# LATER-LIFE LEARNING AT UNIVERSITIES THREE QUESTIONS TO JANICK NAVETEUR

**Kathleen O'CONNOR**
**Janick NAVETEUR**
University of Lille, France

Email: kathleen.o-connor@univ-lille.fr

**Interview**

*The global issue of population ageing is most prevalent in Europe, where approximately 20% of the population is over 65 and where life expectancy has hit 81.7 years (Eurostat, 2024a, 2024b). The fact that more people are living to an advanced age is a success particularly attributable to better living conditions and developed healthcare systems. However, what some see as a positive development also gives rise to negative and pessimistic discourse among others. In addition to widespread individual anxiety about losing personal autonomy in later life, an ageing society is often considered to be the source of many economic problems, particularly those related to increased health and pension expenditures within the context of a reduced working-age population.*

*While this ageing society view focuses on changes in population structure, the less pessimistic perspective on a longevity society explores changes that occur during the lifespan and the exploitation of life-expectancy gain (Scott, 2021). Other interesting views consider that the economic challenge could be managed by decreasing the severity of diseases and disabilities linked to ageing (Manton, 1982) or by delaying their onset (Fries, 1980). A key point to emphasise in line with these approaches is the malleability of ageing, including through education.*

*In 18 EU27 countries, more than 25% of people aged 55 to 64 have completed tertiary education (Eurostat, 2024c), with an increase in this figure anticipated in the coming years. Given this trend, a few considerations deserve attention. Research findings show that "the more education people have, the more education they want, and the more they participate in further learning activities" (Cross, 1981: 15). Such a pattern of educational engagement is crucial, since later-life learning contributes to the compression of morbidity (i.e., the postponement of illness and disability into a shorter period at the end of life) by promoting mental and physical wellbeing and preventing cognitive decline (Narushima et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2025). Policymakers have taken into account the scientific evidence for this, shaping recommendations that are guided by these findings. Indeed, the United Nations Principle 4 for Older Persons (1991: 2) stipulates that they "should have access to appropriate educational and training programmes." The interpretation of "appropriate" is rendered multi-faceted by the heterogeneity of this population. Nevertheless, opportunities for post-secondary education for older learners are in line with this strategic direction and the large proportion of people now potentially receptive to such offers mitigates the concern of a "Matthew effect."*

Citation: O'Connor, K., Naveteur, J., (2025) ***Later-life learning at universities. Three questions to Janick Naveteur***. European Journal of University Lifelong Learning, 9(2), pp 99-104. © **eucen**, 2025. DOI https://doi.org/10.53807/09026XP4

*Janick Naveteur is Emeritus Senior Lecturer at the University of Lille, where she co-directed a professional training programme for middle managers in gerontological coordination. With a biopsychosocial approach to ageing, she explored the challenges of education for older adults at the university level and led the Erasmus+ project "Active Ageing Academic Certificate (3AC): Towards a European university course dedicated to older learners." She is a member of the research unit Psychologie: Interactions, Temps, Emotions, Cognition.*

*Kathleen O'Connor is Senior Lecturer in English linguistics at the University of Lille and Vice-President for Europe and International Relations. In this context, she has overseen the development of a number of Erasmus+ projects, including 3AC. She also coordinates the university's participation in the NeurotechEU European University Alliance. She is a member of the research unit Savoirs, Textes, Langage.*

**Kathleen O'Connor**: With reference to their threefold mission, how might universities mobilise their resources to serve older adults seeking educational opportunities and, building on this, what institutional forms can the admission of older learners to university take?

**Janick Naveteur:** In the context of later-life learning, the three missions of the universities are particularly intertwined. Driven by demographic shifts and policy interest, academic research on later-life learning is gaining momentum, across Europe and beyond. This dynamic field is inherently multidisciplinary — and often interdisciplinary — drawing on insights from education sciences, gerontology, neuroscience, psychology, sociology, public health, and even digital technology. This convergence not only enriches our theoretical understanding but also fosters the research-practice relationship.

As regards higher education for older learners (for a review, see Formosa, 2023), exploring disparities between countries would not go beyond the scope of this interview. To put it simply, three main options can be distinguished. The first one is the enrolment in standard university programmes as regular students or auditors; the name of guest student could be reserved for auditing on a space-available basis.

