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Supporting Intergenerational Relationships: A Role for Universities

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ABSTRACT. The point is made that universities world wide will need to alter their modi operandi in order to adapt to the dynamic socio-economic challenges associated with globalisation. It is argued that these challenges offer the opportunity for many universities to create “public good” by undertaking new forms of engagement with the wider community. A case is made for the academy to develop a scholarship agenda that integrates teaching and research activities through a community engagement approach that focuses on intergenerational relationships. The academy with its unique set of resources and capacities is seen to have the latent potential to be a powerful contributor to the continuing development and overall future scope of intergenerational work. Australia is presented as a case study in terms of its ageing population and the challenges associated with lifelong learning in the new millennium. Varying learning and research paradigms are offered that have the basic purpose of empowering staff and students to develop and increase their understanding, critical thinking and leadership in promoting the significance of intergenerational relations as a viable means of building resilient communities. It is argued that the ageing of world populations will require well-planned efforts to create a society for all ages that allows for meaningful participation in community life for all people within the
context of lifelong learning across the lifespan. It is understood that there will be universities who will have no interest in committing their resources to the promotion of intergenerational work. On the other hand, those universities opting to support the advancement of intergenerational relationships are well placed to contribute to the “public good” as well as receiving a range of reciprocal benefits through strategic partnership arrangements with the wider community. doi:10.1300/J194v05n03_06

**KEYWORDS.** Academy, engaged scholarship, globalisation, public good, resilient communities, lifelong learning

**INTRODUCTION**

The future is rapidly becoming the present resulting in unresolved tensions between what used to be in terms of culture, tradition, community and family life in favour of an internationalised system called globalisation. Friedman (2000) argues that: “[T]he defining measurement of the globalisation system is speed—speed of commerce, travel, communication and innovation” (p. 10.). Friedman reminds us that individuals through to large corporations will need to adjust their lenses in order to see and deal with globalisation and its dynamic capacity to constantly transform our lives. Universities are no exception in terms of the need for constant adaptation to a rapidly changing world. Outdated practices and irrelevant courses of study can no longer be kept on respirators indefinitely. There are now three undisputed certainties facing universities:

1. The new millennium is now calling for a new mix of student skills and knowledge that were not part of the previous focus of the academy.
2. The need for lifelong learning initiatives will increase in accordance with the speed of social, economic, technological and demographic change.
3. New traditions and tenets will progressively emerge as it becomes increasingly clear that the maintenance of many twentieth century operations and practices will no longer be appropriate for dealing with a globalised economy.
University settings provide valuable opportunities for engaging multi-disciplinary and transdisciplinary world-wide approaches to address contemporary social issues and challenges through the development of innovative programs, policy and research. While universities will necessarily differ in terms of their respective missions and overall purpose, there should be a common commitment to the idea that they are a force for “public good.” It is the contention of this author that the long-term survival and reputation of many higher education institutions will be dependent upon how well they integrate their teaching and research activities with external communities in mutually beneficial knowledge exchange relationships. Universities need to respond more actively to the changing nature of the global economy with due attention to such matters as (1) demographic ageing of societies, (2) social forces that are transforming community and family life, (3) impact of urbanisation and technology on communication and human relationships and (4) large scale migration and displacement of persons through social upheaval.

Holland (2005) provides an encouraging message that suggests that the academy is perhaps beginning to more seriously accept a larger responsibility for contributing to the quality of community life:

Observing the impacts of policy, technology and the global economy on academia and the corresponding impact of research on the economy, scholars around the world have launched an ongoing examination of fundamental changes in the nature of research, scholarly values, knowledge generation and dissemination, academic quality, and the role of higher education in society. Engaged scholarship, in particular, has emerged as a force for institutional diversification as each university considers how its intellectual assets should or should not be focused on the exploration of questions with public dimensions; questions that require collaborative knowledge relationships. (p. 11)

