LEADERSHIP, LEARNING AND DEMOGRAPHICS:
THE CHANGING SHAPE OF THE LIFECOURSE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION

Tom Schuller

OCCASIONAL PAPERS

FETL Occasional Papers are short, authoritative treatments of issues key to the leadership of thinking in further education and skills. Written by expert commentators, they are intended to inform and encourage new thinking about important topics.

FOREWORD

Dame Ruth Silver

We have known for quite some time about the likely impact of demographic change on British society. The population is ageing, as it is in many other countries in the developed world, with clear and fundamental implications for education, especially further education and skills, as well as for issues such as health, social care and pensions. Yet we have been remarkably slow to react to what will soon become an all-too-predictable crisis. It is perhaps indicative of the endemic short-termism of our politics that we have delayed our storm-planning until the black clouds are fully formed above our heads.

The problem was well understood a decade ago when Tom Schuller and the late (and much missed) Sir David Watson published *Learning Through Life,* the influential and still-relevant main report of the Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning, funded by the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (now the Learning and Work Institute). The report argued that lifelong learning policy should be based on a new model of the educational life course, with an emphasis on stage rather than age and a fair rebalancing of resources to reflect the need to support people to lead productive and fulfilling lives for longer.

Unhappily, 10 years later, we are no closer to the kind of lifelong learning society envisaged by the report. In fact, in some respects we seem to be going backwards, with resources still inequitably skewed towards young people and adult participation in learning in steep and, as yet, unarrested decline, largely as a result of cuts to funding that we remain a very long way from reversing. This new paper from Tom Schuller represents a serious and important attempt to reopen the debate about lifelong learning and demography, focusing in particular on further

education leadership. I ask that it serve as a wake-up call to the policy community and create a greater sense of urgency and purpose around an issue which has been for too long shelved as too difficult or politically inconvenient to address.

The Further Education Trust for Leadership has been delighted to support this project, and to work with Tom Schuller in developing such an interesting and thoughtful treatment of so crucial a topic. Tom is known in FE as a colleague, a writer and a thought leader. He remains one of the most acute and intelligent commentators on further education policy around and is without doubt among our most authoritative thinkers on lifelong learning. The need for a new approach to ageing and education could not be clearer. Colleges have a key role to play in developing this, and in demonstrating positive agenda-setting leadership in this area. The interviews conducted for the paper suggest that we are already beginning to do this, and that there is excellent practice to build on. I hope the paper will be well read, throughout the sector and beyond, in government and civil society, and its recommendations given careful consideration. The seriousness of these issues demands nothing less.

Dame Ruth Silver is President of the Further Education Trust for Leadership

OVERVIEW

This paper focuses on the implications of an ageing population for college leadership.

Framing the issues

A first challenge is to the way we think about ageing. It is not only that there are more old people. The whole balance of the population is changing. Existing dividing lines often use outdated categories, notably the convention of 16–64 as the boundaries of the working population. So, as an initial frame for discussion, *we need awareness of the weaknesses in existing age-based categories and labels*; and an appreciation that the *ageing of the population has implications for all age groups, in themselves and in their interaction with each other*. A comprehensive life-course framework should cover the biological, psychological and socio-economic dimensions of ageing.

Demographic context

Population profile

The population is ageing.[1] Using Office for National Statistics (ONS) categories:

- The number of *children* (defined as those aged up to 15 years) increased by 7.8 per cent to 12.6 million between 2008 and 2018.
- The *working age population* (those aged 16 to 64 years) increased by 3.5 per cent to 41.6 million between 2008 and 2018.
- The number of people aged 65 to 84 years increased by 23 per cent to 10.6 million.
- Those aged 85 years and over increased by 22.8 per cent to 1.6 million between 2008 and 2018.

[1] https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/annualmidyearpopulationestimates/mid2018

The continued ageing of the UK's population is projected to shift the median age from 39.7 years in 2010, to 39.9 years in 2020, and to 42.2 years by 2030. In 2018, the largest five-year age group consisted of people aged between 50 and 54 years of age, at 4.67 million people.

Workforce profile

Similarly, the workforce is ageing.[2]

People over the age of 50 make up around a third of the UK's workers, and two-thirds of the increase in employment since 2011. By 2020, the largest single age band of workers will be those aged 54–56 years. This is, in part, due to the ageing of our population as a whole, and, in part, to changes to behaviour and working patterns as increasing proportions of people delay retirement.

The response from education and training

Education and training system has not responded to these trends.

Opportunities for adults generally have nosedived, and participation rates likewise, including for older adults. Negative employer attitudes to those over 50 mean that training opportunities at work are sparse.

Only one in five further education (FE) students is over 45, two-thirds of all students being under 35. Universities have chosen to concentrate on young full-time students. The Open University is an outstanding exception, and the voluntary sector boasts the University of the Third Age, but, overall, the system has not faced the demographic challenge in a positive way.

Colleges can lead the way in changing this.

[2] See www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/ bulletins/employmentintheuk/july2019 and https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/work/trends/ megatrends/ageing-gracefully-workforce?utm_source=mc&utm_medium=email&utm_ content=cipdupdate-2-october.Megatrends+report&utm_campaign=cipd_update&utm_term=5108283

Agenda and action

Sections 3 and 4 of the paper spell out a set of issues, derived from work I have been doing on developing a new model of the life course. I put these for discussion (face-to-face or by phone) to a small number of college and sector leaders, chosen because I knew of their personal interest in the issue, they covered a range of positions in the sector, and I had access to them. Section 3 presents this agenda, together with the responses of college leaders. Section 4 extends the agenda to include further issues which arose during the discussions. This overview brings them together.

The goal is twofold:

- to *establish a substantive agenda* which could form the basis of a proper discussion of the educational implications of an ageing population, within colleges and for the sector as a whole;

- to put forward *concrete proposals for action,* ranging from reviewing college missions to specific initiatives at local level.

The main conclusions are as follows:

Establishing a clear and appropriate mission in the light of demographic change
It is for college leaders to ensure that colleges commit to meeting the demographic challenge by serving the population as a whole. In this context that means taking seriously the 'lifelong' in lifelong learning. They have to choose positively to do this – not every college will wish to have such a broad role. If they do, it means making it clear: in the mission statement, in the allocation of effort and resources to match the mission and in the way the curriculum is developed.

Q *Do college missions have 'lifelong' aspirations, and if so do the missions have real consequences for college commitments?*

Gathering effective local/regional intelligence

The demographic profile of the local population and workforce varies across the country. Gathering appropriate relevant information is essential and demands proper detail. Intelligence goes beyond statistics, to a proper understanding of the needs of the local population as a whole.

Q *Do college leaders have the intelligence they need to meet the demographic challenge?*

Building and supporting a range of partnerships

Partnerships are essential for the intelligence-gathering just mentioned, as well as for the design of curricula and the delivery of learning services. For older people, the NHS and other health agencies are the most obvious partners, together with voluntary sector agencies such as Age UK, but there is much scope for local innovation in partnering as colleges develop their offer. Leaders need to make sure that the commitment to partnership is understood and supported at all levels.

Q *Have colleges identified their key partners in respect of older learners, and made genuine commitments to making such partnerships flourish?*

Intergenerational work

Colleges are one of the few public places where intergenerational learning and understanding can be fostered. This may involve formal training or mentoring across age groups – including reverse mentoring from young to old – or simply providing the physical and cultural space for better interaction between students of different ages.

Q *How far are colleges taking active steps to promote intergenerational learning?*

Informing the planning of careers and transitions

Careers are not linear, and people face many and diverse transitions across their work and personal lives. Training, education and guidance all need to reflect this, identifying key transitions in relevant population groups, including movement in and out of employment in the context of longer working lives. Integrating career services for all age groups is a major responsibility, especially given its current

youth focus. An emerging challenge is helping people prepare for and manage the final phase of their lives, from retirement through to death.

Q *What are colleges doing to help people of all ages to anticipate and manage transitions in their occupational and personal lives, including the final transition?*

Enabling caring across generations

Ageing increases society's personal and professional responsibilities for caring, in many different forms and running across generations, with grandparents increasingly prominent as caregivers as well as receivers. Colleges can train care-related staff and enable carers to return to learning, but they can also most importantly provide formal and informal spaces for people with caring responsibilities to learn from each other.

