

A) General Part

General	
Case Study Title	Realizing your Potential: Engendering Learning & Guidance in Later Life
DIALOGUE thematic group	Learning & Guidance
Date of the case study	2010/12
Contact Information	
Name of the institution	University of Strathclyde
Location/country	Glasgow, Scotland , UK
	Centre for Lifelong Learning (CLL)
Website	http://www.strath.ac.uk/cll/
Abstract	
Key words	Employability; Ageing; Guidance
Please provide a short abstract of the case study	<p>This case study represents an initiative mounted by CLL to encourage older adults to re-engage with lifelong learning to help enhance employability in later life. Key background features: (i) Scotland's workforce is ageing, resulting in a greater number of adults aged 50 and over in employment or seeking employment than ever before. (ii) This presents significant challenges, particularly for older workers remaining in the workplace, with barriers such as employer attitudes and legislation often forcing individuals to re-consider their point of exit from the labour market. (iii) Financial circumstances dictate that, for many, early retirement may not be an option.</p> <p>The <i>Realising Your Potential</i> project sought to address these issues by devising a theory based, practical intervention. The methodology was framed around double-loop learning theory and supported individuals through a series of activity stages to reflect on past experiences, build confidence and motivation for future planning and learning and encourage goal setting to achieve future aspirations.</p>



B) Specific Part

The following part depends on each thematic group, outlining strengths and weaknesses of the chosen situations.

1. Context:

Please present the general background (“landscape of experience”) of the activity and in which institutions, organisations, units or sectors the case took place.

A challenging ‘landscape’ of demographics, employment & lifelong learning

One of Europe’s greatest challenges is its ageing population. With many Member States implementing policies and reforms that encourage older adults to work longer in later life, the employment rate of older adults aged 50+ is expected to increase significantly over the next decade. Action and interventions are required to support older adults update their skills and knowledge, and to help them re-engage with learning and enhance their employability to ensure both economic and personal needs are met. *“Taking no action would weaken the EU’s ability to meet the future needs of an ageing population”* (European Commission, 2009: 3).

This challenge has led to governments and policy makers across Europe introducing measures, such as increasing statutory pension age, that encourage older workers to remain working longer in later in life. Paradoxically, many organisations, particularly in a time of economic recession, adopt strategies which adversely affect older workers, for example, through early retirement/redundancy programmes. The true value of the older worker, the tacit knowledge and hidden skills which often exist can be lost to the labour market. Moreover, older adults who exit the labour market at 50+ are less likely to re-enter employment than their younger counterparts (TAEN, 2009). To ensure growth and economic prosperity in the future, employer attitudes and views of older workers must change. For this to be achieved, assistance must be provided to help individuals understand the wider implications of exiting the labour market and planning for life beyond work.

Generational tensions – striking a balance

Many young people across Europe today continue to leave school with low or no qualifications and will no doubt face significant labour market challenges in the future. Rightly so, this is a key priority being addressed by the European Commission. However, older adults, too, face serious challenges, with many in low-skilled, low-paid employment or facing redundancy, both of which may lead to greater levels of pensioner poverty. Furthermore, the *“future European labour market will be simultaneously confronted with an ageing population and shrinking cohorts of young people. As a result, adults - and in particular, older workers - will increasingly be called upon to update and broaden their skills and competences”* (The Bruges Communiqué, 2010). Today’s generation of 50 to 67 year olds, too, are less likely to have benefited from Further or Higher education on leaving secondary education back in the 1950/60’s.

In Scotland, 57.5% of school leavers went onto Higher or Further education in 2009. This compares with less than 15% of school leavers in the early 1960's (Scottish Government, 2010), a pattern which is almost certainly reflected across Europe. Data also show that instances of adult education and participation in learning declines with age (Schuller and Watson, 2009), a point supported by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (2008) who contend that older workers across Europe receive less training and development than younger people and that lifelong learning has been detected as an important factor for extending the working life. Bohlinger and van Loo (2010), citing the work of Shultz *et al* (1998) drill down further and examine the interconnectivity between factors that affect participation in learning later on in life and labour market participation. They argue that, in order to understand the extent to which older adults wish to participate in learning, the relationships between age, learning and work capacities must be examined.

Education in Scotland, as in most developed countries, begins at an early age with many children benefiting from pre-schooling before progressing onto primary and secondary education. At this stage though, a drop in participation levels can be observed with individuals exiting the learning system altogether. This narrows further with age, although a proportion of learning may take place through continuous professional development activity. For those who are unemployed engagement in learning is even less likely. On reaching age 45+, participation rates in learning drop significantly, particularly among those who are in low skilled, low paid jobs or who are unemployed.

2. What are the objectives and purposes of the concrete action?

The purpose of the activity was to engender learning and guidance in later life by adopting a relevant framework for formal engagement with lifelong learning and devising a practical intervention in the form of a university lifelong learning course. .

In contrast to the educational context described in 1. above, Smith (2010) suggests a more participative and inclusive approach, one that engenders a culture of continuous learning throughout the life-course. Smith's '*Hourglass*' theory of participation while acknowledging the need for a robust and challenging educational system in the early years, argues that it is equally important to open up opportunities in later life to pursue interests, enhance employability prospects and explore potential. *This theoretical perspective provided the framework for the project.*

The learning objectives were described and operationalized *through reflection and personal exploration* by participants, in relation to how opportunities for re-entering the labour market or embarking on a career change in later life can be enhanced. There is also an opportunity for providing a sense of direction for those who may be considering, or are already in, retirement. In essence, *this model concurs with Barham and Hawthorn's (2010) analysis of the support*

required for older adults to make informed career decisions. They conclude that quality careers guidance is equally important for the older part of the population as it is for those starting off in working life.