The second option is the Universities of the Third Age (UTAs; often called by another name to indicate openness to other audiences), of which the first was founded in France by Pierre Vellas in 1972. This academic model that offers non-formal non-vocational educational opportunities has undergone significant global development since then. While some UTAs are still fully integrated into higher-education institutions, as was the case at the beginning, others are autonomous, such as those based on the British model of peer-to-peer learning. Others have distanced themselves from their initial academic foundation, which is paradoxically the case in France, where the link with a traditional university often now boils down to a cooperation agreement. All these models aim to maintain high academic standards. However, in the absence or loss of the status of university programme, the educational offering tends to favour one-off lectures rather than structured courses. This can be explained by limited availability of human and logistical resources, but also by the objective of retaining members, which requires variety and continuous renewal of content.

The third option is in line with the so-called University Programs for Older People (UPOP; Villar et al., 2011), i.e., structured programs developed by conventional universities specifically for older learners. Teachers often deliver lessons in a similar way to their traditional service, but these are generally slightly simplified and adapted. The number of hours varies widely and accreditation can sometimes be issued. This format enhances the sustainability of the offering, allowing for optimisation of both content and form. Compared to the UTAs, the learners may feel more like they are truly studying at the university. By varying the time commitments necessary, the UPOP format can provide a scalable entry point for some universities to incorporate later-life learning within their lifelong learning strategies.

With respect to an older audience, the specific goals of such opportunities are ultimately to improve the lives of people and foster a human capital that is too often neglected. Such university initiatives around demographic ageing align with their Third Mission of serving society beyond academic boundaries. In this vein, the European Union has made it a priority to support the engagement of universities with their local communities and regions. As regards later-life learning, universities are a part of an ecosystem, and many demands of older citizens can be taken in charge by stakeholders, particularly lower-level learning or recreational learning. It should finally be emphasised that the development of university later-life learning is not a purely altruistic strategy. The strengthening of local contacts that it enables can bring indirect benefits, such as easier access to research fields or internship opportunities for young students. It can also stimulate participatory research, possibly with the older learners to whom the university has opened its doors for a teaching programme.

**Kathleen O'Connor**: Despite these opportunities, the proportion of older learners at university remains low. How do you explain this and what can be done to remedy it?

**Janick Naveteur:** You're right. Based in particular on Article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, age discrimination in education is prohibited. However, just because many older people are thirsty for knowledge doesn't mean they'll find their place at university. Moreover, evidence for the societal benefits generated by later-life learning is obviously not a sufficient argument for universities to genuinely engage with these learners. To top it all off, this situation has already been criticised in publications dating back to the 1970s and 1980s, and yet obstacles still remain today, at both the societal and individual levels.

An economic rationale emerges from the misalignment between societal returns and institutional incentives. The broader social value is rarely reflected in the financial frameworks that govern university funding, and many have had to absorb a surge in the number of younger students. In this context, older learners are not a priority for institutions, and their increasing interest in higher education could even be seen more as an obstacle than a catalyst.

A certain illogic can also be pointed out in public policy. Although it advocates later-life learning, in practice it has virtually excluded it from lifelong learning. The extension of the education system to all stages of life became popular in the 1970s, largely due to the influence of Paul Lengrand and UNESCO. Faced with the obsolescence of the linear education model (initial training followed by professional life), universities were encouraged to open up to continuing education. Then, from the 1990s and 2000s up to the current vision of university alliances promoted by the European Parliament, lifelong learning has become fully integrated into their missions. However, again in line with the hierarchy of priorities, the main targets were inexorably linked to professional life (preparation, optimisation, reorientation). The economic benefit of training retirees has thus been relegated to the background, so that, at best, only the humanistic objectives of later-life learning have been considered. Furthermore, the shift from the concept of lifelong education to that of lifelong learning may have been counterproductive for senior citizens (Borg & Mayo, 2005). Arguing that older people's needs for acquiring knowledge and skills can be met in ways other than formal education, this view easily transfers responsibility for later-life learning from the state to the individuals, or to community-led or volunteer sector alternatives.

