

**Academics ‘staying on’ post retirement age in English University
Departments of Education: Opportunities, threats and employment
policies.**

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Abstract

In the UK, as a result of the Age Discrimination Act (2006) a default retirement age no longer exists and more people choose to ‘stay on’ in their academic posts. ‘Staying on’ poses opportunities and threats in the academic labour market. Older academics can make a positive contribution to their institution through their expertise and experience. By continuing to work, paying tax and keeping healthy, they may directly and indirectly reduce social health and welfare costs. Alternatively, in a context where academic jobs may be decreasing, older workers may be positioned as limiting the employment and promotion opportunities for younger colleagues by staying on. Drawing on twelve in-depth semi-structured interviews with academics who have

stayed working in university education departments, this paper explores these issues alongside policy-related questions about employment in the sector.

Key Words:

Post-retirement work; ageism; employment policy; older academics.

Introduction

According to the UK Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2019), the number of people who are over 65 and still in paid employment increased from over 30,000 in 2013 to over 1.5 million by 2018. The ONS predicts that, by 2030, the number of people working beyond the traditional retirement age of 65 will rise to 15.5 million. The academic community has not been immune to these changes. In the UK, 'for part-time academic staff, the largest increases in staying on at work have been from those staff aged 61–65 (up 41.2%) and 66 and over (up 169.0%)' (Universities UK, 2018: 28). Whilst there has been a rich research seam that explores the contribution of older workers in the workforce, the situation and perspectives of these older 'stayers on' in higher educational institutions (HEIs) has been less widely addressed (Altman et al., 2019).

Two factors have influenced this change in the demographic of academics in the UK. First, the Age Discrimination Act (2006) and the Equality Act (2010) have resulted in eliminating the mandatory retirement age limit of 60 for women and 65 for men; in consequence,

default retirement (forced retirement at 65) no longer exists. Second, in comparison with previous generations, professional people in later years (65-70) frequently enjoy relatively good health, are living longer and are choosing to stay for extended periods of time in paid employment, although many choose to work flexibly (Kristjuhan & Taidre, 2013).

This paper explores the narratives of twelve academics who have decided to 'stay on' working in their institutions. All the participants are baby-boomers; those born immediately after the Second World War (Walker-Smith and Clurman, 2007). Before looking at their decisions, choices and experiences, we contextualise and problematise 'staying on' in higher education.

Contextualising 'staying on'

Retirement is a major life transition and moving beyond paid employment is generally seen as something to look forward to.

However in some cases, 'retirement can pose challenges and some

retirees find it difficult to adjust to their new circumstances' (CAB, 2018, p.4) which may, in part, have led increasing numbers of older workers to 'stay on' (ONS 2019). Other factors are involved in deciding if and when to retire, for example the nature of the occupation, questions of changing status and identity, alongside factors such as health, relationships and available resources (Hansson, et al., 2018). As Manfredi and Vickers (2009, p.344) claim, work forms 'an important signifier of social status' and having to retire simply on the basis of age can 'diminish older people, and... ignore individuality and human dignity'.

One driver of this change in the labour-force is demographic. Many parts of the world, including the UK, have ageing populations. One policy concern is that the increased longevity of the population may result in larger numbers of retirees looking to claim state support (Szinovacz, 2011). This has precipitated an extended public debate about what is frequently referred to as the looming 'ageing crisis'. In the UK and elsewhere, concerns about the financing of social security for this cohort are paramount. Related policy issues include concerns

about rising pension and care costs as well as the need for additional health provision which all come out of public taxation and look set to rise in an ageing society. An ageing population will be expensive for the public purse, more people remaining in paid employment may help to bridge these increased welfare costs; it may be that more people will also have to work longer because of labour supply shortages.

It is argued that older people bring expertise, experience, reliability and diversity to the workforce (Timmons, et al. 2011) and that staying in 'fulfilling' work can be enriching and sustaining for this cohort (Marvell and Cox, 2017). In the UK, concerns about labour shortages have led to a shift in policy from one that encouraged early retirement in the 1970/80s to policies today that promote later-life employment (Taylor 2007). Currently, UK policy is concerned with supporting healthy ageing and, to some extent, enhancing positive working environments for older workers forms part of this agenda (Walker, 2018). In this policy landscape, staying on poses opportunities but also potential threats and in the UK a 'crisis' has been manufactured round the baby-boomer generation who are seen to have benefitted from supportive public

policy initiatives in the past (good health care, free education, available and affordable housing). The boomers are now remaining in their posts and in this way limiting opportunities for younger people – Willetts (2011) has called this large cohort the ‘selfish giant’.

Hamilton and Hamilton, (2006) suggest that baby boomers’ experiences are frequently misrepresented. They report that the seeming unprecedented wealth of the baby boomers is reserved for a very small proportion of that generation. In a more positive vein, Walker-Smith and Clurman (2007) claim that baby boomers have been politically active and instrumental in cultural change and it is therefore unsurprising that this generation is leading the way in terms of innovative post-retirement decisions. As Harkin and Huber, writing for Demos, a UK think tank, observe:

The baby boomers have always been seen as a deeply symbolic generation swollen by a surge of post war optimism, reaching adulthood in tandem with the 1960’s and a new set of social freedoms, consumer innovations and political conflicts. For many of them challenging the received wisdom is deeply embedded in their

own self-image. As they age we should not expect this characteristic to be diminished (2004 p.11).