Q *Are colleges prepared to cater for the diversity of caring needs, including establishing informal spaces for sharing experience?*

Changing the funding basis: towards better accountability

Adequate funding is the basic requirement for meeting the demographic challenge. The issue is not only the overall volume of funding; it's the flexibility needed to deploy funding to meet new challenges. Accountability frameworks must show this flexibility. College leaders are the right people to define these frameworks in order to give themselves the elbow-room for appropriate innovation.

Q *Can colleges identify the most important changes in funding and accountability that will allow them to meet the demographic challenge?*

Leading the conversation

Colleges are uniquely placed to meet the learning needs of an ageing population, in and beyond the labour market. College leaders should be at the forefront of any debate on the implications of demographic change: from the building of a genuinely lifelong careers service to experimentation with education-health partnerships to making public spaces available for mutual learning across generations. College leaders should be educating policymakers on the changing

needs, but also learning from each other so that the sector builds its own professional experience.

Q *Are college leaders ready to make their voices heard on the implications of demographic change?*

1. INTRODUCTION: POPULATION SHAPE-SHIFTING

There are three main drivers of change in the actual and potential shape of the college student population. The first is *demographic,* the main focus of this paper. Demographic change refers primarily to the ageing of the population, but not only to the presence of greater numbers of older people. Crucially, population ageing affects *all* age groups, though, of course, in different ways, and these impacts carry implications for education providers such as FE colleges. Ageing also brings in its train new patterns of relationships *between* generations, and these in turn throw up some interesting educational challenges.

The second driving force is *the reconfiguration of the labour market*. Historically, alarms are regularly rung about impending changes in occupational structures, the volume of jobs available and the threat of unemployment. Today, these alarms are to do with robotization, artificial intelligence and the invasion of digital technologies into almost every area of work. On top of this – and particularly relevant for the purposes of this paper – is the increasing instability and unpredictability of work: the fragmentation of employment contracts, the growth of the gig economy and the increasing deviation from full-time continuous work as the dominant model of employment. The increasing presence of women – of all ages – in the labour market plays an important role in this.

Third, there are the *cultural changes* that shape people's outlooks, attitudes and preferences in a host of ways. Of particular relevance to educators in the context of an ageing population is how people envisage their futures: what their aspirations are, how long (or short) their time horizons are – in short, how they conceive of the shape of their lives, and how they move from one phase of their lives to the next. These trajectories and transitions will heavily influence their propensity to engage in the learning opportunities that colleges offer, and come to offer in the future.

All three drivers intersect with each other, obviously, as people's family and employment circumstances shape their attitudes and outlook. The primary focus here is on the first driver, the demographic, and in the following section I provide a brief and selective overview of some of the most relevant trends. I then set out an agenda generated from these trends which I hope can provide a fruitful basis for discussion, for colleges and policymakers. The fourth section builds on this; it reports on conversations held with individuals in significant leadership positions on how they see our systems and institutions responding to the issues set out in this agenda – how they are responding now, how they might or should in the future, and what the implications are for college and sector leadership.

The underlying rationale is that those of us engaged, in whatever capacity, in providing learning across the life-course need a new framework for thinking about the demographic, labour market and cultural changes just referred to, for mapping and understanding these changes, and in turn for helping others – notably students – to understand better their own learning needs; and so for all parties to engage in the task of defining future provision – to co-design, in the jargon. We should be suspicious of out-dated categories based simplistically on chronological age.

2. THE SHIFTING DEMOGRAPHIC PICTURE AND THE EDUCATIONAL RESPONSE: 'OLDER SHOULDER' AND COLD SHOULDERING

Societies naturally use chronological age to map the ageing of the population, indeed to allocate people to categories generally. So, we draw overt, official lines at 16, 18, 21 and 25 – and then again at 60 or 65, and so on. The lines can change, but usually only erratically and with considerable creaking and groaning. The slowness of category change is, up to a point, inevitable, but there are at least two problems. The first is that the use of chronological age inevitably misallocates parts of the population – 'young' people who are not yet ready or able to move into the adult world, for example, or 'old' people who are fit and not ready to move on from their current working phase and occupation. The second problem – technical but also political – is that it is hard to get the formal boundaries changed, not just in terms of official statistics and national policy areas such as education, but more generally in public perceptions.

Many more people are living longer, in the UK and in many other countries. So there are more old people, chronologically defined. We see some adjustment to the different roles that older people may play, in society and the economy, as well as growing concern about the demands that the presence of more old people puts – legitimately – on our health and adult support services. But this awareness is not matched by decisive steps to do much about it, and specifically not much about older people as actual and potential learners.[3]

The other side of the picture is that there are relatively few younger people. The ageing of a population is not only about old people; it's about the balance between

different age groups. Younger people are involved in this in their various age groups and capacities: as citizens, as taxpayers, as workers and trainees, as care-providers and care-receivers, as employers and as fellow students. Population ageing means that the balance of personal and social services is changing, and the nature of the jobs and professions that make them up, as well as intergenerational and familial relations. It may be that 'stage' not 'age' is more significant for demarcation purposes.

In short, to get a grip on the issue, and its implications for education, we need at least two perspectives:

    a. Awareness of the limitations and weaknesses of current
       age-based categories.

    b. An appreciation that the ageing of the population has implications for
       all age groups, in themselves and in their interaction with each other.

Bearing this in mind, we can turn to a brief overview of the relevant demographic changes.

First, a brief summary of data on the *population as a whole*. The overall trends are quite well known. The two figures below show the change in the population over the last 10 years; and the projected future population in 20 years' time.[4] Both show the upward movement in the 'older shoulder'.

Here are the major changes that have already taken place in the shape of the

[4] https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/annualmidyearpopulationestimates/mid2018

Figure 1: Population pyramid for the UK, mid-2018, single year of age 0 to 89
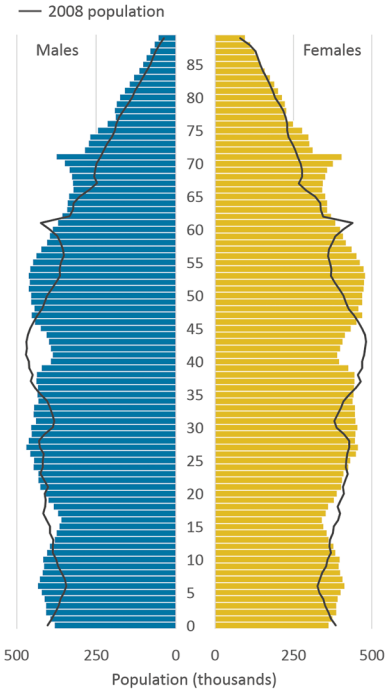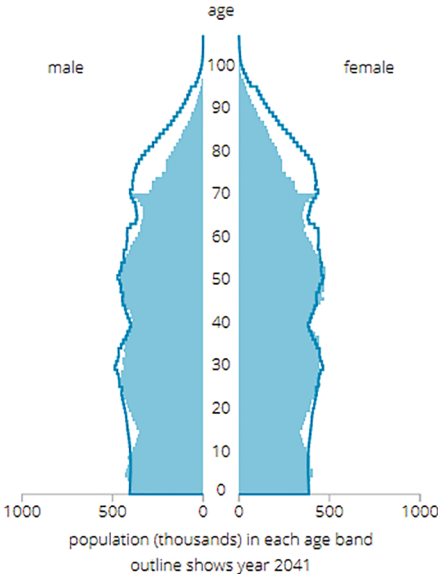

Figure 2: Age structure of the UK population, mid-2016 and mid-2041

population:

- The number of *children* (those aged up to 15 years) increased by 7.8 per cent to 12.6 million between 2008 and 2018.

- The *working age population* (those aged 16 to 64 years) increased by 3.5 per cent to 41.6 million between 2008 and 2018.

- The number of people aged *65 to 84 years* increased by 23 per cent to 10.6 million between 2008 and 2018.

