureaucratic mechanisms that impede collective decision making. (p. 71)

Undoubtedly, seeking to avoid bureaucracy is a desirable aim. Universities, however, are large, complex institutions with a myriad of goals, often competing. If the needs of adult learners in general and older adult learners, in particular, are not to be marginalised, might a more strategic and multifaceted approach be required?

Generations of reflection and response around later life learning

When seeking answers to the question, *how should universities respond to the needs and desires of older adults?*, it is important to be clear about what the purposes of learning are as they ultimately influence the learnings that transpire. Rubenson (1998, 2000) identifies an early, *first generation* of ideas about lifelong learning with its roots in humanistic traditions

and utopian visions. This assumes that people live in a world where the individual is highly motivated to learn, constantly seeking new knowledge. These visions were followed by a *second generation* of ideas from the late 1980s of lifelong learning, which appeared to be structured around an economic worldview (p. 2). Here the focus is on supporting the needs of the economy, and education is focused on providing training and qualifications to meet perceived labour market demand.

The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) data, first available in 1997 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 1997), created a *third generation* of concern by identifying a wide gap in adult learning participation in countries including the USA, UK and Ireland. This international survey (and its successors) reaffirmed well-known patterns in Western society that adults with the highest levels of initial education are the most likely to participate in lifelong learning. Furthermore, those who are employed are more likely to avail of opportunities to learn. In reference to the IALS results, Rubenson (1998) stresses that:

... lifelong learning for all can only be achieved in a society that actively engages and make demands on the literacy skills of all its citizens ... It is conditional on a working life organized in a way that promotes the use of literacy, and a society where people are encouraged to think, act, and be engaged. (p. 262)

A *fourth generation* of concern has emerged based on the connections between learning and well-being. Older people are more vulnerable to diminished health and well-being, and may have limited access to the learning and life skills necessary to stay well (Ludescher, 2016; Schmidt-Hertha, 2016; Selwyn, Gorard, Furlong, & Madden, 2003). There are large political and pedagogical issues that must be considered by universities and communities engaged together in later life learning (Borg & Formosa, 2016). Our focus is on this *fourth generation* of concern around later life learning and its potential for overcoming the hurdles between older adults and higher education; however, we reach a step further.

Across these generations, we find the premise, *learning throughout life is a human right*, to be a cornerstone of adult education and later life learning (Schuller & Watson, 2009). This premise is held by this article's authors drawing on lessons from those such as Schuller and Watson (2009). They offer 10 proposals for upholding the human right to learn throughout life, but among their proposals is a call for the strengthening of choice and motivation to learn, a framework to give people control over their own lives as citizens, and strategising on local, regional, and national levels. Modern learning theories and practice must do more to not see education as a commodity to be bought (Kolland, Ludescher, & Waxenegger, 2016). These notions can be seen our principles for and work towards the AFU.

The AFU: impetus

In 2012, the Ministers of Education from the 47 members of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) issued a proclamation that the student body entering and graduating from higher education institutions should reflect Europe's diverse populations, from which a commitment was made that included a focus on the ageing population. 2012 was deemed the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations (Withnall, 2016). While in the USA, organisations like the National Council on the Aging and events such as the White House Conference on Aging continue to emphasise the empowering role of

education (Findsen & Formosa, 2011; Manheimer, 1998, 2005); the connection between higher education and older adults remains insufficiently legitimated.

Higher education of course is just one component of the post-school educational environment along with further education, community education, and workplace-based learning (Slowey & Schuetze, 2012). But, higher education does have a distinctive role to play. In the case of Ireland, e.g. the Irish Universities Act of 1997, gives explicit recognition to the role of universities in relation to opening access to people not entering university directly from school. Section 9(j) states that one of the objectives is to ‘facilitate lifelong learning through the provision of adult and continuing education’.

