# Age and learning in a post capitalist world

## Two competing purposes of learning

From its earliest roots, adult education has had two conflicting purposes[[1]](#footnote-1). Policymakers have tended to espouse a utilitarian view, that it exists to compensate for the failings of initial education, to enable those who did not succeed, or were not offered the opportunity to participate, in standard initial education to catch up. Over 200 years, this threshold has moved from being able to read the Bible, to some element of higher education, but it remains the dominant thrust of public education policy. The alternative view, led more often by people who have worked with adult learners, and especially in informal and “liberal” education, is that adult education seeks to extend individuals beyond the confines of their immediate context, to raise aspirations and horizons, and to empower people (especially the socially disadvantaged) to take greater control over their lives. The latter vision has been the driving force of “liberal” education, from the foundation of the WEA and Extramural movements to the insertion of “liberal studies” into vocational day release education. Sometimes this was presented as a project of political empowerment, ranging from Forster’s modest,“we must educate our masters” to the much more radical visions of workers education. At others it has been seen as providing access to high culture, enabling people to have access to the good things in life.

At times the two were seen as intertwined, as in the early years of the WEA where an explicit focus on economics and politics sought both to compensate for the inadequacies of initial education and to build a politically active working class. However, since the 1970s the utilitarian agenda has been the dominant force. One driver of this has been a concern for equity, that no one should become socially excluded by the failure of the state to guarantee the basic threshold required for full citizenship. Another has been the underlying belief that the UK’s economic survival depends on the creation of a high skilled economy, which has few places for the unskilled and undereducated. As a result, at the end of 20th century, Government made a pragmatic decision that limited public resources should be concentrated on the compensatory agenda, guaranteeing a threshold level of skills and knowledge to enable all citizens to participate, primarily through paid work, in a growing and increasingly high skilled economy.

Thus, across the century, the compensatory battle was won, at least in principle. The school leaving age was progressively raised, and working class men, then women, and then a plethora of excluded groups, were given better access, including the abolition (only in the 1970s) of the legal status of “ineducable”. At the turn of the century the right to further study to achieve what is generally regarded as the school leaving qualification[[2]](#footnote-2) was enshrined in policy. However, much of the effort to “widen participation” was essentially about extending the initial education offer to a wider range of young adults, or to extending the age range into the 20s, for those who had fallen out of the schooling system to climb back in again their 20s.

The empowerment battle, on the other hand, remains a challenge. It has flared up and died down over time, and is far from won. There has never been the same degree of support for the idea that education services should seek liberation or empowerment for adults, or that learning for personal and social development (other than the very specific kinds which meet other state objectives – like resisting terrorism or improving public health) is something which should be pursued.

By the beginning of the 21st century, public policy had adopted a very narrow utilitarian vision of lifelong learning which paid lip service to breadth, but saw the primary purpose of the state as funding learning for immediate employment. This model reached dominance in the Leitch report of 2006, which not only concentrated on learning for employment, but also interpreted that in terms of very specific qualifications, whose relevance even to economic needs is questionable. Government acknowledged that there were other kinds of legitimate learning, for personal, social and cultural development which were in principle, desirable, as were some kinds of work related learning, but was happy to leave these to the free market – for people who wanted to, and could pay, to take up from their own resources. Behind this lay a vision that the primary purpose of Government is to enable people to earn their living, and thus to contribute to the wealth of the community. Social inclusion was a priority, but was best achieved through enabling people to engage in paid work (and the evidence base for the power of work for social inclusion is indeed substantial). Personal development was just that: personal, and the responsibility of the individual.

## Two new challenges

The mid 2000s have presented two major challenges to this model, exposing its intellectual and moral poverty, and the degree to which it was tied to the very particular context of late 20th century capitalism: rooted in a particular view of boundaries between paid and unpaid work, of the relationship between learning and work, and of the roles of the parties – individual, employer and the state.

The first challenge comes from the global economic collapse of 2008, which questions whether the underlying economic model on which these policies rest is sustainable. The second is an ageing society, which challenges the focus on paid employment, and questions the nature of the social contract between generations, when most people are spending a third of their adult lives outside the paid labour market.