More prosaically, in line with the idea that retirement is a time for disengagement and rest, learning at this age is seen as nothing more than a leisure activity. It can thus be entrusted to people other than higher education teachers, whose missions are not to entertain an audience. Added to this is the idea that age-related cognitive decline prevents seniors from learning anything substantial. Of course, I am making a caricature. But who can honestly say they have never had even the slightest hint of such ageist thoughts? I can remember myself as a young teacher, going to give a presentation at the UTA, with an almost amused sense that I was just doing a good deed. The ageist stereotypes when they are directed inwards by older people often prevent them from functioning optimally (Levy, 2009), and some may then unfairly

consider that they do not have sufficient skills to pursue university education or simply that they no longer belong there.

We must therefore combat both exclusion and self-exclusion, a fight which cannot be left solely to the university and cannot be won with the wave of a magic wand. Nevertheless, it is likely that increasing demographic ageing and the empowerment of older citizens will ultimately bring about change, especially with unwavering support from international structures, such as the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, or the Age-Friendly University Global Network. Also, it is important to bear in mind that older learners can be rewarding for the teachers, but also very demanding. '*This is an audience you can't mess up with!*' said a colleague. It is therefore desirable to foster a mindset that optimises teachers' adaptation to later-life learning. In practical terms, it is possible to reinforce low-level actions with a favourable cost/benefit ratio. For example, it is essential to make it standard practice for universities to have a service capable of listening to and advising older students. Publicising these students' experiences in the media and encouraging exchanges between them, especially through dedicated meetings, can also have a significant impact. Unfortunately, the inclusion of such instruction in teachers' required teaching duties is also not always possible, which limits the commitment of some, when it is not simply a matter of volunteering, as is often the case for UTAs. Furthermore, although the literature provides several examples of university initiatives for older learners with undeniable benefits, project-based approaches may fail to continue once the project is completed due to a lack of subsequent funding. Local partners involved in these projects may become frustrated by this, which could ultimately undermine the Third Mission of the university. So, this answer ends as it began, with a question of money, but perhaps we are no longer talking about a political choice but rather an imperative...

**Katheen O'Connor**: According to your perspective, in which thematic area of later-life learning should universities invest as a matter of priority?

**Janick Naveteur:** As regards topics included in traditional university courses, older learners are often motivated by a desire to pursue personal interests — mostly in the humanities and for pleasure. In addition, they may seek knowledge and skills for practical purposes, such as legal information, finance, digital literacy, or even foreign languages. Depending on individual motivations, some topics may serve both purposes. Aside from occasional updates, teaching methods generally require little adaptation for this educated audience, especially when willing to make a significant learning investment. Andragogy, the science of adult learning, provides the overarching framework. However, in the case of instrumental learning in particular, the diversity of needs makes it difficult to offer general strategic orientation guidelines, except for the welcome qualities discussed above. Moreover, we also did not address the important challenges related to the extension of working lives. Higher education institutions must mobilise to be able to strengthen the competencies of people nearing retirement age, in ways that fully recognise their accumulated expertise.

Another set of courses looks at ageing itself, using a biopsychosocial approach to study it. It was first addressed in Wilma Donhue's pioneering initiative to welcome older learners to the University in 1948. It was also central to Pierre Vellas' thinking when he created the UTAs. The roots are therefore long-standing and have since inspired similar initiatives, but some were one-off actions despite positive impacts. In my opinion, this is the path universities must invest in as a priority. Thus, while preparing the future of younger students is one of their primary functions, they can also seek to optimise the future of older learners in this way, given that a greater knowledge of ageing improves life satisfaction and reduces ageing anxiety (Neikrug, 1998; Nuevo et al., 2009). As a corollary, benefits in economic terms are expected, especially via social engagement, which is protective against older adults' functional and cognitive decline (O'Neill et al., 2011). Goals of self-actualisation and empowerment of older learners can be reached in a framework of positive and preventive gerontology.

To meet learners' expectations, such courses must be firmly grounded in disciplinary and interdisciplinary ageing research, which is why universities are key actors. They must avoid anything that sounds like behavioural injunctions or the promotion of an idealised view of successful ageing. While there is no question of placing pathological ageing at the centre of the courses, it is difficult to never mention it, which requires a great deal of tact.

A specific gerontagogic challenge is also how to best combine scientific knowledge with learners' experiences of ageing. Effectiveness requires fine-grained strategies, including at the level of course content, which is rarely implemented in the publications to date. Thus, a phase of participatory action research is still required, as older learners are well positioned to identify good practices and provide guidance.