While special measures to open access are crucial in terms of individual opportunities, they are unlikely to sufficiently address the wider societal challenges arising from demographic change. To genuinely address these challenges, a more comprehensive strategy is required on the part of higher education institutions, building on their central purposes, of fostering, as Watson (2014) puts it ‘... self-creation, the authentic life, the habit of thinking deeply, and the capacity to connect with others emphatically’ (p. 107). Beyond the question of access, how might higher education institutions bring together education, research and engagement to bear on complex issues associated with demographic change? For example, bringing impartial research to bear on debates about ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ in intergenerational transfers in many developed countries (Albertini & Kohli, 2013).

The AFU concept

The story of the AFU began in Dublin, Ireland at Dublin City University (DCU). The strategic approach was first developed and piloted by the Irish university. The AFU expanded through an on-going collaboration and co-creation with Strathclyde University in Glasgow, Scotland in the UK and Arizona State University (ASU) in Phoenix, Arizona in the USA (AFU, 2012). The three institutions first engaged researchers, adult learners and external partners representing older adults’ interests to develop 10 principles (see Table 1) that underpin the AFU (Dublin City University [DCU], 2016a).

Table 1. The Age Friendly University (AFU) principles.

Number	Principle
1	To encourage the participation of older adults in all the core activities of the university, including educational and research programmes
2	To promote personal and career development in the second half of life and to support those who wish to pursue ‘second careers’
3	To recognise the range of educational needs of older adults (from those who were early school-leavers through to those who wish to pursue Master’s or PhD qualifications)
4	To promote intergenerational learning to facilitate the reciprocal sharing of expertise between learners of all ages
5	To widen access to Online educational opportunities for older adults to ensure a diversity of routes to participation
6	To ensure that the university’s research agenda is informed by the needs of an ageing society and to promote public discourse on how higher education can better respond to the varied interests and needs of older adults
7	To increase the understanding of students of the longevity dividend and the increasing complexity and richness that ageing brings to our society
8	To enhance access for older adults to the university’s range of health and wellness programmes and its arts and cultural activities
9	To engage actively with the university’s own retired community
10	To ensure regular dialogue with organisations representing the interests of the ageing population

These design principles set the challenge incorporating the interests of older adults into a university's core teaching, research, and engagement (civic) activities. The AFU seeks to play a leadership role in strategically addressing the challenges of an ageing population through its research agenda, curriculum development, engagement with the ageing community, and relationship to its own academic and support staff and students. This requires an interdisciplinary perspective harnessing the institution's expertise and resources to investigate and address older adults' interests in relation to larger societal issues. The AFU approach also includes intergenerational learning programming that brings together younger and older students, learning from each other for their mutual benefit (Corrigan, Mcnamara, & O'Hara, 2013).

The AFU is in the early stages of implementation, but it represents one example of a strategic response on the part of higher education to the changing nature of the life-course from a linear to a more dynamic and complex model. Increased longevity, coupled with the changing nature of work (e.g. more IT and home-based), employment (e.g. insecurity), and family structures (e.g. more single households and 'patchwork' families), suggest the need for a new view of the stages of life.

Schuller and Watson (2009) highlighted the skew in educational expenditure across the different life stages. Based on detailed analysis of public and private investment in England and Wales, they estimated that around 86% of educational expenditure is concentrated on those 25 and younger; 11% on those 25–50; 2.5% for those between 50 and 75; and just 0.5% for those over 75 years of age. This starkly highlights the unequal, front-loaded nature of educational systems. While equivalent figures are not readily available for other countries, the pattern likely holds. Even a modest rebalancing of educational systems like university budgets could deliver improved outcomes in terms of intergenerational equity and help better position higher education to support the ageing population.

A cursory glance at organisational literature on universities and institutional profiling reveals the contemporary trend towards categorisation and branding around themes such as: 'the engaged university'; 'the borderless university'; 'the accessible university'; 'the research intensive university' and the like. As a leading scholar of leadership of higher education, David Watson points out a particularly popular contemporary fad relates to entrepreneurialism. 'The "entrepreneurial university" has become a familiar trope in recent discourse, reflecting the instrumentalist drive for higher education to appear useful, as well as to stimulate and enhance economic growth' (Watson, 2014, p. 45). (Previously a vice-chancellor himself, Watson rather mischievously repeats the tale that Burton Clark's influential book *Creating Entrepreneurial Universities* (Clark, 1998) '... sits on the bookshelf behind almost any vice-chancellor giving a TV interview' (Watson, 2014, p. 45).