### The economic challenge

The immediate cause of the economic collapse of 2007 was a period of rapid and unregulated economic growth in the West, leading to boom and bust. However, behind it lay some much more fundamental issues. One was the ending of capitalism’s success in improving wellbeing. For most people in the West, continuing economic growth was no longer making people happier, and deepening economic and social divisions in the countries where the model had been most vigorously applied, was leading to increased social tensions. As Thomas Piketty pointed out, by 2010 inequality of wealth in developed countries had reached levels not seen since 1914. The same economic growth, continuing apace in some “developing” countries, was beginning to demonstrate that the resources do not exist to allow the whole world to achieve the material living standards of the West.

It was also becoming clear that the economic model favoured by the UK Government, that the West would continue to provide the thinking power for the globalised economy, while the East and South provided the food, and manufacturing capacity, and some offshored services, was by no means inevitable. The special status of Western, and particularly UK and US, higher education would come under challenge, as China and India, to be followed, no doubt, by others, were demonstrating that they could also do clever work. The idea of the West as the brains of the global economy, in some ways a legacy of empire, was under severe threat, and with it the assumptions about the distribution of global wealth which have driven thinking for a couple of decades.

This coincided with the emergence of “happiness” in policy discussions. With its roots in radical economics, it was popularised in the UK by Richard Layard, with the proposition that the primary purpose of public policy should be the pursuit of the happiness of citizens, rather than their material prosperity. Logically, he argued, the only reason to accumulate wealth is to achieve happiness, and the reverse cannot be true. Since the evidence is that growing wealth does not (beyond a certain, relatively low, threshold) lead to a proportionate increase in measurable happiness, perhaps Government should seek to address the latter more directly, and examine what it can do to increase happiness. The arguments were developed for the French government in 2009 by Stiglitz, Sen, Fitoussi, and that work has since been taken up by the OECD. Furthermore, since levels of wellbeing seem to be inversely correlated with degrees of social division, which were documented by Wilkinson and Pickett, perhaps social policy should be actively seeking to reduce difference (and if this is true within countries, perhaps it is equally true globally).

The logical implication of this might be to revert to something more like the economy (and perhaps associated social values) of post war austerity[[3]](#footnote-3), with smaller differences in wealth and income, more emphasis on what people can make and do themselves, with more emphasis on social and personal development, and less on a crude notion of economic growth.

However, public policy and attitudes shift slowly, and public and media opinion are powerful brakes on social change. Whatever the research evidence says, people do not give up the pursuit of material goods overnight; relative wealth (doing better than one’s peer group) still does increase wellbeing; and there is no doubt that wellbeing of many people was seriously damaged by losing wealth, work and income as a result of the economic collapse. The first priority for most people in this situation is likely to be getting back to where they were, not to develop a radically different way of living, unless someone articulates a very different and appealing model.

### The ageing challenge

If the economic agenda challenges our assumptions about priorities in education, so does ageing. The figures on an ageing society have been well rehearsed. Declining fertility and rising life expectancy in all developed, and many developing, countries mean that most face a rapidly ageing population. If real retirement ages remain unchanged, the dependency ratio deteriorates, placing an ever increasing financial burden on the working age population. Finding a way of maintaining a politically acceptable balance is a major policy concern.

But the dependency ratio is not the only challenge. There is also a simple issue of labour supply. In 2008 the UK Commission on Employment and Skills proposed that, despite short term recession, the UK economy would have to fill, within a decade, 13.5 million vacancies, some caused by expansion of work in particular sectors, but mainly to fill vacancies created by retirement (assuming that retirement patterns remain unchanged)[[4]](#footnote-4). Only half that number can be produced by young people leaving school, FE and HE (whose numbers are already known, since they have already been born). The options are stark: a severe constraint on economic growth through labour shortages; an improbably large increase in labour productivity; a politically unacceptable level of continuing immigration; or a reduction in the retired population through extending working life. A modified version of this last option might involve a redefinition of what we mean by “work”, and its redistribution over the lifecourse.

Last, but by no means least, an expanding phase of healthy “retirement” raises questions about meaning and purpose. For most of the 20th century, retirement was, for most people, a short period, like a holiday at the end of a long hard working life, followed by ill health and death. Now that it represents a third of adult life for most people, and more than that for some, questions of meaning, purpose and status begin to be more serious. Neither of the two contradictory public stereotypes, of age as a period of decline, ill health and poverty, or as a world of leisure, golf and world cruises, provide a good guide to how to live well in this new world.