- The number of people aged *85 years and over* increased by 22.8 per cent to 1.6 million between 2008 and 2018.[5]

Perhaps the most striking single figure is this: in 2018, the largest five-year age group consisted of people aged between 50 and 54 years of age, at approximately 4.67 million people. The continued ageing of the UK's population is projected to shift the median age from 39.7 years in 2010, to 39.9 years in 2020, and to 42.2 years by 2030.

The *geography of ageing* is also important: different parts of the UK are ageing at different rates. Some cities, such as Wigan, Telford and Aldershot, have seen a particularly sharp growth in the proportion of their population that is over 65.[6] Many of these ageing towns and cities have a college, but not a university. In this respect, demographic change brings a significant challenge specifically to colleges.

As for future projections, the shift towards an older population continues. I have selected the particular ONS figure below because it illustrates the official threefold life stage structure: children are defined as 0–15, working age is defined as non-

[5] https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/annualmidyearpopulationestimates/mid2018.

[6] https://www.centreforcities.org/blog/silver-cities-ageing-population-changing-urban-britain/

children who are below whatever happens to be the State Pension Age (currently projected to be 67 for both sexes in 2041); and the rest are the rest:[7]

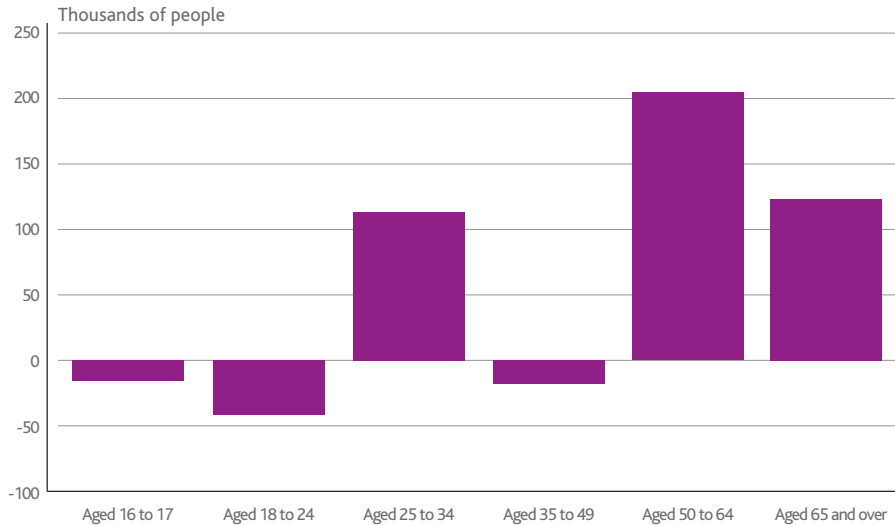**Figure 3: UK population by life stage, mid-2016 and mid-2041**
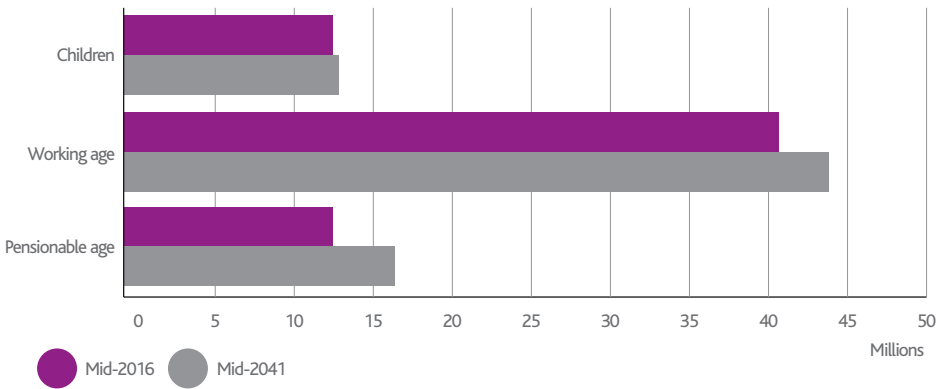
Let's look in more detail at the middle bar, to see the *changing demographic profile of the workforce*. Overall, we have today a very high estimated employment rate, at 76 per cent, of those aged 16-64. The employment rate for women in 2018 was 72 per cent, the joint highest recorded (also 16–64). Against this background, the age profile of the active workforce is changing significantly. Figure 4 from ONS shows graphically the pattern of employment increase by age:[8]

[7] https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/ populationprojections/bulletins/nationalpopulationprojections/2016basedstatisticalbulletin.

[8] www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/ employmentintheuk/july2019

Figure 4: More than half of the annual increase in the number of people in work occurred among those aged from 50 to 64 years

Changes in numbers of people in employment, seasonally adjusted, between March to May 2018 and March to May 2019

Thousands of people

| Aged 16 to 17 | Aged 18 to 24 | Aged 25 to 34 | Aged 35 to 49 | Aged 50 to 64 | Aged 65 and over |

It's not insignificant that the figure preceding this in the ONS report, on employment rates by age group, stops at age 64, and so gives no data on those aged 65+ – though it does start at 16.

As the Centre for Ageing Better recently reported:

> People over the age of 50 make up around a third of the UK's workers, but make up two thirds of the increase in employment since 2011. This is in part due to the ageing of our population as a whole – as a society we are older on average than in previous decades – but also from changes to behaviour and working patterns as increasing proportions of people delay retirement and remain in work in their 50s and beyond.[9]

<hr>

[9] www.ageing-better.org.uk/blog/where-have-record-numbers-people-employment-come

With the average age of the UK's labour force increasing over the coming decade, today's largest age band of workers is set to shift upwards from 44–46 to 54–56 by 2020.[10] As in all G20 countries, the so-called old-age dependency ratio – the proportion of people beyond working age relative to those of working age – is growing. The upper limit of the 'working age' population is set at 65, and of course the ratio would shrink if that was moved upwards.

Also as elsewhere, inequalities accumulate over the life course. 'People with low quality jobs, unstable careers and lower incomes tend to have less access to health services, and are less likely to retire with adequate income from pension systems and private asset accumulation.'[11] There is a constant educational challenge to remedy this cumulative disadvantage.

So, we have both a society and a workforce in which older people occupy a growing part, with old and new cleavages in the population. And how is the education system responding to these demographic changes? It's only marginally unfair to say that the words 'cold' and 'shoulder' come to mind.

First, a look at general adult participation in learning by age, from the Learning and Work Institute's invaluable annual survey. The overall picture is gloomy:

> In comparison with the results from previous years, 2017 has the lowest participation rate (current or recent learning) in the history of the participation survey, at 37 per cent of adults.

---

[10] Duckworth, M. et al. 2010. *Horizon Scanning and Scenario Building: Scenarios for Skills 2020.* Commissioned by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES), London. Available at: http://www.ukces.org.uk/publications/er17-scenario-for-skills2020. Cited in UKCES, The Future of Work: Jobs and Skills in 2030 (Evidence Report 84): https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/303334/er84-the-future-of-work-evidence-report.pdf

[11] See OECD, *Fiscal Challenges and Inclusive Growth in Ageing Societies,* 2019: http://www.oecd.org/g20/summits/osaka/OECD-Fiscal-challenges-and-inclusive-growth-in-ageing-societies.pdf. p14.