Is it possible that the AFU is simply another example of this fashion in university 'branding'? Simply another 'contemporary fad'? Possibly yes; however, if at a minimum, the AFU concept helps highlight the importance of focusing on the interests and needs of older adults, then arguably some progress will have been made, fad or not.

The impact of the AFU's dialogue between universities and the germination of its principles within the universities remains uncharted; however, we share stories of its beginning from three university perspectives. We use the word 'dialogue' above to signal that higher education institutions are places not only for the exchanges of thought, but also places for mutual learning (Kolland et al., 2016). Although in its beginnings, the stories show AFU's

commitment at the highest level of these universities to widen the participation of older adults in universities, there is no single blueprint on how the AFU might be developed (Slowey, 2015). We examine how the AFU concept has been applied in the three universities that define the core of the AFU movement to date – DCU, the University of Strathclyde and ASU.

The case of DCU

DCU is a young university with a distinctive mission, which aims to ‘transform lives and societies through education, research and innovation’ (Dublin City University [DCU], 2016b). Since admitting its first students in 1980, DCU has grown in student numbers and size, and an international reach: with a student body comprising representatives from 108 countries; a strong research profile, recognised in its consistent ranking in Times Higher Education’s 100 global top universities under 50 years old, and the QS top 50 under 50; and, an active role in a range of international university networks, such as the European Consortium of Innovative Universities (ECIU) of which it is the only Irish institution to be a member.

DCU’s research orientation is matched by a strong commitment to educational innovation, and also, more widely, to civic and community engagement. In seeking to harness its expertise and resources to engage with real world challenges, civic engagement is central to DCU’s mission creating ‘a mutually beneficial relationship between the university and the community’ (Munck, Kelly, & Ozarowska, 2015, p. 16).

Within the context of these values, DCU decided to respond to global challenges posed by demographic changes at national and regional levels through a commitment, along with the University of Strathclyde and ASU, in its intention to become an AFU. In this, the university was building directly on its existing strong track record of research, educational innovation, widening access and community engagement in areas such as intergenerational learning, innovative delivery of lifelong education, health and wellness, social enterprise, support of non-traditional learners, careers, business, and technology.

The DCU approach

The AFU concept moved the university to a wider, strategic focus, incorporating the needs of older adults into the development of new opportunities and synergies locally, nationally, and internationally. Under the auspices of the University President, a university-wide, interdisciplinary working group was established with the brief of engaging directly with older adults and their representatives to identify ways in which DCU, and higher education more generally, might best contribute to meeting their interests and needs: short, medium, and long term. Those involved included older adult learners from DCU’s long established Intergenerational Learning Programme (IGLP) (Corrigan et al., 2013) and major agencies such as: Age Action Ireland, Age and Opportunity, AONTAS – the (Irish) National Adult Learning Association –, the Senior Citizens’ Parliament, the Retirement Planning Council of Ireland, the Third Age Foundation, prominent experts (e.g. a social-gerontologist), U3A (University of the Third Age), various active retirement associations, representatives of the university’s own retired community, and relevant public authorities.

In 2012, as DCU launched AFU and incorporated the 10 principles into its mission, the Prime Minister of Ireland, *an Taoiseach*, Enda Kenny, said it was a ‘truly pioneering initiative’ through which:

... DCU is taking a leadership role in preparing society for the multifaceted challenges of our aging demographic. It will actively encourage older people to come into our higher education institutions and to become involved in shaping university programmes. The age friendly activities being promoted are both relevant and correctly targeted at promoting the quality of life of our older men and women. (Dublin City University [DCU], 2012)

A subsequent Age-Friendly Implementation Action Team was established representing six ‘Pillars’ of areas of work across the university: (1) Research and Innovation; (2) Teaching and Learning; (3) Lifelong Learning; (4) Intergenerational Learning; (5) ‘Encore’ Careers and Enterprise; and, (6) Civic Engagement. This work was supported by the coherence of core strategies of DCU relating to educational innovation, widening access, civic engagement and research.