Thus economic change challenges our notion of the value and sustainability of economic growth, and forces us to ask how economic activity might better enable people to live happy and rewarding lives, while the ageing agenda challenges us to rethink the balance of paid and unpaid activity across the lifespan. The two together point to a new social contract, in which work might be redefined and redistributed, and where learning might play a more significant part of all life – leading us perhaps at last towards the learning society.

The theme of the rest of this paper is this last option, and its implications for lifelong learning. How might we rethink the relationship between paid and unpaid work, and how it is distributed across the lifecourse, and especially the nature of social contract for people in the decades of healthy life between “retirement” and dependency and death.

This means a review of the relationship between age and learning which goes beyond the traditional pleas of adult educators to shift a little of the resource from schooling to adults. We need to consider how age affects needs for and nature of learning, both formal and informal, its purposes, measurement, outcomes and resourcing.

## Models of the lifecourse

Since the invention of “retirement” as a distinct phase of life in the early 20th century, public policy has tended to see the lifecourse in terms of three phases: 15-20 years in childhood and adolescence; 40-50 years of adult “working life”, and 10 years of retirement (much of it in poor health and poverty). Government frames policy around the key ages of 16/18/21 and 60/65, and gathers data on policy impact on the assumption that these are relatively homogenous groups.

Even if this were ever a reflection of reality, it is no longer true. The lifecourse has become more complex and discontinuous, especially around initial entry into adulthood, and around retirement and old age. In the last decade, the proportions of young people experiencing delayed entry into adulthood have risen steadily. Many of those who stay in education to first degree level take gap years, internships, and trial jobs before settling into what their parents would have seen as “proper jobs”. Those who leave without a degree are increasingly at the mercy of an uncertain labour market, competing for a shrinking volume of low skilled and insecure work. Government initiatives to train more do not always reflect the real demands of the labour market, and many qualifications deliver little if any economic return. At the extreme, is a group of young people who fail to engage with the legitimate labour market and fall into crime and various socially unacceptable lifestyles, from which many (but not all) emerge in their mid-20s as they complete their neurological development and build more stable relationships.

At the other end of the lifespan, retirement has also become a less predictable process. Significant numbers of people leave the labour market in their 50s as a result of ill health (increasingly mental health problems, resulting from the stresses of pressured working lives, rather than physical ones). Growing numbers are continuing to work into their late 60s and beyond (the only age group whose number have been growing in the last decade). Government has been actively seeking to extend working life, and removing structural barriers to doing so, with incentives, for example, for deferring pensions

## The new “third age”

An age perspective on adult learning is not just about different learning needs at different ages, nor is it about location or delivery modes, although both of these matter. What it does is raise questions about the nature of the lifecourse, priorities and distribution of activity, learning and resources. It also raises fundamental questions about meaning and purpose. Retirement, which used to be a short holiday after a long working life, has turned (largely unnoticed) into a major phase of life. For most of those under 60 today, this is likely to be more than a third of their adult lives, and for some it may be a half. For some people, 60, which used to be the beginning of the end, may soon be the mid-point of a lifespan extending to 120.

We all think we know what being adult means: taking responsibility for oneself, earning money to maintain oneself and raising the next generation. However, we have organised society in a way that actively discourages people from doing any of these activities for a third of their adult life. What then is the new social contract, what can older people expect of society, and what can society expect of them? The answer depends, to some extent, on whether we see retirement as a reward for a long life spent working hard, or a recognition of incapacity to continue to work. If it is the former, how large a reward is appropriate for how long a working life, bearing in mind that the costs of retired people are paid by the current workforce[[5]](#footnote-5). If it is the latter, why do we still assume that this point is reached at 60/65, when most people are physically healthier, and most jobs in the current economy are less physically demanding than a generation ago?

For the individual, accustomed to a model in which adult identity has been increasingly based around paid work, how are the satisfactions which work provided to be achieved in “retirement”? For the community, how is a growing economically inactive population to be supported? Failure to answer the first of these questions will result in poor quality of life for a large proportion of society. Failure to answer the second may result in serious social disruption as a shrinking “working age” population come to resent working ever harder to earn the wealth to support their elders.