This is four percentage points lower than that of the previous survey, undertaken in 2015.[12]

And the persistent pattern is one of decline across the life course:

Figure 5: Participation by age
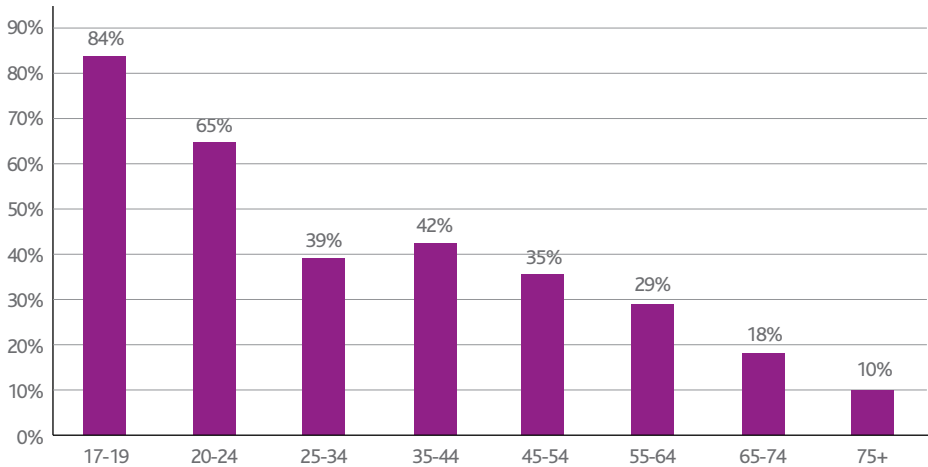
Since the 2015 survey, the largest fall by age has been a nine percentage point drop in participation for the 45 to 54 group. The survey recurrently confirms that those with least initial education participate least later on.

More specifically in respect of employee training, the latest CIPD report confirms falls in the volume of training overall, in expenditure on training, and in the proportion spent on training per employee.[13] From the college viewpoint, the drop in off-the-job training is particularly worrying, with the proportion of training taking place away from work dropping from 73 per cent in 1998 to 53 per cent in 2018. A recent Resolution Foundation report confirms the overall trend:

[12] Learning and Work Institute: https://www.learningandwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Adult-Participation-in-Learning-Survey-2017.pdf

[13] https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/addressing-employer-underinvestment-in-training_tcm18-61265.pdf.

While the proportion of people receiving 'off-the-job' training was slightly up over the past year at 6.6%, the long-term trend still shows a big fall in training intensity over the past 20 years.[14]

Older people exhibit lower levels of digital readiness than their children and grandchildren, and also participate less in job-related training than younger workers. They are particularly exposed to being laid off as a result of technological changes, and less likely to regain employment – especially if they have less education or fewer qualifications in the first place. The OECD sums it up:

> If people are to extend their working lives, they must have access to effective skills development…. Firms tend to under-invest in the training of older workers, as older workers will eventually retire and companies do not take into account the full social return of keeping senior workers active and productive.[15]

Let's turn now to the key data for the FE sector:[16]

FE and skills (includes apprenticeships, education and training, community learning)

Age	000s	%
16	342.8	10.9
17	347.7	11.0
18	219.6	7.0
19-24	569.7	18.1
25-34	598.6	19.0
35-44	443.7	14.1
45-59	453.2	14.4
60+	169.9	5.4

Those under 25 account for just under half of all enrolments: 47 per cent. Adding in the next age group shows that those under 35 account for almost exactly two-thirds of total enrolments: 66 per cent. And if we add in one more layer, we see

that those under 45 account for 80 per cent. So, just 1 in 5 FE students is over 45.

These are the overall enrolment figures. The age distribution of FE students is somewhat similar to the general pattern identified in the LWI survey, i.e. a sharp drop over the age groups – but with the exception that there is no 'bounce' for the 35–44 year olds. If the duration of study was added in the distribution would be far more skewed, as young people enrol on longer courses.

For comparison, it's worth looking across to how the HE sector does. The answer is, badly. Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) figures show that just 20 per cent of students in 2017/18 were over 30, down from 23 per cent in 2013/14:[17]

Age	2013/4		2017/18	
	000s	%	000s	%
20 and under	880.6	38	967.1	41
21-24	622.2	27	655.0	28
25-29	265.9	12	259.3	11
30+	530.4	23	461.5	20

Unlike FE, HE does not break down age over 30. We have to assume that the numbers over 45 or thereabouts are not worth bothering about, statistically speaking. Most university continuing/extramural education departments have been closed down or severely truncated; and universities' regular degree offerings are now very heavily skewed towards young fulltime students, with the kind of part-time provision that appeals to older students greatly diminished.[18]

A notable exception is the Open University: 80 per cent of its 135,000 students in

[17] https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he.

[18] See Alison Wolf, *Heading for the Precipice: can further and higher education funding policies be sustained?*, Kings College London, 2015

2018/19 were over 25, 60 per cent of them over 30, and 19 per cent over 45.[19]

Of course, there are other providers, some of whom cater specifically for older learners. The voluntary sector flourishes, in part compensating for the failure of the public system to respond to demographic change. Outstanding among these is the University of the Third Age (U3A). There are over a thousand local U3A branches in the UK, with 425,000 learners (www.u3a.org.uk/). One problem, however, is that U3A participation is in the nature of things socially unbalanced, reflecting growing inequality in the wealth and income levels of older people.

Looking at these sets of figures, one crude question occurs: how closely should enrolments and participation reflect the demographic profile? In other words, what could or should be the age distribution that policy-makers and college leaders might aim for? This is not a simple numerical issue. No one – or hardly anyone – would argue that the age profile of the FE population should exactly match that of the population as a whole. But, if not, what would count as a satisfactory or appropriate picture? Does it make sense to have a target for older age groups? If so, should this be a national figure, or one tailored to specific regions or areas?

3. GETTING TO GRIPS WITH THE DEMOGRAPHICS: AN AGENDA

Section 2 established the factual background on the ageing of the population and the workforce. In this section, I offer a list of questions designed to provide an agenda for discussion and action, derived from the earlier detail.

I used these questions as the basis for conversations held with a number of leaders in the FE sector, face-to-face or by telephone. It would be stretching things to say that the questions were fully validated by that process, but they did stand up sufficiently well for me to present them here as a possible agenda for wider discussion. In this section, I elaborate each point from that original agenda, drawing in part on the conversations with college leaders; specific further comments from those conversations are presented in Section 4.

The first question relates specifically to older people, but the ones that follow make it very clear that population ageing is not only about this age group.

i. How do we develop the *offer for older people (50+)* in:
- ### vocational training;
- ### careers advice and guidance;
- ### caring roles, including grandparenting?

I have set the age line at 50, in contradistinction to the standard categorisations used in the previous section, for instance by the ONS. In *Learning Through Life*, the final report of the Commission into the Future of Lifelong Learning which did its work 10 years ago, David Watson and I argued for a different approach to adult life stages.[20] We recognised the limitations of chronological age, but accepted its practical utility. We therefore proposed a very simple quarter-century approach, beginning with 25 as the initial starting point. We rejected the 60/65 dividing line,

instead proposing entry into a Third Age at 50, going through to 75, for a mixture of labour market and health reasons. The earlier age of 50 is because some people are already by then withdrawing from the labour market, voluntarily or not; others are starting to think about whether they will go on working as they have been, or maybe shift to a different occupation, or a new combination of paid and unpaid work or different pattern of working hours. The upper limit of 75 is a little futuristic, but as I have made clear above, many people already work beyond 65; this will certainly increase, and in a few years we are likely to see 70 being more regularly breached. Moreover, 75 is, very crudely, the age around which health problems become quite common.[21]

The first heading under this question concerns the provision of vocational training for older people. As we have seen, access to training opportunities drops off drastically for this age group, both on the job and off the job. Employers are less likely to see it as a good investment (and this is against the background of a shrinking commitment to investment in training generally), especially where off-the-job training is involved. Since colleges are mainly engaged in off-the-job provision, they may see training for older people as an area of negligible interest to them, given the low level of employer support and individual demand, in addition to inadequate public financial support. But as the workforce age profile shifts upwards, and more and more 50-year-olds look at a 20–25 year working life still ahead of them, this should change. It might mean straightforward updating of existing skills within the same job or occupation; or it might mean the learning which enables a third-ager to shift to a different position, to change occupations completely or to move to a new mix of paid and unpaid work. Both individual and organisational demand will rise; by how much depends in part on how well colleges adapt their supply.

Moreover increasing numbers of older people are self-employed, or starting up their

[21] For further elaboration of the rationale, see *Learning Through Life,* Chapter 5, 'A new model for the educational life course'.

own businesses as entrepreneurs.[22] These are a valuable component of the economy as a whole, and especially for local economies. There is a strong learning dimension: shifting to self-employment and starting up a business generate particular training demands, technical and personal, which colleges are well placed to meet.