Securing adequate funding for such initiatives is imperative. However, since many factors can influence outcomes, including sociocultural factors, a proactive orchestration by an international organisational structure is essential. Transitioning from a coordinating function to a resource hub, this organisation could then provide valuable access to databases, assessment tools, and competency frameworks.

To return to your first question, the delivery context of these courses could vary. It could also encompass face-to-face, hybrid and online modalities, but opportunities for interaction between learners must be preserved, as the benefits of self-disclosure add to those associated with social bonding. The Erasmus+ 3AC project led by the University of Lille[1] is a good example that has highlighted all of this. In any case, it is imperative to emphasise the significance of maintaining a university label, thereby ensuring adherence to scientific advancements and the assurance of evolving in alignment with these developments.

**Kathleen O'Connor:** Thank you very much.

[1] https://www.3ac-universitycourse.eu/

## REFERENCES

Borg, C., & Mayo, P. (2005). The EU Memorandum on lifelong learning. Old wine in new bottles?. *Globalisation, societies and education*, *3*(2), 203-225.

Cross, K. P. (1981). *Adults as learners: increasing participation and facilitating learning.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Eurostat. (2024a). Population structure by age and sex (tps00028). Eurostat Database. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2908/tps00028

Eurostat. (2024b). Life expectancy at birth by sex (demo_mlexpec). Eurostat Database. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2908/demo_mlexpec

Eurostat. (2024c). Population in private households by educational attainment level (%) (edat_lfse_03). DOI: https://doi.org/10.2908/edat_lfse_03

Formosa, M. (2023). Five decades of older adult learning: achievements and challenges. *International Journal of Education and Ageing*, *5*(3), 91-104. Available at https://www.inderscience.com/jhome.php?jcode=ijea

Fries, J.F. (1980). "Aging, Natural Death and the Compression of Morbidity." *New England Journal of Medicine, 303*, 130–35. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJM198007173030304

Levy, B. (2009). Stereotype embodiment: A psychosocial approach to aging. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 18(6),* 332-336. DOI: https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1111/j.1467-8721.2009.01662.x

Manton, K. G. (1982). Changing concepts of morbidity and mortality in the elderly population. *The Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly. Health and Society*, 183-244. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/3349767

Narushima, M., Liu, J., & Diestelkamp, N. (2018). Lifelong learning in active ageing discourse: Its conserving effect on wellbeing, health and vulnerability. *Ageing & Society*, *38*(4), 651-675. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X16001136

Neikrug, S. M. (1998). The value of gerontological knowledge for elders: A study of the relationship between knowledge on aging and worry about the future. *Educational Gerontology*, *24*(3), 287-296. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/0360127980240308

Nuevo, R., Wetherell, J. L., Montorio, I., Ruiz, M. A., & Cabrera, I. (2009). Knowledge about aging and worry in older adults: Testing the mediating role of intolerance of uncertainty. *Aging & Mental Health*, *13*(1), 135-141. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/13607860802591088

O'Neill, G., Morrow-Howell, N., & Wilson, S. F. (2011). Volunteering in later life: From disengagement to civic engagement. In *Handbook of sociology of aging* (pp. 333-350). New York, NY: Springer New York. Available at https://lib-pasca.unpak.ac.id/index.php?p=fstream-pdf&fid=3508&bid=15479#page=360

Scott, A. J. (2021). The longevity society. *The Lancet Healthy Longevity*, *2*(12), e820-e827. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/S2666-7568(21)00247-6

United Nations. (1991). *United Nations Principles for Older Persons*. General Assembly resolution 46/91. Available at https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/united-nations-principles-older-persons

Villar, F., Pinazo, S., Triadó, C., Celdrán, M., & Solé, C. (2011). How students evaluate university programmes for older people: A comparison between two models in Spain. *Journal of Aging Studies*, *25*(2), 118-125. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2010.08.014

Wang, N., Xu, H., Dhingra, R., Xian, Y., McConnell, E. S., Wu, B., & Dupre, M. E. (2025). The Impact of Later-Life Learning on Trajectories of Cognitive Function Among US Older Adults. *Innovation in Aging*, *9*(5). DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/geroni/igaf023