Three, not mutually exclusive, options present themselves. The obvious option would be for most people to stay longer in work. There is no inevitable logic in simply adding the extra years to economically inactive life. One might equally argue that as healthy life expectancy rises, so should retirement age (and perhaps state pension age), to keep the proportion of adult life spent in retirement constant as life expectancy rises. There are good economic reasons to support this, and it would address both the individual and societal objectives. However, employers generally remain (at least for the time being) reluctant to pursue this option on any scale. While growing numbers will retain well established experienced workers, age discrimination remains a powerful force in recruitment practice. Achieving change here would call for significant changes in how work is organised, and a rethinking of traditional career patterns for many. It probably also requires rethinking the nature of working life: while most people are capable of work well beyond 65, physical constraints may limit the options for many. The labour market offers limited options for second careers, and there is little guidance available to help people manage such transitions. An alternative option is to expand “voluntary work”, which can give the same benefits, but with increased flexibility, and sometimes with stronger intrinsic rewards. This would call for a rethinking of how voluntary work is organised. It might also involve a rethinking of what work is conducted in the paid economy and what work is ”voluntary” (we have seen an example of this kind of change in recent years in relation to childcare, much of which has moved from the unpaid responsibility of parents to a paid economy of formal childcare, and an informal economy of grandparenting. A third option is to engage in systematic learning, which, for some people, provides all the benefits of paid work - except money, which is important for many, but by no means all.

## A new vision of “work”

One solution to the dilemma must be a better distribution of work across the lifecourse. Improvements in health, and changes in the nature and management of work, mean that there are few jobs which cannot be done by the average 65 year old. Furthermore, there is good evidence that many older people would like to stay longer in paid work, especially if it is less pressurised, more flexible and perhaps part-time. There is also ample evidence that the concentration, and growing intensity, of paid work for people between 25 and 55 is damaging to individuals, their families and society as a whole. If the work were to be distributed more evenly across the lifecourse there would be more time for other things – for childrearing, learning, playing an active part in the local community and pursuing non-work interests. It might also make it easier to maintain a continuity of social and personal development across the lifecourse.

Until relatively recently, research into work, and peoples’ attitudes to it, has tended to concentrate either on young people entering the labour market, or people in mid-career, at a point where there is little choice but to work (few people get the chance to leave the active labour market for other than caring responsibilities during these years) . However, at some point after 50 (for some sooner and others later), people reach a point where they are aware of a choice about what they do and how they do it. The option to exchange a lower income in retirement for escape from a tedious unrewarding job, or to exchange the constant pressure of a management role for something less demanding, becomes real. So people in this transition phase of life can tell us important things about work and where it fits in life, once the vital pressure of survival is removed.

A set of qualitative and quantitative studies of attitudes to work and retirement among people aged 50-70, carried out In the mid-2000s by the Centre for Research into the Older Workforce shed light on these issues. Firstly, older people rather liked work, which was usually seen as synonymous with paid employment. Perhaps surprisingly, this spread across occupations, income levels and sectors. Enthusiasm for work (and the reverse) could be found among people in very low status jobs, as well as among highly qualified professionals. It could also be found among people who had moved from the latter to the former – consciously “downscaling” to less demanding roles to reduce stress or undertake a different kind of challenge.

Two groups of reasons for continuing in work dominated responses. First came intrinsic motivations. Work gave a sense of purpose and meaning to life, a way of making a recognised contribution to the community, something to be proud of and giving status within the community. Second came social engagement. Even if work colleagues were not bosom friends, they form a regular framework of human interaction, people who knew who you were, and who you recognised in turn. Work also provided a location for demonstrating and practising one’s skills and knowledge, and provided the status which went with this. Among those who had retired, some missed the structure of work, and some had returned to work because of this: they wanted “something to get out of bed for”, even if they did not want the full rigour of a former work routine. As they approached retirement, most people said that they would consider staying in work longer. Despite popular perceptions, this did not appear to be primarily a matter of money (though most welcome it, and some desperately need it). Work helps people to belong, and to feel they have earned the right to do so.