The ageing of the population has major implications for the demand for skills and services, which then translates into vocational training demand. We will need more care workers, occupational therapists and others who work in providing health and care services for older people. These services may be provided by people of any age, including older people themselves. Information on occupations likely to grow will be important.

Evidently closely linked to this is the case for careers advice and guidance tailored to the needs of this age group. Mid-life career reviews have been strenuously argued for,[23] but we come straight up against one of the most evident age-distortions of the current system, as careers advice has retreated into a niche activity reserved for young people mostly in schools and colleges. Adults in certain ESFA-restricted priority groups can access a National Careers Service but for the majority of adults this is a hidden resource.[24]

Granted that the 'we'll all have to change jobs several times' argument has over decades been overplayed, it nevertheless looks very likely that more and more people will change occupations repeatedly in the course of an extended working life. So it is dysfunctionally strange to exclude the majority of adults from advice

[22] See for example, Institute of Directors, *The Age of the Older Entrepreneur,* 2017: https://www.iod.com/Portals/0/PDFs/Campaigns%20and%20Reports/Start%20ups/Older-Entrepreneur-Report-IoD.pdf

[23] Notably by the former National Institute for Adult Continuing Education. See Stephen McNair, *Mid-Life Career Reviews,* NIACE 2015: http://www.stephenmcnair.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/MLCR-report-on-main-project-outcomes-Final.pdf. See also Centre for Ageing Better, Developing the Mid-Life MOT, 2018: https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2018-10/Developing-the-Mid-life-MOT-report.pdf

[24] ESFA Annual Report 2018: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/819926/P3297_ESFA_Annual_Report_FINAL_Web_single_pages.pdf. I am grateful to Deirdre Hughes for this point.

and guidance on what they are going to do.

'Career' is a complex and contentious term. Fewer people now follow a conventional ladder-like pathway. This is especially the case for women (and has always been so), and since they now form nearly half the workforce, and are generally better qualified than men, rethinking our models of what 'career' means is long overdue.[25] For third-agers, it may well involve shifting to part-time paid employment and combining this with unpaid work.[26] In any event, careers advice for older workers, paid and unpaid, has an urgent claim on college time.

This in turn takes us to the third component: caring. Of course, this is not restricted to older people, but increasing numbers of them have caring responsibilities, for older or young generations. The role of grandparents as carers is growing significantly.[27] It has major economic significance, especially in enabling dual-earner and single-parent households to manage their complex lives. I am not suggesting that colleges go in for formal training for this kind of carer in a big way, but offering space for older carers to exchange experiences could be a quite significant function. This is the kind of informal peer learning that colleges could foster and enable, with huge benefits all round.[28]

---

[25] See Tom Schuller, *The Paula Principle: how women lose out at work and what could be done about it,* 2017, and Avivah Wittenberg-Cox and Alison Maitland, *Why Women Mean Business,* John Wiley, 2008.

[26] In *Extra Time: 10 lessons for an Ageing World* (2019), Camilla Cavendish argues against thinking of part-time work as particularly suitable for older people, on the grounds that it marginalises their contribution. I look at it the other way round: we should cease to look at part-time work as marginal, and a major beneficiary group would be older people, of both sexes.

[27] See a recent (27 July 2019) tweet from Scotland Learning @SLPLearn: 'We look after our grandchildren because their parents have to work & without our family learning sessions we just wouldn't manage, not now my wife's less able. We wished for new things to do with them & now have a whole community helping us.' https://twitter.com/slplearn/status/1155749542681350144?s=11. See also Carolyn Hutchison, *Building Families and 'Learning to Be': Grandparents' Care for Babies and Toddlers in Scotland,* EdD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2018.

[28] The report pf the NIACE commission led by Baroness Sharp of Guildford in 2011, *The Dynamic Nucleus: Colleges at the heart of their communities,* comments on the important role colleges have in hosting learning in these kinds of ways. https://www.aoc.co.uk/sites/default/files/A%20dynamic%20nucleus.%20Colleges%20at%20the%20heart%20of%20local%20communities._0.pdf

ii. How do we develop greater capacity in young people (under 50) to manage longer lives – their own and others?

Now we switch back across the age-50 boundary, with a similar learning agenda but leaving aside the core education and training mission for this age group. Both longer lives and longer working lives have implications for the learning needs of people below 50.

Some of these will be immediately recognisable: employability over the longer-term, the capacity to change and move on occupationally, the ability to adapt to technological change. But I'm thinking here more of lifespan issues, of the kind identified by authors such as Linda Gratton and Andrew Scott.[29] Some of these have already been touched on, notably the question of caring for oneself and others. But there are others which impinge strongly on how well people manage their lives, and on how much they contribute to society.

Most evidently, there are issues around personal finance. The state pension system in the UK has been considerably reinforced in recent years – one definite cheer. But employers have increasingly withdrawn not only from lifetime employment but also from the provision they used to make for their employees' old age, through occupational pensions. Auto-enrolment in pensions is progressing quite well, in part balancing out the ensuing insecurity. Yet increased life expectancy poses major challenges to individuals' sense of financial security – or if it doesn't, it probably should. These challenges can and should be met and overcome, with the right support. Increasingly, planning for old age becomes a matter of personal responsibility. The issues are complex and often quite scary, especially for a UK population that is notoriously short on numeracy skills, and this poses the question of what colleges could or should be doing to help people plan ahead.

---

[29] Gratton, L. and Scott, A. 2016. *The Hundred Year Life*. Bloomsbury.

It is worth reiterating how far we are from equipping people with the skills needed to manage these extended lives. To take just one basic competence:

> Financial illiteracy is particularly a concern when planning for retirement. Across G20 economies, only about 60% of households on average are using a budget. Adults have also difficulties to set long-term goals and strive to achieve them… Basic financial concepts such as interest compounding or applied numeracy need to be strengthened across the population, especially for women, and could be made part of core education curricula.[30]

iii. How does gender affect all of the above, e.g. in a) older women's increasing economic activity; and b) women's increasing preponderance in learning?

Almost all of the issues discussed so far have a strong gender dimension. Older women's economic activity rates have been increasing faster than men's (from a lower base). They are more likely to have caring responsibilities, of both (grand) children and parents (-in-law). Their earnings diverge from men's most substantially from 40 onwards, and they carry this earnings penalty over into a longer life. They are very much more likely to be poor in old age.

At the same time, women carry over into adulthood their greater propensity to learn in youth (the above remark on financial literacy notwithstanding). They participate more in most forms of adult learning, both vocational and non-vocational. From this two questions follow: a) how to give women's competences, qualifications and skills a proper value in the labour market (mainly an issue for employers rather than colleges);[31] and b) whether there should be particular efforts to stimulate greater demand for learning amongst

---

[30] OECD, 2019, p. 42.

[31] See e.g. Gracie, C., *Equal: a story of women, men and money,* 2019; and Schuller, T., *The Paula Principle*.

older men, given their relatively low propensity to participate in education? If so, a follow-on question is, what do we know about successful initiatives in this field?

iv. Can we develop provision for those *in or approaching the Fourth Age/dependency,* to foster:

- **Physical and mental health**
- **Social participation**
- **The management of the last phase of their lives?**

In *Learning Through Life* we pointed out how negligible the resources devoted to the Fourth Age are – barely 1 per cent of the aggregate public and private expenditure on adult learning.[32] The assumption seems to be that people more or less give up on learning after 75. Certainly, it is true that their physical mobility tends to be less so they are less able to travel to learn. But given what we know about the benefits of learning to physical and mental health, and to the maintenance of some degree of independence, it is perverse to ignore the potential for continued learning, even as a matter of straight economic efficiency, for example via its demonstrated contribution to reducing the strain on health services.[33] Quite apart from the cognitive effects, learning can be a vehicle for social interaction which brings its own very tangible benefits, especially to people who may otherwise have little interaction with the world outside.

Also under this heading is the still largely taboo subject of preparation for death and the lead up to it. Death studies is now established in one or two universities as a subject of academic research,[34] and there is a growth of informal

---

[32] Schuller, T. and Watson, D. *Learning Through Life*, Ch 4.