Intergenerational learning, health and wellness, and innovative use of technology

From a myriad of areas of development at DCU, four are highlighted here as illustrative of the range encompassed under the AFU concept. First, lifelong learning was further developed through the offering of flexible learning programmes (part-time or e-learning particularly at the postgraduate level), which address current research, identifying the challenges faced by relatively younger adult students (30–50s) engaging with full-time study (Slowey, Murphy, & Politis, 2014). For example, DCU is host to Ireland’s National Centre for Digital Learning. Also, DCU in the Dublin community offers shorter programmes targeted particularly at widening access to adults who did not previously regard higher education as ‘being for them’. Arguably, however, at the core of provision for older adults lies DCU’s IGLP, which is directly centred on the identified needs and interests of older learners. This is done not in isolation, but in close collaboration with younger students with an educational approach designed to encourage each to learn from the other (Corrigan et al., 2013).

Second, DCU has taken a lead in research on implications of specific aspects of ageing. For example, DCU has set a major focus on early onset dementia, getting involved with EU projects such as In-MINDD (innovative midlife intervention for dementia deterrence), and an Elevator Project supporting awareness raising and training in relation to dementia.

Third, DCU has developed programmes around health and wellness. DCU hosts a MedEx programme, which under the care of a medical director, brings several thousand older adults to the DCU campus for a wide range of programmes aimed at supporting healthy living including: HeartSmart – cardiac rehabilitation; BreatheSmart – pulmonary rehabilitation; SmartSteps – vascular rehabilitation; Diabetes Health Steps – diabetes; Move On – cancer rehabilitation; and, Living Life – for people living with advanced/secondary cancer.

Fourth, DCU works to continue its collaborative research investigating learning among older adults. The use of innovative technology for learning holds potential for older adults who can be otherwise excluded from learning activities due to physical and social barriers. Working in partnership across a range of disciplines (e.g. technology, adult education, communications) and with other researchers internationally (e.g. International Longevity Centre Brazil [ILC-Brazil], 2016), Universal Design for Learning (UDL) explores the use

of multiple representations of information through alternative modalities to create new interfaces to support older adult learning (Murphy, 2015).

The case of ASU

A new charter for a New American University

ASU is the largest university in the USA, comprising over 80,000 students. More than a decade ago, ASU embarked on a new and ambitious trajectory. Calling itself the 'New American University', it sought to reconfigure itself into a new prototype for the American public research university – one that emphasises access to all demographics and stresses societal transformation for the public good (Crow & Dabars, 2015). As boldly proclaimed in its university charter, 'Success is measured 'not by whom it excludes, but rather by whom it includes and how they succeed' (Arizona State University, 2015). Its charter furthermore emphasises 'advancing research and discovery of public value, and assuming fundamental responsibility for the economic, social, cultural and overall health of the communities the university serves' (Arizona State University, 2015). Implicit in these imperatives is the call to be relevant to all ages, all demographics, all sectors and all societal needs. While many of ASU's initiatives remain in the developmental stage, several accomplishments are noteworthy.

Repositioning lifelong learning for older adults

ASU's Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) was commissioned to provide immediate access for older adults in an organised and strategic manner to the intellectual, social and cultural experiences of ASU. OLLI immediately changed its mission. Prior to the AFU, OLLI existed nearly a decade as a broker of community lifelong learning opportunities largely unlinked to the university experience. In many ways, its offerings were redundant with a plethora of lifelong learning opportunities readily available elsewhere in the community, emanating from such sources as public libraries, senior centres, community colleges, and homeowner associations of age-restricted communities. Concurrent with the AFU commissioning, the OLLI reconstituted its mission into a tripartite set of outcomes:

- (1) To connect older adults (aged 50 and above) to the intellectual, social and cultural environments that define ASU.
- (2) To build a sense of community among older adults – with each other and with ASU.
- (3) To provide older adults with pathways for public service.

The mission reconfiguration was met with immediate success. The number of older adults partaking in OLLI's programming tripled to over 1500. The keys to this success were many. First, courses were transformed into low-cost, three-session short courses. The courses now mirror ASU's full range of academic courses available, and are taught virtually entirely by ASU faculty and faculty affiliates.