This should not surprise us. Long ago, Maslow pointed out that the basic survival needs provide only the foundation for a good life: food and shelter are necessary, but not sufficient, and earning money is not what makes life satisfying for most people. Control, purpose, recognition and structure are what matter to most of us, and if we are to find a way of organising society which promotes the wellbeing of all its citizens, we need to find ways of achieving this. Interestingly, this list of motivations is surprisingly like the reasons which people cite for taking part in adult education.

## Lessons of a recession

The evidence that older people would quite like to work longer has important implications for policy on work and learning. During an economic downturn there is not enough paid work to go around. In past recessions, the solution has been to encourage the oldest workers to retire early, which is sometimes presented as the “kindest” option, sometimes eased by generous financial settlements. Yet while well paid unemployment may be better than unemployment with poverty, it is not a satisfying identity, and age discrimination legislation has made this a more difficult option for employers to adopt. Furthermore, some employers have learned from previous recessions the danger of losing the knowledge, expertise and contacts embodied in their most experienced workers, and have sought solutions which distribute work more equitably. Reduced income and reduced hours for all may be better for individuals, and for the firm, than full employment for most and nothing for some. Some, even more enlightened, took the opportunity to upskill their workforces in preparation for the upturn, seeing a recession as an opportunity to prepare, rather than an excuse to cut back on training. What happened was, in effect, a redistribution, albeit on a very small scale: the pain of recession was spread more equitably through everyone working less and earning less.

A more strategic response would be to apply this model more widely. Instead of redistributing work among people of “working age”, it could be more equitably distributed across adult life, giving older people the benefits of work, and younger people (and especially those in the most hard pressed mid-life phase) the benefits of reduced stress and more leisure. There might be two elements to such an approach: to redistribute paid work, and to redefine the boundaries between paid and unpaid work.

To an objective observer the case for redistribution is probably strong. It is plainly absurd that we concentrate all the available work into 25-30 years mid-life, when people are also trying to raise children, and sometimes to care for elderly dependents as well, and then, at precisely the stage when these other pressures ease, we remove the opportunity to work. For those who have had to give up paid work to carry out these roles, we make it hard for them to return to the workplace. At a time when many people are ready for a new challenge, with 20-30 years of experience behind them, and perhaps 20 years of active life ahead, we remove the opportunity. Although many do find a satisfying niche in the labour market, many do not. At its extreme we see the peak in mortality rates for men immediately after retirement: deprived of the benefits of work, they fail to find a new role and identity, and a new social network, and fall ill and die.

A second approach would be to review what we think of as “work”, or more strictly “employment”. Historically, the boundaries between paid and unpaid, voluntary and domestic have shifted. Some work which was once done by domestic servants is now done by householders for themselves, some caring roles which are professionalised as paid work in some cultures is done within the family in others. The UK, since the 1990s, has seen a dramatic shift of care work for pre-school children from the home to paid nurseries, and a dramatic growth of the number of predominantly young working class women employed in formal childcare[[6]](#footnote-6). For older people, caring, for older relatives and then for partners, is generally regarded as part of normal domestic responsibility, and not even considered when issues of “voluntary work” are debated. Older people dominate much formal voluntary work, and this is one of the ways in which people can derive the benefits of work without all the constraints of an employment contract (though much voluntary work requires firm discipline and management).

## Age and learning

Education can help with both these challenges, but it is not the whole solution. Although some unemployed people get back to work through training, they are a small proportion of the unemployed population, and an even smaller proportion of the people whose incomes, self-confidence and wellbeing are damaged by recession. Nevertheless, the implications for education policy are significant. We know that some of the activities which promote wellbeing are fostered by education. People’s wellbeing is enhanced by a sense of purpose, control and growth, and by social engagement with others. All these spring from good education, but not only, or necessarily, from education which prepares people for particular employment, or for employment in general. This puts “learning for its own sake”, or learning for social and personal development, back on the agenda. However, Government is slow to respond, and to move radically to the fostering of a different model of adult learning is risky in both political and economic terms. The publication of a White Paper on informal learning suggested that change was in the air, but it was a small straw in a light breeze, and its significance was not widely recognised.