This paper will endeavour to argue a case for how the academy may actively utilise its intellectual assets in creating “public good” by engaging with the wider community to support intergenerational relationships. It will also be argued that both academic quality and prestige are correlated to the degree that community engagement is embedded within each university’s mission and evidenced by sustained and meaningful contributions to building “resilient communities” (Theobald, 1997).
ADVANCING THE FIELD

The concept of “A society for all ages” the theme chosen for the 1999 International Year of Older Persons, is highly relevant to the work of most universities in the new millennium. Indeed, more than ever “there is a need to continue to strive for a richer understanding and fuller realisation of the pivotal issues concerning multigenerational relations nationally and internationally” (Brownell & Resnick, 2005, p. 74). Universities in concert with their respective communities should be open to new ways of thinking as well as grasping opportunities for the further advancement of the intergenerational field. Accordingly, the academy with its unique set of resources and capacities can be a powerful contributor to the continuing development and overall scope of intergenerational work. Newman (2003) in the very first edition of the Journal of Intergenerational Relationships: Programs, Policy and Research argued that this international journal had the prime responsibility for advancing greater understandings and appreciations of “intergenerational approaches to social and community development issues” (p. 1). The study of human relationships across all ages will never be complete. It will always remain work in progress as a consequence of the dynamic interrelationships between demographic, social, political and economic circumstances that are forever impacting on all societies both today and tomorrow. Holland (2005) draws our attention to an increasing interest by universities in creating “public good.” According to Holland this trend is evidenced by fundamental shifts in modes of knowledge generation including new ways of conducting scholarly work through engaged scholarship activities with the wider community. This preceding trend is supported by Adams et al. (2005), who highlight that the value of collaborative community-based partnerships is gaining prominence as an important part of the core business for universities. Such partnerships aim to generate reciprocal benefits for all parties that emerge from perceived forms of complementarity. Ramaley (2005) argues that:

[Engagement] refers to an educational or research initiative conducted through some form of partnership and characterised by shared goals, a shared agenda, agreed upon definitions of success that are meaningful both to the university and to the community participants, and some pooling or leveraging of university resources and public and private funds provided by other participants. The resulting collaboration or partnership is mutually beneficial and is likely to build the capacity and competence of all parties. (p. 18)
Gibbons et al. (1994) flagged the emerging trend towards a new research paradigm in universities known as Mode II research, which calls for “transdisciplinary” modes where knowledge is provided in the context of an engaged network of internal and external partnerships. This preceding research paradigm is in stark contrast to the traditional Teaching and Learning Model I approach, which is almost exclusively university-driven and discipline-based. Under the Mode II approach engagement is truly collaborative and participatory and is strengthened by a multitude of perspectives that come from a diverse range of participants across and beyond the academy. According to Holland (2005) the Mode II form of engagement scholarship involves many players “and deals with difficult, evolving questions that require long-term effort during which results may become known over time as particular pieces of the puzzle are solved” (p. 13).

This new form of community engagement offers universities opportunities to examine how they might enter new associations and connections under the rubric of “intergenerational work” that encompasses programs, policy and research. Vander Ven (2003) reminds us that “…this spectrum of worldwide intergenerational activities gives us hope as they build here and there pockets of harmony, stability, productivity and connectedness” (p. 3). The twenty-first century has heralded many dramatic changes that see people of all ages across all societies “facing new kinds of psychological and interpersonal issues” (Vander Ven, 2004, p. 15). Universities of the future will be increasingly expected to deploy some of their research and teaching capacities to contribute to the enhancement of community life. Ramaley (2005) suggests that genuine engagement means that a university “must be willing to open itself up to the possibility that it, too, will change and learn from the experience” (p. 19).

The idea of universities engaging with society under a Mode II model implies among other things that institutional success will require cooperation and collaboration with a diverse range of partners in an ever changing and highly complex learning society. Equally important will be the need to recognise that:

1. Learning and engagement represent sophisticated and integrative activities.
2. Engaged scholarship will be an essential performance indicator of academic excellence and accountability in the 21st century university.
3. Commitment to the role of an engaged institution can enhance the role of the academy as a force for building social capital and thereby contributing to the “public good.”