Second, the pedagogy was changed to emphasise dialogic learning (Wells, 1999), such that learning became a communal phenomenon rather than a passive teacher-transmit-information-to-learner phenomenon. From this, a strong sense of community identity has

emerged among the OLLI learners with a corollary side benefit of a rapidly emerging culture of philanthropic commitment to the OLLI community.

Third, community formation among the older adults was catalysed through on-campus special events, celebrations, public displays of art and writings produced in the courses, gatherings at bistros, and other ways of linking the participants outside of the classroom experiences. This has resulted in a loyalty to one another in ways that never could be evoked in the traditional classroom setting.

Finally, mechanisms have been established for commingling classroom learnings with service learnings. OLLI learners participate in service opportunities ranging from inner city school tutoring to environmental advocacy to participating in public venues dedicated to active ageing and abundant living. The consequence is that traditional university scholastic learning becomes inextricably tied to community-based learning where education becomes woven throughout the entirety of human development.

Manifestations of the AFU principles

ASU has established other important manifestations of its commitment to AFU principles. First, with the assistance of The Bernard Osher Foundation, scholarship resources are available for older adults seeking enrolment in traditional degree programmes. Osher institutions are 'largely supported by philanthropy' (Withnall, 2016, p. 159), which helps to lessen the burden of fees on students.

Second, an Emeritus College has been established to provide the university with a continued association with scientists, scholars, and artists who have retired from the faculty but not their disciplines. The Emeritus College provides infrastructure and resources for nearly 400 retired ASU faculty to engage in research projects and collaborate with older adults in the research enterprise.

Third, the university serves in leadership capacities to grow community-based age-friendly initiatives that establish multi-sector partnerships with older adult-related quality of life movements across the nation (Keller, 2014). University resources are brought to bear in building multi-sector community capacities for ageing in place, convening symposia on abundant ageing, capturing the value proposition of public investment in older adult populations, and driving public policy to benefit the significantly increasing ageing cohort (Ball, Lambert, & Lombard, 2015). Relationships of great reciprocity have been established with local councils of governments, local and national human service providers, grant making agencies, and community development corporations.

Fourth, the university is developing a relationship with EncoreU (Encore.org., 2015) to develop gateways into ASU for older adults wishing to pursue academic degree programmes and certificates related to serving the public good with particular focus initially on older adults interested in social entrepreneurship.

Fifth, the university is aggressively crafting new forms of intergenerational learning and mentoring. Successes have ranged from honours courses taught simultaneously to older adults and traditional students, promulgation of age-friendly community projects co-created by older adults and traditional students, and student achievement programmes moving older adults into mentoring roles for undergraduate students.

Finally, the university is bringing new spirit, energy, and focus into the broader domain of research on abundant ageing and longevity (Mueller, 2014). Some of the more significant

cross-institutional, cross-sector foci include the creation of the ASU Centre for Healthy Outcomes in Aging and the Centre for Sustainable Health, and development of strategic alliances with the medical enterprises such as the Banner Health Research Institute and Mayo Clinic to advance research in human longevity, biomedical technology, and transformative health and healthcare delivery systems to optimise patient care and health. Since the AFU proclamation, ASU researchers from the social sciences and natural sciences have coalesced to form research clusters on cognitive processes in ageing, socio-medical advances in caregiving, older adult community design, rehabilitation and health sensor technologies, ageing resilience, and abundant ageing.

The case of the University of Strathclyde

The University of Strathclyde is one of a small number of universities in the UK, which is growing a special focus on providing for the educational needs of older adults. The University's egalitarian ethos dates back to the late eighteenth century when John Anderson, the founding father, set out in his will a vision of a new democratic university with part-time education for non-traditional students, including artisans and women – 'a place of useful learning' – now the University motto. Through public subscription, the John Anderson University came into being – now the University of Strathclyde.