What, then, do we know about age and learning? Firstly and most obviously, participation in formal education and training declines with age, in all developed countries, and this is especially true of work related learning. The reasons for this are not entirely clear, but one plausible hypothesis is that neither employers nor employees see a likely return on an investment in learning for people who are about to retire, either because the payback period is too short, or they have no confidence that training will change anything. The evidence on the latter is thin: despite much rhetoric from adult educators, there has been little empirical work to test whether training older workers does indeed lead to improvements in productivity or on any other business indicator. Secondly, there is evidence that employers overestimate the working lifespan of younger employees, and underestimate that of older ones. In practice young employees are much more mobile than older ones, for a variety of reasons, and the benefits of much training expenditure on young people accrue to later employers, rather than those who sponsor the training. Older employees, well managed, are much more likely to see an investment in training as a sign of confidence and value, and respond with greater productivity and loyalty. However, it may be that what is on offer is simply inappropriate. This would not be entirely surprising, since most vocational education is designed for young entrants to the labour market, or mid-life returners. Furthermore, there is clear evidence that few older workers refuse training, but at least half are never offered, and many simply do not think of it as an option.

We know that age, per se, does not affect preferred modes of delivery, or learning styles. We do, however, know that as people age, especially past retirement, the subjects which they choose to study do change (although this is often constrained by what is on offer). There is also reason to believe that the balance between formal and informal learning changes, partly because of limitations on access to formal learning, but at least partly because informal learning gives people more control over what they do, how, and where. It also probably gives more control over how the learning take account of individual experience and circumstances, which necessarily diverge as people grow older.

However, understanding learning needs in an ageing society is complicated by generational change. Some of the differences we can perceive between young and old are not the result of chronological ageing, but of different life experiences. Most people over 80 in 2010 grew up before the welfare state, left school at 14 or 15, spent a significant part of their adult lives under the shadow of the Second World War, worked in manual occupations, retired in their late 60s, and expected to die in their early 70s. By contrast, their children, now in their 50s and 60s, were born into the welfare state, were much more likely to have stayed in education into their late teens or twenties, and grew up in the economic boom of the 50s and early 60s. Since they were still in the labour market to benefit from the boom at the turn of the century, most are much wealthier than their parents, and they can expect to live a decade or more longer. For the generation between, the industrial restructuring of the 1970s and 1980s at the peak of their working lives led many into long term unemployment and poverty. These changes have a profound effect on how people think about their lives and learning. For the first group, learning was either something got over, with relief, in one’s teens, never to return, or something adopted to challenge social preconceptions, or a demonstration of solidarity with a class or community. For the second group, learning has played a greater part in life. They are more likely to have formal qualifications, and these likely to have a greater bearing on their life chances and prosperity.

## Purposes of learning

What would a redistribution of work mean for education? If we were to distribute work and non-work more evenly across the lifecourse, there would be more time for learning, in and out of work, distributed across the lifecourse. This would help create the “learning society” which policymakers intermittently advocate. Secondly, we would think more carefully about what people need to learn to remain employable. Thirdly, we would ask more fundamental questions about what people seek from learning.

## What do older people seek from learning and work?

I have already pointed out that the reasons which people give for staying in work are very like those given for participation in adult education. What then would a curriculum aimed at wellbeing across the lifecourse look like?

Firstly, and most obviously, there would be more support for learning later in life, to enable people to continue to contribute to society, through paid and unpaid activity longer into the third age. This would aim to support personal development and social engagement as well as economic activity, recognising that individual welfare, social cohesion and economic productivity would all be better served by a more complex mix of work and non-work. Furthermore, choices about what to learn and how would be more clearly in the hands of the individual, with less intervention from the state. Since everyone is constructing a personal learning career, and these will not become more alike as people age, the best person to decide what to do and how is the individual, supported where necessary with professional advice, not merely about choice of courses, but about the implications of those choices for life and work. There would certainly be a wider and stronger range of learning in the areas where older people are now concentrated – in programmes designed to help people to keep up with ever changing technologies, and especially those which help people to remain independent into the fourth age (especially communication with remote friends and relatives, online shopping and medicine). There would also be more opportunities to study the subjects which help people to make sense of their lives through the humanities and arts.