However, by staying on, older academics may run the risk of being positioned by the negative discourse of being 'bed blockers', limiting employment and promotion opportunities for their younger colleagues (Willettts, 2011). 'Bed blocking' only becomes an issue if these older academics really are impeding the recruitment of new staff, or if these older (often senior) workers are not contributing to teaching and research and are indirectly or directly preventing younger academics from being promoted (1). While little is known at present about how younger academics may feel about the retirement decisions of older colleagues, Dorfman's (2009) North American based study of older tenured professors found some evidence of positive intergenerational relations that contributed to feelings of satisfaction among the older workforce. In contrast, Altman et al., 2019 found that some junior academics were sometimes critical of their older and more experienced colleagues and considered some to be 'dead-wood'.

As we have noted, there is now a pattern where more academics are choosing to 'stay on' post the normative retirement age, frequently in

part-time paid posts (Kaskie, 2016). Some reasons for this may be that academics take many years to develop their careers and professional identities, they tend to have a lifetime commitment to their work and as mid-career entries often gain full time posts much later on than in other professions (Sugar, et al., 2005). Many members of education departments have had a career in teaching and come later to academic work and may feel they need more opportunity to complete their research agenda. A reluctance to 'give up' academic life and work is highlighted in various studies. For example, Dorfman's (2009) US study of physics professors working beyond their 70s found that these academics remained productive in their work and contributed to teaching and research. Other research, in the US, reported that between 50% and 70% of academics continued their professional activities following retirement and were highly satisfied with their work and were making a contribution to their field (Berberet, et al. 2005). Chase, et al. (2003) found that academics who had retired and discontinued work-related activities reported suffering from stress and found difficulties in adjusting to new life patterns beyond paid employment.

For various reasons then, it seems evident that older academics are currently set to play a role in the university labour force. However academics working past retirement are not a homogeneous group and, like other older workers in other professions, will have different motivations for continuing to stay in paid employment. Their contexts may vary because of the type of university they work in; older institutions will require more research productivity. They will also have different perceptions and experiences of being a 'stayer' in their own institution and will also have views about policy and practice in this area as well as on arguably malign discourses such as 'bed-blocking'.

Problematising 'staying on'

Manfredi and Vickers (2009, p.344) have recognised a number of positive reasons for 'introducing (legal) protection against age discrimination' in the workplace. Subjecting older people to a mandatory ending of their paid work at a set age can constitute a form of less favourable treatment and may be based on stereotyped and ageist assumptions about the capacity and worth of elders. Manfredi and

Vickers foreground a mix of principle and pragmatism to justify the UK Age Discrimination Act but they argue that there remain a number of contentious debates around some possible negative effects of 'staying on' for younger generations of workers and also for employers. These less positive perspectives include concerns about what is referred to as the 'fair innings' argument (Hazra et al., 2018). The 'fair innings' case is that everyone starts young and as they age they will have time to accrue benefits, promotions and an increasing salary. In their turn, the young as they mature will enjoy these benefits and then also ultimately suffer the inequalities of age discrimination. As Manfredi and Vickers (2009, p. 346) put it, 'In effect, the argument is that distinctions based on age are not unfair, as we all move from advantage to disadvantage at different stages of our lives'. According to the 'fair innings' case, older people have had their time and now resources need to be focused elsewhere.

This is a somewhat seductive argument when one considers the current cut-backs in the UK academy and the growth of casualisation and precarity experienced by early career academics (Allmer, 2018).

However, as Manfredi and Vickers demonstrate, the 'fair innings' argument fails to account for those women who have experienced interrupted careers and have not had a 'fair innings'. For example women may have had some years away from paid employment to look after children or care for elders so will have had less years to build up their pension. The fair innings case also assumes that there is a finite number of jobs that will be filled once the post holder retires. In the current situation of employment practices in the UK universities, some posts currently occupied by stayers may simply cease to exist once a worker retires or leaves the institution.

There is another complexity that arises from the need to manage the staffing portfolio in the workplace. As Manfredi and Vickers (2009, p.347) state, 'Good management practice entails an element of workforce modelling, and succession planning. It is important for employers to have some way to predict staff turnover, and to be able to plan for the replacement of senior staff'. If it becomes harder to anticipate when people may leave, succession planning will become extremely difficult. One more tension that can arise is where older staff request to work flexibly, and this may restrict the employers capacity to

accommodate other workers' applications for part-time work (Manfredi and Vickers, 2009). If older academics are working flexibly, there may be tensions over what aspects of their workload are maintained or relinquished and this may result in younger employees having to carry a heavier load of less popular work, for example marking more assignments and having reduced time for their own research. There could also be a situation where older academics who are seen as more strategically important, perhaps in terms of their research, would be able to 'stay on' while others would be encouraged to leave. One more constraint could centre on the fact that older more senior staff would be more 'costly' for their universities. So, older academics who want to 'stay on' post retirement may pose some significant policy and practice dilemmas for managers and employers.