Inclusivity and community outreach have characterised the development of the institution. By the mid-80s, the university embraced the Learning in Later Life (3L) idea based largely on the University of the Third Age. As it was the first targeted 3L programme in Scotland, it gave birth to a wide-range of teaching, research and practical activities targeted to the needs of older adults. The flourishing 3L programme was formalised by the institution as the Centre for Lifelong Learning (CLL) in 1996. A broad range of public programmes were offered including languages, history, the arts, and natural and social sciences at all levels geared towards the needs and interests of older adults.

Currently, around 1500 learners aged over 50 are enrolled in targeted programmes. The learning programmes are wide-ranging and flexible, with a great many other non-formal activities through self-help clubs and groups. On-going support and encouragement is also provided for teachers and tutors through non-formal training and workshops, especially addressing how to develop better ways of learning.

Not only was the initiative the first in Scotland, but also it remains one of the largest and most sustainable in Europe. CLL staff are often asked to identify the factors contributing to its sustainability, and three aspects have emerged. These are linked to the collaborative nature of the venture involving partnerships both within and outside the university in the development and delivery of programmes, support from the University for the work of CLL at the highest level and, most importantly, the engagement of older students in decision-making and in the development of extra-curricular activities, some of which are discussed below.

Developing responsive programmes that formed the basis for the AFU platform

The Centre, since beginning, has developed initiatives that cultivated the context for the creation of the AFU concept and principles. Four arenas for innovative practices for older adult learning follow.

First, the programme offers bridges between generations enabling young people to learn from therein seniors and vice versa. The intergenerational contact has been useful in promoting new images of both older and younger people, placing young people at the forefront of challenging ageism.

Second, the Centre targets older adults in the 50–59-year old age range recognising the burgeoning older adult population, in part brought about by employer restructuring and downsizing. For example, one-day workshops were developed, half-day taster seminars, study trips, summer courses and lunchtime talks. Skills-based classes – especially information technology – have expanded exponentially, both for personal enrichment, and also for work readiness. An overall uptake of optional university credits has also demonstrated that some students wanted official acknowledgement, while others have seen these as enhancing job opportunities.

The third hallmark of Centre development is that older adults have been integrally involved in defining its offerings. Despite the sociable nature of classes, it is the personal connection to each other that enhances the experience. Tutors are engaged for three hours per class, two for teaching and a third for social interaction. Over refreshments in a pleasant room, tutors and students mingled. This strategy enables barriers to be lifted and enriching relationships to thrive. A 3L Students Association (3Ls) was formed in 1998 and has a current membership of over 900. It organises social events including lunches, theatre trips, and study weekends. It also supports 16 special interest clubs, which are open for those registered in the programme and who are student association members. It works in parallel with the classes to ensure formal learning is supported by informal activities. Furthermore, it helps to integrate students into university life with members encouraged to take part in other events, such as university public lectures, intergenerational debates, concerts and art exhibitions. This involvement has raised the 3L student profile throughout the university, as well as engendering a sense of belonging to university.

Fourth, a host of older adult volunteer groups has been created to carry out the Centre's mission. Exemplars include: University Guides (campus tours); Computer Buddies (one-to-one learning); and, the Spinal Injuries Support Network (social support). These projects have allowed students to apply their learning and to benefit the community. '50+ Challenge', set up in 1997, supported students in their search for paid employment. One-to-one mentoring, help with CV writing, and interview skills were supplemented with study for the European Computer Driving Licence. Over the years, the Centre has built considerable expertise in older adult employment, which is of increasing relevance.

Fifth, pathways have been built to facilitate older adults' sense of belonging and access to university facilities. Such engagement has contributed to the programme's success through the range of informal activities running in tandem with the volunteer projects. The work done over the years includes mailing promotional material, assisting at open days, staffing exhibition stands, community group talks, conference registrations, cataloguing books, hanging art exhibitions, and welcoming visitors and new students to the programme.

New initiatives under the AFU imperative

In line with the AFU's mission, the Centre has broadened its mission in two significant ways. First, it has built significant expertise in employment and skills-related training to

encourage older adults to improve career prospects. It has worked with employers, trade unions, and other business organisations to explore productive and flexible ways of integrating and maintaining older adults in the workforce. Additional funding from the local authority and the European Union has largely supported these programmes.