Acceptance of the preceding propositions by universities will necessitate that they also initiate appropriate actions to ensure that their respective partnerships are identified, monitored and measured in terms of clear performance outcomes. Adams et al. (2005) argue that if universities are to undertake a serious commitment to community engagement then it will be essential that they deploy strong performance indicators to measure the impact of their efforts to service the public good. In a similar manner, Gibbons (2005) suggests that universities willing to demonstrate that they have been able to serve the public good need to produce “socially robust knowledge” to support their case. The remainder of this paper will examine ways in which a university may elect to deploy a measure of its research and teaching capacity to contribute to the promotion of intergenerational relationships.

**LIFELONG LEARNING AND THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY UNIVERSITY**

Countries worldwide are now experiencing increasing numbers of their older people living longer and healthier lives. The new reality arising from scientific research is that we can no longer think of ageing in negative and pejorative terms. The fact that people are now living longer highlights the need for governments and key institutions to strategically plan and prepare for a future that allows for older people to be meaningfully engaged in community life. Having a valued and socially included older population will require the development of national strategies that address the range of challenges through effective partnerships and responses from government, business, the wider community and individuals. Meeting the needs of older people in the new millennium cannot be achieved in isolation from the broader community. Serious and well-planned efforts will be required to create a society for all ages whereby opportunities for meaningful participation in community life for all people occur within the context of lifelong learning across the lifespan. Migration patterns in recent times must also be part of any future planning agendas with genuine
consideration being given to people’s diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

The demographic ageing of world societies raises a number of imperatives for universities that will require new ways of thinking about older people and their future roles in society. Any attempt to assess and understand the future place of older people in the life of modern societies will need to take note of the profound social changes that have occurred over the last several decades. It is the view of this author that ageing research will become increasingly important as the trend towards structural ageing of populations will demand that governments take action to understand contemporary and future trends associated with baby boomers. The baby boomers represent those cohorts of persons born between 1946 and 1964 and as they progressively enter later life there will be obvious implications for such areas as (1) workforce participation, (2) demand for health services, (3) retirement planning, (4) participation in community life, and (5) intergenerational relationships. Feldman and Seedsman (2005) alert us to the fact that today we are seeing increasing numbers of older people seeking independent and rewarding lives. The preceding authors offer the proposition that the future role of older people in family and community life will be open to continual definition resulting from the fact that:

Predicting lifestyles for older people will become extremely difficult as increasing numbers of older people seek to find their own unique way of affirming life. For older people in the new millennium, there exists a push-pull phenomenon whereby they are expected to adhere to traditional roles while at the same time being encouraged to embrace new social attitudes, behaviours and lifestyles. (p. 181)

At the present time in Australia, the Federal Government has made a commitment to increase the participation rates of older workers aged 55-64 years. This preceding commitment stems from the fact that current demographic trends are leading to the prospect of a slowing down of growth in the working age population 15-64 years. McCallum (2005) argues that: “This represents a major challenge to the assumptions and practices of the Australian society and economy—and universities” (p. 30).

McCallum further emphasises that employers will first need to change their attitudes while at the same time focussing their attention on the
“work ability” of older workers, which will require new ways of retaining and/or engaging mature age workers to participate in the workplace beyond the “prescribed” retirement age. Up to the present time many older workers have been disadvantaged by attitudinal and contrived systemic forces that have unfairly targeted them as less productive and unable to learn or adapt to changes in the workplace. While it is imperative that universities look externally to plan for the challenges of an ageing workforce they must also consider the demographic composition of their own workforces. It will be strategically important for universities to recognise that their respective workforces are also part of the intergenerational agenda. The higher education workforce in Australia is already affected by the ageing of its teaching and research workforce (Hugo, 2005; Mouhtouris, 2005). Issues relating to both retraining and value added input by older academics acting as mentors will need to be important considerations in future workforce planning by universities. Australia is but one of many countries that need to adopt a range of strategies and partnership arrangements to foster higher levels of work participation by older workers.