[33] See, for example, UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning. 2016. *The Impact of Adult Learning and Education on Health and Well-Being; Employment and the Labour Market; and Social, Civic and Community Life: Third Global Report on Adult Learning and Education,* Hamburg, UIL.

[34] See for example https://www.bath.ac.uk/research-centres/centre-for-death-society/

activities such as death cafés which help people (of any age) to think about and discuss death-related issues in a secure setting. But there is little if any organised preparation for this final transition – which can be very extended – as part of our lifelong learning curriculum. Such preparation could run from the intensely practical (getting one's finances in order, sorting out wills and advanced directives) to the deeply philosophical (the meaning of the life one will shortly finish). The trend towards technologically-driven prolongation of life makes this a difficult and urgent area for public education, at several levels.

I doubt that death-related learning figures in any college curriculum or planning, even under a more discreet label. Similarly, it is doubtful that preparing for transition from active third age to the less independent fourth age features in what is offered – though I'd be delighted to be proved wrong. The question is whether it should be on the planning horizon, for individuals and for colleges and other providers.

v. What are the key *transition points* in the lives of students/potential students, e.g. between stages in their careers, or moving from employment to self-employment?

Death is the final transition. There are many others which precede it, whether they are formally marked or not. Entry into employment is an early one – now often a very extended transition as young people pass through various stages of apprenticeship and temporary employment. There are many others, related or not to employment, which pose personal challenges of very diverse kinds.

The shift to self-employment is one example of this which happens to figure prominently among older people. It's sometimes moot whether 'self-employment' is simply a convenient category to cover what is in effect withdrawal from the labour market. But if we want people to make a success of this move, there are significant implications for learning, ranging from

technical ones such as tax status and other bureaucratic issues to more personal ones about managing the transition from an employed status and personal management.

As with other issues on the agenda, managing transitions is not only about older people. Transitions between 'stages' that are not, on the whole, age-related are very significant. Prisoners who look to reintegrate themselves into life outside face a particularly set of challenges, where colleges could arguably be much more involved. The asylum seeker who, after a certain period, may be allowed to work if their case still has not been resolved The same is true for people who are coming out of addiction. These are important life-course transitions which have lasting consequences.

vi. What scope is there for colleges to foster *intergenerational learning?*

We live in increasingly segmented societies, by age as well as other factors. There are probably fewer places and spaces now where people from different generations can come together and learn from and about each other. Arguably, the family is one such, with more equal conversations between parents and children. But the public spaces are shrinking.

The issue is relevant to employment as well as to society more generally. The UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) *Future of Work* report pointed to the emergence of a multi-generational workplace:

> The future workplace will be multi-generational, with four generations working side-by-side. Traditional notions of hierarchy and seniority will become less important. The skills for leading and managing the four-generational workforce, and for facilitating collaboration across multiple generations and their values, will be in increasing demand.[35]

[35] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/jobs-and-skills-in-2030

If we accept that learning together is one of the best ways of establishing common bonds building and mutual respect, the logic is that we should commit time and effort to thinking about how to bring this about.

4. CONVERSATIONS WITH LEADERS: FUTURE CHALLENGES

The agenda in Section 3 was broadly endorsed by college leaders as relevant and appropriate – a possible base for strategic discussion at board level. Here I report in rather more detail on the conversations with individuals who either lead or have led institutions in the FE sector, or have some other relevant leadership role. They are listed in the appendix, and I am grateful to them all.

I sent each leader beforehand the agenda presented in the previous section in order to structure our discussions and to seek implicit endorsement of it as an agenda, though the conversations did not necessarily follow this structure. I prefaced these by stressing that I was looking for the leadership implications rather than specific curriculum proposals.

Several leaders observed that the agenda was not one they had been brought to look at in much detail up to now. They were all personally aware of the broad demographic trends, yet had generally not found the space or opportunity to consider the implications. The brutally simple explanation is that colleges have been under such direct financial pressure, and the pressures of accountability through Ofsted, that their leaders do not have the time to consider alternative proactive strategies, but it's a reminder of how hard it is to develop a future agenda.

The response from East Sussex College put it this way:

> The LLD [leadership, learning and demographics] questions are ones that not many colleges are asking themselves, but they should be... [This is a] critical area of public education policy that is not developed well enough, but needs to be included in future adult learning strategies given the ageing population (and the healthy ageing grand challenge in the Industrial Strategy).

Nevertheless, as some of the inputs below make clear, there is some excellent innovative thinking and practice already going on. Predictably, the responses varied greatly in the particular emphases the leaders placed on the different issues. However, several clear, if intersecting, themes emerged as key to getting to grips with the demographic challenge. These may be seen as complementing the agenda of the previous section.

A. Establishing a clear and appropriate mission

Mission statements are often derided, sometimes deservedly so, as a confection of fine-sounding but vacuous words. Yet, they can be a meaningful guide to institutional values, behaviours and priorities. Even if the actual mission statement has to be so short that it cannot convey much, the mission itself, as endorsed by the governing body, should be explicit as to the kinds of commitment being made. The mission statement itself can come first, as a kind of lodestar, or it might simply be the best summary of a process of deciding what the institution's priorities are.

So a basic condition is that a commitment to lifelong learning is part of the college mission, where lifelong means just that.

> At institutional level, this means making sure that your mission clearly and emphatically includes lifelong learning as a purpose. So Bath's mission defines it as a community college, serving the local population as a whole. Without such an explicit mission, it's all too easy to let slip all the broader activities which deal with the population as a whole. So, *leadership (especially from governors) means getting a very clear mission statement that gives priority to lifelong learning in a changing demographic*.

Fircroft College's mission is very clearly about social justice (more specifically, 'to promote social justice by providing adults with an excellent learning environment for personal, professional and political development'). This needs continuous re-interpretation – for instance, in-work poverty is a big issue now, which is very different from its traditional concerns with white male working-class occupations. So, the leadership challenge here is *to reinterpret the existing mission*.

A commitment to lifelong learning does not have to turn a college into a community college as such. It means that the decision-making process reflects the commitment to learning for all age groups – and of course the acid test is the allocation of funds.

> The funding cuts, especially to the adult budget, have narrowed people's minds, and their focus. At times of contraction, people fall into two camps: those who implement the cuts, according to given formulae; and the much smaller number who go back to *rethink purpose and goals*. East Sussex has sought to preserve adult education and so to place itself in the second category.

It has done this partly through a subcontracting model (see below on partnerships).

A commitment to lifelong learning also does not mean committing to providing a full curriculum across all age groups. One key challenge for leaders is in deciding what the distinctive contribution of colleges should be. On some areas, the market – understood as both commercial providers and also voluntary sector bodies such as U3A – does quite well, and there is less reason for publicly funded colleges to intervene. Colleges should probably focus their publicly funded provision more on the poorer end. By contrast, there is a danger of being seen as too focused on disadvantaged – a 'one-note piano'. It's a question of balance, locally interpreted.

A brilliant question was put to Leicester College by some Maori educators visiting some years ago: *As a result of coming to this college, how many more people will come to your funeral?* For them, the key test was what contribution a college makes to friendship and community bonds – an important civic role. The criteria question reappears in the section on funding below.

B. Gathering local/regional intelligence.

Section 2 posed the question of just how nearly provision should match the age profile of the population, and the answer has to be, not too rigidly. But there needs to be some relationship between provision and population profile. Age is only one dimension of this and, to repeat, the ageing of the population is not only about there being more old people.

The demographics will vary greatly according to geographical location. From the college leader angle, *the process of defining goals and purpose has to have the right inputs*, in the shape of data on the local population and labour market, and effective analysis of that data so that governors and directors can reach appropriate decisions. For some, to say this is annoyingly obvious; but given the overall mismatch between demography and provision, one of the missing components may be exactly this kind of input.