Second, pathways have been developed for engaging older adults with the university's research agenda. Older adults are now engaging in research that will (a) inform the university's ambition to provide more responsive programmes for older people and (b) inform public policy makers about the educational needs of older people. An initial task was to prepare an historical record of the growth of provision for older learners over a 25-year period, to review existing provision, and to make recommendations for future development from the perspective of these older learners. The research, all conceptualised and executed by older adults, has informed the development of many university projects on inter-generational learning and on the potential for older adults (grandparents and other community members) to contribute to children's learning. This new departure provides a way for learners to identify their own learning needs and provide evidence on what works.

Today the importance of learning in later life is now recognised as an integral part of the mission of the University of Strathclyde in its quest to enhance and promote active healthy ageing. It is also seen as an integral part of the university's strategy to widen access through encouraging older people from all backgrounds to engage in formal and non-formal learning within a university context.

Concluding observations

This article has outlined the importance of incorporating older adults into the mission and work of the university. This strategic approach is important if the interests and needs of older adults are to be moved from margins to mainstream. While not denying the challenges involved, our experience of working with the AFU concept to date is that it can assist higher education providers to claim their positions as hubs for increasing community well-being by further serving older adult populations.

Findsen's work (2006) shows the extent to which older adults '... want to take greater charge of their own educational affairs' (p. 71). Responding to this desire for autonomy in learning undoubtedly presents challenges for universities and other higher education institutions. Many older adults have sought out non-traditional alternatives to higher education, such as Universities of the Third Age (U3As), to fulfil such desires, because higher education is not meeting their needs (Formosa, 2014). Ludescher (2016) notes caution, 'While it [U3A] no doubt promotes successful ageing, not all U3A associations are firmly found on scientific research and committed to academic learning' (p. 183).

In responding to older learners, our experience shows how higher education institutions not only need to consider alternatives to their many systems (including resource generation and allocation) geared towards full-time students, but they also must look outside of many conventional benchmarks, which fail to capture the rich and diverse activities encompassed within the vision of the AFU. Additionally, there are challenges in discovering the type(s) of learning which many older learners seek as opposed to prescribing how they should learn (Kolland et al., 2016). This includes reworking how we define success in adult learning in later life.

We commenced with a discussion of different conceptions of learning. Holistic approaches and multiple ways of knowing, rather than single truths, are important for older adults to thrive in an interconnected and globalised world. This importantly includes arts and humanities, which ‘... contribute to knowledge through ways of knowing that transcend the verbal, linear, and measurable’ (Kivnick & Pruchno, 2011, p. 143). In our ever-changing global society, many older adults seek breadth and depth across disciplines and boundaries; they desire greater knowledge of global issues, philosophies and societies as opposed to a narrow life-skills approach (Talmage et al., 2015). Withnall (1998) emphasises that we must not distract our focus from exploring the deeper meaning of learning in later life, which may not be found in formal education or training; universities can be meaning-makers alongside older adults in knowledge creation and sharing.

Universities, as key producers and disseminators of knowledge, are thus well placed to become leaders in addressing these challenges. The illustrations we have provided of AFU activities are, we suggest, building blocks, which are both relevant and correctly targeted at promoting the quality of life of older adults. They are firmly based on a partnership approach involving teachers, researchers, community organisations, and learners working together in the delivery of programmes. Along with age-friendly initiatives in related areas (such as health and wellness, urban development, technological innovation, and cultural activities), they are all part of what might be a part of an AFU trajectory.

Achieving a university that is age-friendly in practice would require nothing less than a cultural transformation for most higher education institutions. The challenges are clearly considerable for institutions with an educational mission centred on young adults. However, our experience from three universities in Ireland, the UK, and the USA suggests that there is much to be gained from even taking the first step of opening discussion and debate involving all interested parties. In these debates, the diverse voices of older members of our communities have an important role to play in bringing us back to central questions concerning the role of universities in contemporary society and issues of access to higher-level knowledge. The possibilities for mutual learning, dynamic development, and innovative outcomes are considerable.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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