It can be expected that with rising lifestyle aspirations across both younger and older generations that we will experience a worldwide trend for baby boomers and successive generations to display an increasing trend to work well beyond the traditional retirement period of 55-64 years. It may also be commonplace in the future to have larger numbers of people working full or part-time into their 70s and 80s. Wagner (2000) offers the prospect that declining fertility rates and increased longevity will see “A reversal of the trend towards early retirement... and a likely result is that more people aged over 65 will remain in the workplace” (p. 21). We are on the verge of an age irrelevant society where lifelong learning will mean that educational programs for midlife and older individuals will begin to focus on work, retirement and the economy. Kirby (2000) argues that the impact of current global, technological, economic and social changes will require that within the Australian context “Education and training systems in the future will need to provide a strong foundation of learning for all citizens, provide continued opportunities for formal learning, and establish an awareness of the importance of and enthusiasm for continued learning” (p. 1).

Wilson (1998) proffers the view that with people living longer lives they must be able to access meaningful opportunities for continuing human development over the lifespan. The Delors Report (1996) in a
document titled *Learning: The Treasure Within* puts forward a strong case for lifelong education when it states:

There is a need to rethink and broaden the notion of lifelong education. Not only must it adapt to changes in the nature of work, but it also must constitute a continuous process of forming whole human beings—their knowledge and aptitudes, as well as their critical faculty and the ability to act. It should enable people to develop awareness of themselves and their environment and encourage them to play their social role at work and in the community. (p. 21)

Seedsman (2004) puts the case that Australia’s future, as well as that of other developed nations, will depend on how well key stakeholders respond to the demand for new workplace skills, knowledge and preparation of young and older workers to perform multi-disciplinary tasks. It would appear that some universities are well placed to take a leadership role in providing innovative education and training programs for adult learners including midlife and older unemployed people. It will be important, however, that senior university staff note the work of Sheehan (1995) in which he reports on the leadership attitudes to age of 180 United States universities’ and higher education institutions’ presidents that show “university leaders tend to hold a negative view of the teaching and scholarly abilities of older staff. Relatively few institutions have examined the academic performance of older staff and they do not see such studies as important” (p. 12). The immediate challenges for program providers are two fold: (1) Motivating many mature age workers to undertake adult education programs to improve their foundation and generic vocational skills and (2) building relationships between employers, government and the community. Action areas in need of urgent planning and attention include the following:

- Promoting the value of adult/lifelong learning.
- Assisting mature-age career transitions to allow for new learning about work. For some mature-age workers this may require moving across several career pathways in the course of an extended working life.
- Promoting the value of learning in the workplace.
- Altering negative attitudes, perceptions and older age stereotypes of employers and learners who doubt the capacity of older workers to learn or adapt to changes in the workplace.
• Mainstreaming older individuals into existing education programs rather than segregating them into age-specific programs that by design prevent integration with other generations.

Riley (1992) presents an important challenge for universities by way of introducing the notion of “structural lag,” which she takes to mean “the structure of social opportunities has not kept pace with the rapid changes in the ways that people are now growing old” (p. 24). This preceding challenge will require that people will need to be prepared to meet the developmental tasks of turning midlife and later life into meaningful forms of productivity with implications for education, work and leisure. At the same time, society and by association universities will need to initiate “social planning and related marketing strategies that are genuinely committed to the provision of improved social opportunities for older people to age in new and different ways” (Seedsman, 2002, p. 119).