3. How does this activity combine insights from research and practical hands-on experience?

Utilizing the background analysis and theoretical insights described above, the Centre for Lifelong Learning created the *Realising Your Potential* project, framed around Argyris and Schön's (1978) 'double loop' learning methodology. The project aimed to engage older workers in a bespoke programme consisting of five stages, with the hypothesis that by going through the programme, individuals would be better informed and motivated to progress onto new learning opportunities.

Stage 1 encouraged individuals, through semi-structured interviews, to reflect on past learning experiences and identify barriers which may have existed thus preventing participation in learning earlier on in life.

Stage 2 offered a bespoke Learning Programme delivered over a set period of time and covered areas of relevance to individuals who have been disengaged from learning for a period of time.

Stage 3 encouraged individuals to explore areas of interest, understanding that they may have always wanted to learn something new, but never had the time, opportunity or encouragement to do so.

Stage 4 allowed the opportunity to evaluate current work ability and future work potential. Using a self-administered questionnaire, individuals identified and assessed key barriers that may have affected their capacity to continue in the labour market in the future.

Stage 5 encouraged reflection on the programme and supported progression onto new learning opportunities through a structured seminar programme.

Ten groups totalling 134 older workers, from a wide range of backgrounds and industry sectors participated and benefited from the programme. In terms of gender, the split between men and women was contrary to Schuller and Watson's (2009) findings that participation in learning is more or less equal above the age of 50 for both men and women. In this instance women were more participative in learning than men with 75% of participant's female and 25% male. With the exception of one participant, all were white from the UK/Other and three participants were aged 65+. All other participants were aged 50 to 65.

Of the total number of participants, 63% worked in the public sector with 34% coming from the private sector. 3% worked in the voluntary sector. Of those who came from the private sector, 44% were self-employed.

Theory/Practice Connections

A key area of this project was the links between theory and how findings materialised in the 'real world'.

The body of literature and research around employability and guidance in later life has only started to come to the fore over the last decade. Donald Hirsch (2000), one of the early commentators in the field noted “*the transition from work to retirement has only recently started to become the focus of attention for academics, policy analysts and social commentators.*” (Hirsch, 2000: p2). Although there has been more attention paid to the subject recently, the breadth of literature focused on the UK, in comparison with other fields of study, is comparatively narrow. This reduces further when examining the topic in a Scottish context. Furthermore, a large proportion of the literature has been carried out for policy purposes as the ageing population has wider societal implications for government.

This relative *lack of literature provided a challenge when creating the project* as the literature to build on, particularly in Scotland was limited. The Centre for Lifelong Learning is the leading expert in age and employment in Scotland and through the expertise and experience of staff working in the Centre, the project was designed and tested by them. *A further influencing factor in the project design was the funding strand, which was practitioner rather than research based meaning set targets and outcomes were to be achieved.* This restricted academic freedom in terms of designing a research question and hypothesis testing as time restraints and resources limited the opportunity to adopt this approach.

The method adopted in this project was therefore not a classical research one, but more driven and designed through the lens of a practitioner. This offered the opportunity for the project findings to be written up from a researcher’s point of view at the end of the project life-cycle, with a number of key issues and areas for further research emerging.

4. Does the institution/sector/unit provide instruments (e.g. ICT or human resources) for the implementation of the concrete action? Which tools were applied?

The institution provided staff time, organisational infrastructure, and funding for conducting the research.

5. Best practice/ Bad practice:

What kind of results were obtained? What do you consider to be the innovative or interesting part of this concrete action?

What are the barriers (potential and effective) to the full implementation of this action and what are its benefits?

In which sense can this action be useful for DIALOGUE?

Population ageing across Europe brings fresh challenges for both individuals and policy makers. The current generation of older adults are living longer and healthier lives than previous generations and have a different outlook on work and retirement.

As has been demonstrated through this project, there is an increasing likeliness of older adults working longer, with different aspirations and ideas on how they wish to live and work in later life.

With policy increasingly being steered towards increasing employability rates of older adults, it is important to consider the value of continuing to learn and develop in later life and to continue adding to the vast amounts of knowledge and experience that often has been amassed throughout working lives. This requires a clear strategy among policy makers to engender a culture of guidance for all, services that not only serve the needs and ambitions of younger people, but one which older adults feel comfortable and confident in accessing.

Guidance and learning are inter-twined. The provision of appropriate guidance can help highlight the learning opportunities which exist and, further, can help instil confidence among those who need it allowing them to access and embrace the true ethos of lifelong learning and continue to contribute to society in later life.

6. Are researchers and practitioners directly linked in this activity?

- If yes, how are they linked and what are the communication and interaction processes?
- If they do not communicate directly, how are findings from research connected to practical activities and vice versa?

The project was conceived, designed, executed and analysed by researchers and practitioners working jointly throughout.

7. Which elements would you identify as easily transferable to other institutions in different regional and national contexts?

Any university offering an initiative to support older workers in improving their employability could be informed by this work. The model for the course at Strathclyde is one which is and can be replicated in HE institutions throughout Europe. Mature learners face many of the same economic and social challenges regardless of their geographical location and providers can learn much from the project.

8. Recommendations for dissemination:

Briefly identify the most important points in the case study for other ULLL managers and practitioners – these may include risks as well as benefits.

Please formulate some recommendations for the dissemination on the basis of the

case study addressed to the working group and other partners.

Several papers have been prepared by G. Smith, (see references).

9. Additional information. E.g. bibliography, website, publications, reports

References

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