East Sussex College has done its own analysis of relevant population changes. They draw on national analyses by UKCES 2030; the JCP; and the Augar Review on post-school funding. This was backed up by local demographic analysis, which breaks up the local population, current and projected ahead in 10 and 15 years, by age groups up to and including 85+. Other colleges, as they decide their priorities, will have similar detailed data available to them. It's not just demographic statistics but information about the community that counts. This can often only be gained from outreach and partnership work (see next heading). One cost of the withdrawal from community outreach work has been the loss of just such intelligence-gathering.

C. Building partnerships

A range of partnerships is a necessary condition for a college to succeed in the community/lifelong learning mission. Bath has partnerships with local employers and businesses, but also with community organisations; different departments in the local authority; mental health services; housing associations; and probably many others. So *leadership means opening up the space for such partnerships, and ensuring that they flourish*.

Employer and vocational linkages take different forms. East Sussex College is starting to put parts of its vocational training outside into the community; for example, the hospitality and catering is going out into a local commercial environment. For the same college, in the context of an ageing population, careers advice is an example of where it is important to work with the voluntary sector.

Partnering includes learning from each other. In particular, colleges can learn a lot from the charity sector – good charities are very focussed on getting things done. There are also obvious partnerships with the NHS on mental health issues, including promoting mental acuity for an ageing population. Leaders need to show they are learning from their partners.

The links to health were universally referred to. For the London South Eastern Group of Colleges (LSEC), community involvement through community learning or volunteering is one of the most important ways to improve physical and mental health older, particularly for people who have lost their spouse:

> As LSEC becomes more community focused as a social enterprise we need to invest more into this kind of adult and community learning programmes.

Colleges have large fixed costs, and for efficiency reasons – delivering wrap-around services at reasonable cost – they are going to have to learn to work with

partners in the community that have lower fixed costs. It's a mix of increasing accessibility and adding value. These partnerships should be *scaleable,* for instance with Age UK to meet the challenge of social isolation.

Partnerships will become increasingly central in relation to services for older people. An approach which integrates lifelong learning with social care may be a counsel of perfection but is needed in order to frame the argument properly. Partnerships between colleges and private care homes are important for older people's opportunities, in addition to collaboration with the NHS. There are many private providers, such as drama groups, which might be part of a coordinated programme.

Partnership does not necessarily come easy. One obstacle, in the context of careers guidance, is this: as a consequence of marketization, colleges are under-funded – many find it difficult to collaborate and share information as they need to retain their competitive edge.

If these linkages are to work, the community focus needs to be owned at all levels. Getting staff buy-in is crucial, especially in order to make the partnerships work. Staff have to understand the mission, and have the capacity to handle devolved budgets with reference to it. So *leadership means enabling/empowering staff to implement the mission*.

In line with the need for local and regional information and context is the need for colleges to be able to experiment and innovate – to forge their own pathways but to be able to monitor and evaluate what works, and to share this, as 'nimble' institutions.

D. Careers and transitions: Planning and fluidity

A previous FETL report focussed on two specific transitions: returning to work after childcare, and retirement. The report contains several important and relevant recommendations which are congruent with this one, notably for

colleges to develop age-appropriate curricula, and for an entitlement to career reviews as part of age- and stage-appropriate guidance.[36]

We are in a much more *fluid* context when it comes to the changing nature of careers and options for the future:

> We are witnessing a blurring of boundaries in many facets of life, and the implications for careers are that they become multidirectional.

So, college leaders need to extend career dialogue as part of the breadth of their programmes, building in career management skills[37] for individuals of all ages. Careers guidance for older people should be developed alongside the implementation of the National Retraining Scheme,[38] with the collaboration of social partners. We need a strong professional spine for a lifelong career guidance system, supporting embedded careers guidance in educational institutions, in workplaces and in the community.

Can the role of careers advisers extend to older people? Are they able to go beyond advising young people on specific initial occupational paths, and advise on the general state of the labour market for people at different ages and stages of life; for second and third careers, and on self-employment? The answer at present is hardly at all because of a restricted focus on certain target groups and government cuts in careers adviser posts in England.

Some transitions are becoming more extended and more blurred, such as the extended transitions which young people can experience, sometimes perilously open-ended, with the risk of them being trapped in low-skill work. Other transitions for young people include students in care coming to the end of their

---

[36] Aldridge, F., Tyers, C., Smeaton and Klenk, H. 2019. *Learning at Life Transitions,* FETL.

[37] http://www.elgpn.eu/publications/elgpn-concept-note-cms

[38] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-retraining-scheme

time in care, and disabled students reaching the end of their health plan. Can colleges show the way in enabling paths out from such complex or extended transitions?

At the other end of the working life, we confront a reverse transition, from employment to whatever the next stage is. Several leaders observed that 'leaving work' would be an ideal type of transition where a few pilots could be run to gather experience on the kinds of advice and learning experiences that could be profitably offered.

How far can such transitions be anticipated and planned for – and is there a role for colleges in this? For the under-50s, issues of future planning are becoming increasingly important as employers abdicate any responsibility, both for a stable employment future and for pensions. This links to the need for better financial literacy from an early age. It also connects to people's conception of career shapes: do they recognise the changing trajectories of careers, with the growth of part-time and gig work? Careers services should address this by sector, recognising the great variation that exists across sectors and local settings. One leader raised the question of *inheritances* and how to manage these: how to use capital which arrives late in life, notably through the sale of a deceased parent's property. This is a further challenge to financial literacy, and also links to the issue of 'final phase management'.

Many transitions are not particularly age-related. There are very large numbers of individuals with English language needs who confront specific transitions, e.g. from asylum-seeker to refugee status, and the differing entitlements to funding for learning from the state.

> Where the state decides on the change of citizenship status, isn't there a state responsibility to make sure this is manageable, including ensuring that access to education (and in this case vital English language) to enable them to access and contribute to society and the economy. Access to and eligibility for education and training should not be blocked by the state?

For people transitioning from drugs into rehab:

> Even before they come to the college, they have already been on
> something of a transition, and as a result they are faced with 'That's
> no longer my reality – so what is my reality now?'

A key shift is towards a desire to give back, as a motivation for learning and moving into a new phase. This is true of ex-prisoners and addicts, and maybe also more generally.

The combination of an ageing population and the growth of the gig economy has particular gender implications. While women might benefit from the general flexibility, it may also lead to further division/segmentation. There are now many women who are the primary breadwinners. Since older women are one of the fastest growing segments of the labour force, there is gradual increasing awareness of the implications of the menopause as a transitional period. The CIPD in particular has drawn attention to this as an issue for employers managing their staff.[39]

One very sobering thought on transitions and their potential costs came from Fircroft: they are aware that women progressing in their own lives through education can provoke domestic violence, as their partner sees them moving on and feels unable to move with them.

We can all agree that simplistic universal notions of career paths are inappropriate. The challenge is to present better alternative models. We need to get away from staircase/ladders, especially in relation to levels of learning: people might need to add several qualifications at the same level, rather than necessarily progressing upwards. One original proposal was for a staged approach: 5–10-year cycles with key transition points and identified options so that people can plan one or two transitions ahead.

[39] https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/culture/well-being/menopause

At City Capital College, they think in terms of making the 'lifelong' commitment to be one to the college itself, as well as to learning. In other words, they hope that their students will come back again and again, at different points in their careers. Obviously this is something which already happens on occasion, but the idea is that it should be more systematically developed.

Finally, more than one leader talked about the need for new *role models* for people at different ages. A good question to put, maybe as part of a civics approach for students and their 'personal, social, welfare' dimensions of curriculum: 'Who do you admire/aspire to emulate at age 50/60/70/80/90, and how might you prepare to have that kind of future for those age phases?'.

E. Caring and sharing

Caring responsibilities have always impinged on the FE student population. These responsibilities are now changing and increasing in tandem with general demographic change. The most striking feature is the growth of grandparental caring, including the huge cost to the public if people withdrew from these caring roles. There are several aspects to this.

The first is the need to extend flexibility for learners to reflect these responsibilities. Colleges already have suitable flexible-learning arrangements in place for single mothers, people currently working and carers, so facilitating grandparenting could be a natural step. A proposal from East Sussex to include digital training as part of grandparenting builds similarly on existing practice in family learning/parenting (and would also promote intergenerational learning).