Many universities can expect to witness a changing student profile as the quest by people in midlife and later life for lifelong learning takes on an unprecedented level of demand for new and expanding opportunities for education and training. Mason and Randell (1997) provide, for those universities wishing to promote the positive side of citizenship for older people, a clear message that sees them as active participants in higher education curriculum:

A new education for older people will have to be more than just recreation, information and remediation, important though these aspects will continue to be. Education will need to address issues of personal and social transformation, vocationalism for older people and mechanisms for continued engagement in a society that will continue to place demands on their ability to adjust and survive. (p. 214)

Universities can take a lead role in working with government, industry groups and professional organisations to stimulate employment of older workers. A range of innovative strategies need to be development that promote the value of older workers and which in turn encourage and assist employers to open up work opportunities for mature age workers. At the same time, research is urgently needed to explore labour market trends and the impact on labour force participation of older workers.
Education for people in midlife and later life offers both the potential and possibility for strengthening social cohesion and building social capital by creating opportunities for real intergenerational connection and dialogue.

**TEACHING AND RESEARCH: THE INTERGENERATIONAL AGENDA**

It is proposed that university based faculty interest and participation could help to develop an agenda for addressing the current shortfall in intergenerational education and research. At the same time it is recognised, however, that in many instances the current level of operations and commitment in the academy will be a major issue in the incorporation of intergenerational materials and research into the curricula. The first step in advancing the agenda for developing teaching and research in intergenerational relations is to determine if faculty members are willing to pursue such a venture and to what extent they would be prepared to acquire more knowledge of the possibilities. Assuming that genuine interest is forthcoming there still remains the reality that in many cases faculty and administrators will have limited expertise or knowledge on how to expand their teaching and research in intergenerational related areas. An important second step will involve both the design and implementation of professional development programs that focus on (1) conceptual understandings and insights surrounding intergenerational education and (2) development of intergenerational materials for inclusion into existing curricula. Equally important will be the need to support staff to identify a range of creative research undertakings that will ultimately benefit the university and the wider community. A third and useful step will require initial and ongoing evaluation of professional development programs and any subsequent teaching and research activities including the effectiveness or otherwise of internal and external related coalitions. It must be recognised that steps taken to advance the intergenerational relations agenda will necessarily attract a range of personal, group and institutional costs involving time and reallocation of ever diminishing financial resources.

What then might be some worthy themes and actions that could serve as starting points for universities to either continue and/or commence ongoing enquiry and program design, implementation and evaluation that lead to an increasingly collaborative and comprehensive engagement
with the promotion of intergenerational relationships? An important initiative could be introduced into the social sciences that, supports the inclusion of intergenerational theory that in turn “provides validity, credibility and a coherent, dynamic frame of reference for program development” (Vander Ven, 2004, p. 16). The preceding initiative would provide important opportunities for aspiring research students to apply their theoretical concepts to innovative postgraduate research projects including masters and doctoral theses. Allocation of funds to support postgraduate student scholarship opportunities to work as part of research teams that have an intergenerational relationship focus could also provide an important impetus for building a sustainable collective of young and older researchers. This initiative could help to promote multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary conversations and dialogue that lead to new ways of thinking and examining intergenerational relationships.

There is no reason why universities in particular countries or regions could not combine to Build Intergenerational Relationships Capacity. This would provide outstanding opportunities for researchers, policy makers and practitioners to lay out issues and options for action with key stakeholders through regularly scheduled colloquia with summaries of proceedings placed on appropriately designed network websites. At the same time encouragement should be given to Emerging Researchers in Intergenerational Relationships to participate in association with any centralised workshops or colloquium that support the building of intergenerational relationships capacity. This would provide an important forum for masters and doctoral students to present their work to fellow academics and policy makers who stand to benefit from the up and coming generation of researchers.