Necessary changes include not only subject content. Although there is little evidence that age itself makes a great difference to how people learn or prefer to study, it would be particularly important to strengthen teaching and learning approaches which foster autonomy, and give people greater control over their lives. This will include more direct and explicit opportunity to build on previous experience and knowledge. It is significant that, in the largest survey ever conducted of older people’s learning, the benefit most often cited from participation was “passing on my skills and knowledge to others” (NIACE 2013). During life transitions like retirement, people are vulnerable, and need to feel, and be, in control of their lives. Learning which helps them feel in control matters and being in control of the learning is a first step.

More and better learning would help people to build a strong sense of personal identity within and beyond work, building on their experience and interest. They need to feel that they matter and are respected by others. This means that learning approaches would need to value the experience and views of all the participants, and provide opportunities for people to use and share their skills and knowledge, with their peers and across generations.

Learning opportunities would also be designed to challenge people to stretch themselves, to explore new areas and expand beyond the familiar. There is no reason to suppose that people will not respond to challenges, just because they are older.

Man is a social animal, and learning needs enable people to define themselves in relation to others, and build relationships which are supportive and rewarding. There are strong correlations between social isolation and poor health and premature mortality. Alone among public services, education brings people together in groups and builds new relationships around common interests. For people undergoing life transitions this is critical: if your identity as a worker has been removed, learning can introduce you to a group of people where you will be valued and respected and have a status which is not dependent on previous career, and which can help to create new networks of friendship.

In the final stages of life, opportunities should be there to enable people to continue to be challenged, physically and mentally. For some, the opportunity to reflect on one’s past, to tell stories and pass on experience to younger generations is an important part of the processes of withdrawal and decline in extreme old age.

Throughout this, a priority would be to promote learning which promotes individual wellbeing. Mechanisms are needed to measure and evaluate how far what is provided achieves this. Although measures of wellbeing exist, they are far from refined, and work is needed to refine them, and explore the relationship between learning and wellbeing, which is intuitively accepted by most educators, but far from clearly demonstrated.

Provision would need to take account of individual and group differences. Distinctions of social class, education, gender and race are no less real for people as they age, and indeed their impact may be greater for earlier generations. One way in which older people feel diminished and discriminated against is by grouping them together and assuming the lowest common denominator of expectations and aspirations. Whatever their previous educational level or social background, people need appropriate challenges and opportunities, but these may differ.

An important dimension of change in the last decades has been the growth of self-organised learning among older people. In different ways, the University of the Third Age, and the Men’s Sheds movement have both rapidly expanded opportunities to learn for older people, at little or no cost to the public purse (or indeed to the participants). They have also provided the opportunity for people to demonstrate and pass on skills and experience, and achieve the kind of social recognition which can be missing from everyday life for older people. Ironically, and perhaps fortunately, this growth has coincided with a dramatic withdrawal of the state form the funding and delivery of learning for adults generally, and older people in particular. The policy concern must be that these new kinds of opportunity do not necessarily attract those in greatest need.

## Conclusion

In a new model of the lifecourse, paid work would be spread over a longer lifespan, but with less intensity. There would be more time for family and community in middle life, more opportunities to move to less stressful work in a longer later working life, better opportunities to phase out and downscale with age, and better opportunities to learn to support these phases and transitions.

A much wider, more diverse, and responsive range of learning opportunities, in public, private and third sectors, could make a major contribution to achieving such a world. Learning (and work) could contribute better to the priorities which individuals experience - the search for identity, recognition and meaning, for social engagement, and the chance to use one’s skills and experience for the benefit of the wider community.

1. The term “adult education” has long been contested, and substitutes have repeatedly been adopted in a (largely vain) attempt to escape from popular preconceptions. I use the term here to embrace any kind of intentional learning by people who have left initial full time education. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The “level 2 guarantee”. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This notion of “austerity” should not be confused with the version adopted, for very different purposes by the political right. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Commission calculate that the effect of ageing will be six times larger than that of economic restructuring. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Although there are two broad models of pensions “pay as you go”, where pensions are paid out of taxes on workers, or “funded” where people save money for their retirement, which is then invested to generate an income. However, the macroeconomic effect is broadly the same: in either case, the wealth to pay pensions is generated by the economic activity of the current workforce. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ironically, these are often the same young women who a century before would have been employed in similar roles as servants. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)