

### U3a summary Lifelong Learning:

As we face population ageing through medical advancements and declining birth rates, we need more older workers in the workforce to maintain economic growth as the proportion of the population in the younger age groups shrinks. There are many reasons why people do or do not stay in work past pension age (health, finances, choice to name a few) and access to learning opportunities throughout life, known as lifelong learning, is one of these factors. Research has shown that threading education and training throughout the life course helps to increase and maintain skills and increases the probability of staying in the workforce for longer.

Our research used 25 interviews with older workers, talking through turning points, decisions, and coping strategies in their working life, to establish the different ways in which exclusion and inequality in late working life accumulate over the life course. This particular part of the project focussed on lifelong learning and experiences of learning throughout working life.

Our research found that while learning is distributed throughout working life, more importance is placed on learning in the early stage e.g. straight after compulsory education, training for first job etc., and middle stage e.g. for job retention and progression. Challenges to lifelong learning included family responsibilities and working conditions, with ageism and internalised age stereotypes increasingly acting as barriers in later working life. Women were particularly affected, foregoing learning opportunities due to caring commitments of financial constraints. Participants were generally disinterested in job-specific learning such as health and safety training or digital training, but acknowledged the mental health benefits of learning in general and 'keeping up to date'. Despite past and current challenges, participants were generally positive towards the idea of learning in later life, however this tended towards learning as a hobby (such as U3a!) rather than job-specific training.

In the context of the need for extended working lives, lifelong learning needs to be better integrated through recognition that barriers to learning occur and accumulate at all stages of life. Recently, there has been increased emphasis on the importance of lifelong learning in policy at European level. This isn't entirely new as lifelong learning has been on the European policy agenda since the 1970's, however, there seems to be a more concerted effort to harmonise approaches to lifelong learning through tackling inequality in access and distribution. While the policy priority in terms of learning is increasing basic literacy and numeracy levels, progress is certainly being made in terms of recognising the importance of learning for older people both in and out of the labour market.