It must be recognised that involvement with intergenerational work within the academy will vary in accordance with emerging opportunities along with the specific interests of individuals and groups. However, effective learning and teaching including research as they relate to the promotion of intergenerational relationships could benefit from engagement with the relevant literature that deals with the impacts of rapid social change. For example, Handy (1995) talks about the paradoxes of our times that result from rapid social change and how they in turn create a range of tensions for workers, families and human relationships. Likewise, Theobald (1997) puts the case that many of our so-called economic successes are actually failures when examined in a cost-benefit framework that includes impacts on families, social cohesion and individual well-being.
While a substantial body of knowledge on ageing has already been collected and disseminated there remains much work to be done within and across the nations of the world. No doubt there are national and international priorities for building policy related research. Universities should be encouraging relevant academic staff to pursue studies in policy related areas of ageing where the findings may lead to a range of practical and meaningful applications. The following series of questions offer a potential starting point for planning a research agenda on ageing:

- What is the relationship between population ageing and socio-economic development?
- What are the contributions made by older people to the familial, social, cultural, spiritual and social capital of their respective communities and nations?
- What is the emerging nature of family structures and behaviours between generations?
- What are the economic and social challenges associated with supporting an ageing population?
- What are the determinants of healthy ageing?
- Are societies likely to experience intergenerational conflict as young and older generations compete for scarce resources?

Additional areas warranting attention within teaching and research that are likely to impact on the level of social participation and integration of older people in society include the following:

- What are the effects of rapid urbanisation and exodus of younger generations from regional, rural and remote areas on intergenerational relationships?
- What are the roles that older family members are likely to play over the next several decades?
- What is the level of older person abuse, neglect, and exploitation within the context of gender, ethnic and racial differences?
- What is the nature and extent of ageism across the generations both within families and the wider community?

CONCLUSION

Rapid social, economic, technological and demographic change is transforming societies resulting in common referral to the term globalisation.
This paper has argued that the academy has a measure of responsibility to promote initiatives that advance intergenerational teaching and research. Perhaps those academics with a social conscience relating to the imperatives of modern times including the need for lifelong learning can find ways of harnessing the intergenerational agenda. It can be expected that some sections of the academy will view the preceding case engaged scholarship involving intergenerational relationships with a high degree of scepticism. For example, there will always be those faculty and senior administrators who will be simply unwilling to alter traditional routines in order to incorporate a new paradigm for teaching and research. At the same time, counter arguments will surely arise that deal with the likely costs that can be expected from any serious commitment to a community engagement agenda that supports intergenerational relationships.

In the end it must be seen that each university will need to explore and determine its own unique commitment to community engagement. While a range of current and future possibilities and opportunities for promoting intergenerational relationships exist across many universities, the actual level of involvement by institutions willing to embark upon such and enterprise will vary according to each respective history, mission, context, scholarly interest and perceived capacity to commit academic strengths and resources to address and resolve social issues and questions in this area. Given that many universities have focused on other core areas for their performance, the fact remains that engagement of one kind or another with the wider community offers potential benefits for work in intergenerational relationships that can generate a sense of “public good.” Nonetheless, it would seem that the time is right for the field of intergenerational relationships to capitalise on the following case in favour of the engaged university:

Universities are a critically important source of ideas that can be put to good use to address societal problems. Universities are communities of scholars who can prepare their students to play productive, responsible and creative roles in their professions and in the community where they live. Universities contribute to the public good and to the quality of life by working closely with society at large and with members of the communities surrounding their campuses to address issues of importance. When these issues are articulated and framed in a collaborative process across disciplines and in cooperation with community representatives, and when the investigation of these questions is conducted in a cooperative
manner involving faculty, students and, where appropriate, community members, we can say that the work is being conducted in an engaged mode. (Ramaley, 2005, p. 18)

Society has a right to expect that universities where appropriate should have as part of their institutional mission and strategic objectives a commitment to civic engagement. This means of course, that genuinely engaged universities are those that have clearly articulated community alliances and partnerships that enable them to effectively utilise their intellectual resources to support local, regional and national challenges. Universities opting to support the advancement of intergenerational relationships through strong partnership arrangements are well placed to contribute to the “public good” while at the same time positioning themselves to receive a range of reciprocal benefits from their respective engagements.

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