Second is the issue of substantive provision specifically for grandparents (or those with similar roles). Several leaders referred to *colleges as potentially providing safe spaces for carers to come together,* to share their experiences and support each other, as peer mutual learning. This would not be 'training' in the formal sense, but there could be some guidance on how carers can and should set boundaries, for instance to cope with potential exploitation. Just making

facilities available, such as a grandparenting room where people can share thoughts on the challenges and skills of grandparenting (and the rewards) would be a positive step.

The issue of caring links to several other themes. It takes us back to *mission definition,* and how far colleges see themselves as *committed to informal learning.* It has obvious links to partnership, with scope for working with the LA and with the health authority. And it opens up scope for intergenerational learning, for instance with spaces where MOOC students of different ages can meet to discuss what they are learning.[40]

'Safe spaces' also suggests how colleges might enable new approaches to managing the Fourth Age when health is failing, and indeed the final phase of life. They might, for instance, provide a space where people could come together to talk around the issues arising from thinking about having care at home or moving into residential care, and about dying and death (as death cafes do in the informal sector). Many people might half-face these issues but not know how to deal with them, and be more comfortable dealing with them in a non-family environment. There could also be space for legal firms to advise on will-making and on financial and legal management of later-life issues.

F. Developing intergenerational understanding.

On the intergenerational front, East Sussex College aims to work with employers to identify older workers and retrain them as coaches/mentors to pass on vocational training (employers and provides could employ them). Their construction training provides a wonderful example of win-win in response to demographic change: they enable older construction workers, who can no longer do such physical work but are able to instruct on site, to become trainers of younger entrants. This keeps the older staff in employment, and makes the

---

[40] See Marc Freeman, *How to Live Forever,* 2019, for some interesting examples of intergenerational collaboration.

course more viable for the college as hiring younger instructors would be much more expensive. However, another leader observed that colleges need to make sure their teaching staff have high-level industry skills to deliver to the peak of the sector and who actively want to be dual professionals:

> What we are not seeking is people who are looking for transition to retirement type role.

Several leaders responded very positively to the idea of more intergenerational work. For instance, courses for young sports students could involve supporting older clients with health and exercise programmes and coaching, or older people (50+) working with 30–40s coaching them on the next phases and what to prepare for. Collaborative inter-generational initiatives offer a way forward in retaining and reconceptualising the notion of maximizing the nation's talent pool.[41]

G. Changing the funding basis: towards better accountability.

We began this section with the importance of a mission definition to shape the allocation of funds to learning across the life-course. A universal concern was with the way that current funding was not only inadequate in overall volume but also constrained the effective use of available funds. Leaders are committed to the higher purposes of learning and making a positive difference to their local communities and where education takes their students but they can feel conflicted because of the overriding pressures of the funding and inspection accountabilities.

One immediate aspect is the underspend currently occurring within the adult education budget because the rules are too rigid and funding is tied too tightly to the acquisition of particular qualifications. In spite of this there are some opportunities for growth funding, with the arrival of Combined Authorities. At Capital City College, they recognised that when it comes to fully funded

---

[41] Ford, G. 2005. *Am I Still Needed? Guidance and Learning for Older Adults.* University of Derby, Centre for Guidance Studies Report.

provision for people on low incomes the uplift in the threshold level to £19K was a step forward, but the funding rules are still a major constraint. At one campus, they have removed financial barriers by offering free education up to Level 2 for all over-50s, and this has been very successful.

More generally, several leaders wanted to see greater discretion in the use of public funds. At present accountability is all about what happens in the college and student destinations with an emphasis on destinations for younger people. The notion that 20 per cent – or even 10 per cent – of the allocation be allowed for discretionary purposes commands considerable support.[42] This might be too ambitious, but even 5 per cent would open things up for vital innovation to meet the demographic challenges. This raises the question of *how to reconcile such discretionary funding with appropriate accountability?* Much depends on the trust levels. It would be preferable to avoid narrow performance indicators (PIs), and to rely instead on the college providing a good narrative of what they are trying to do. Trust is essential in order to pre-empt the idea that colleges can just produce glossy paragraphs with no substantive commitment. So, leaders need to provide a convincing framework which goes well beyond listing PIs, such that college principals think about more than ticking the ILR boxes. It's about *creating a safe space for innovations which are locally appropriate;* and then finding ways of spreading the lessons.

One leader made a specific proposal to link accountability with the different life-stage model put forward in *Learning Through Life.* It would certainly be worth colleges presenting the four-stage life-course approach as a positive educational strategy and clear curriculum intent, demonstrating how they are making a difference across the life course and for their communities. Ofsted should not be uninterested in such curriculum intent. As exempted charities, colleges could include a statement of public benefit in the annual reports that connects with the four life stages in their local communities.

---

[42] The proposal was first made by Alan Tuckett in a paper for the 2005 Foster Review of the role of FE colleges, titled 'The Untidy Curriculum: Adult learners in further education'.

H. Leading the conversation

Leadership goes beyond the institution. The role of college leaders also includes, with their membership bodies, informing and influencing the state and national policy development. Typical observations included:

> Our job is not just to run the institution but to get our heads above the parapet, start the conversations, bring in the people who have ideas about current and future trends.

> We have lost our consciousness of lifelong learning as an organising perspective, so a fundamental challenge is opening up again the whole space of adult education. A *key message for leaders to articulate is that the local community matters;* colleges, together with their partners, need to go back to basics and relearn how to give the local community a voice.

> The sector doesn't have a conversation about its purpose, at least not in relation to social justice. Ethical aspects are now very underplayed.

There are a number of contradictory policies across government departments which can, probably unintentionally, inhibit education, training and retraining. Leaders of colleges can draw attention to these. For example, HMRC's current policy is that tax relief can be claimed for the costs of initial training for a first career for the self-employed, but retraining for a second career is not eligible for tax relief. Arguments need to be heard for the all-age careers service:

> FE leaders need to get stuck in and actively shape the service in England. There is no highly visible EFSA Board member who publicly speaks on behalf of the National Careers Service.

CONCLUDING NOTE

Section 3 set out an agenda for colleges, generated by the demographic challenge of an ageing population. This section has presented additional responses prompted by such an agenda. They are synthesised in the Overview.

Several of my interlocutors made the point that now is a real moment for leadership on these issues. Multiple bodies have put forward or are in the process of formulating recommendations for lifelong learning: the Liberal Democrat and the Labour Party commissions on lifelong learning,[43] the Association of Colleges Commission on the College of the Future,[44] and the Centenary Commission which harks back to the 1919 Commission on Adult Education.[45] These bodies have different emphases but there is a very evident common concern with a different distribution of learning opportunities across the life course. Most specifically, the Augar report on post-school education provides a major opportunity for opening up the agenda, with its formal commitment to a better balance between further and higher education.[46] Augar was commissioned by government; an initial challenge is to prevent his report being summarily dismissed by the change in government. But this is inherently a long-term issue: the changing demographic picture needs given adequate attention in the debate which should follow all this work. Longer lives give lifelong learning a new meaning – and not only those at the further end of it.

APPENDIX

Leaders interviewed

Henry Ball
Chair of governors of East Sussex College Group; previously head of Lewes College, and regional director of the LSC.

Toni Fazaeli
Recent chair of governors at North Warwickshire and South Leicestershire College, governor at Mid Kent College, and trustee at The Bell Foundation.

Susan Fey
Former Vice Principal of Barking and Dagenham Adult Education College, Principal of Morley College in Lambeth, and CEO of the City Technology Colleges Trust.

Mick Fletcher
FE consultant, non-executive director of RCU, and a founder member of the Policy Consortium.

Deirdre Hughes
Director of dmh associates and Associate Fellow, University of Warwick, Institute for Employment Research

Melanie Lenehan
Principal, Fircroft College

Mark Malcomson
Principal, The City Literary Institute

Roy O'Shaughnessy
CEO, Capital City College Group, and senior colleagues.

Sam Parrett
Group Principal and CEO, London South East Colleges.

Carole Stott
Chair of governors at Bath College, and formerly Chair of the Association of Colleges.