Methods and methodology

In this small-scale empirical study we wanted to explore why some academics chose to stay at work past their normative retirement age as well as their views about whether their staying on was limiting

opportunities for younger academics. We conducted in-depth semi-structured individual interviews with twelve academics, aged 65 and over who had decided to 'stay on' working in Education Departments. Each interview lasted for about one and a half hours. Our first two participants were invited to talk with us on the basis of being known to us and we then made contact with other stayers initially through employing snowball techniques (Noy, 2008). In constructing this sample, we wanted to take some account of issues of gender as well as institutional cultures. Women often have breaks from their careers and we anticipated that some women would choose to stay on to buttress their pensions. We also wanted to take some account of academics working in new as well as old universities (Boliver, 2015) to explore any diversity of experiences in terms of different research cultures and expectations of academic staff. It might be that research-driven universities would be more willing to continue to employ older research-active academics and this would be seen as being 'strategic' in the neo-liberal academy; their publications and research funding being seen as an asset by management. We were also aware that different disciplines could have different propulsions to stay/go (Dorfman, 2009) and

decided to start within a field with which we were familiar, that of Education Studies.

(Table 1, goes here)

Snowballing can be a useful method for accessing a specific population and is frequently used in interview-based studies like this one. It can also be useful for collating grounded accounts of experiences shared by particular cohorts. In contrast, it may be that snowballing will simply create a sample that reflects the interests and concerns of the researchers and may miss 'isolates' or different sets of experiences (Noy, 2008). Our research questions concentrated on why (some) educational academics chose to stay on and their experiences and views about potentially being positioned as limiting opportunities for younger colleagues; a phenomenon that one respondent characterised as 'bed-blocking' (a derogatory term derived from concerns that elders have had to stay in hospitals longer than necessary as there are not enough care beds available). Our cohort was made up of post-retirement academics of a similar age and possibly a shared cultural experience of working in the academy.

All the interviews were professionally transcribed and we used a system of open-coding to chart our data based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis of generating initial codes, then searching for and reviewing emergent themes. All transcripts were coded to capture explanations for why our participants stayed on, the reasons for their decisions and details of their institutional experiences. Each transcript was analysed separately by each researcher and a qualitative, inductive approach was applied in order to avoid any pre-determined bias. The researchers then worked together to identify thematic clusters that were repeated across the data as well as highlighting any discrepant or unexpected findings. Pseudonyms have been used in the reporting of the findings concealing the identity of both Institutions and academics.

Individual accounts can be valuable resources in starting to understanding the socio- cultural dynamics of people's lives and, in what follows, we weave these stories into three broad categories: the professional, institutional and personal factors that contribute towards the decisions of older academics to 'stay on' in their institutions and we document their experiences of working post-retirement. From these

discussions we then raise some policy-related questions about choosing to stay on.

Professional reasons for staying on

Many studies do explore academic moves into retirement (Davies and Jenkins, 2013) and they frequently describe a desire to continue working post-retirement that fuels an extended and gradual transition into and beyond formal retirement. Davies and Jenkins (2013) identify five categories of academics coming up to retirement as being either 'clean breakers', 'opportunists' and 'continuing scholars' who renegotiate their employment conditions, 'reluctants' who are concerned about a supposed loss of identity on retirement and 'avoiders' who are undecided about what to do. Overall, Davies and Jenkins (2013) found that more opportunities were available to those academics with enhanced social and professional capital. All of our participants had renegotiated their employment contracts and had decided to 'stay on' so perhaps could be best characterised as 'continuing scholars'; however it might be that for many of our participants seniority and

strong research profiles have made this position more, rather than less, possible. It might also be that other contextualizing factors play a part in their capacity to 'stay on'; such as supportive partners, good physical and mental health and working in an institution that positively enables this choice. Szinovacz (2011, p. 97) makes the point that 'a noteworthy proportion of employees retire involuntarily, due to disability, job displacement or competing commitments such as care for parents or spouses'. Our participants were voluntarily 'staying on' and being paid by their institutions while continuing with their research interests, 'fulfilling' work being a driver for staying on past retirement (Marvell and Cox, 2017).

Eleven participants had started their careers as school teachers and they expressed interests and concerns about education policy and provision. They all, in various ways, argued that this interest was part of their reason for wanting to stay on:

It keeps you 'in' with what's going on in education, what the issues are... I've got this view of education and what it should be like. I want to influence the next round of teachers... and to try to subvert... (Bradley)

All of our participants expressed pleasure in their continuing involvement with their specialist education-related fields, such as inclusion, curriculum and social justice, and this enjoyment was a key factor in their choice to stay. As de Guzman et al., (2008) found, happiness and enthusiasm about continuing to work were factors in sustaining 'staying on'. All, but two, of our participants were now working part-time and some were relieved to be able to have some of the less-pleasant aspects of their work 'proportionally' reduced.

I actually got brought down by more and more admin work that I couldn't actually devote time to, personally to think through some of things that I knew had to be worked through a lot more in the bigger field... I had a kind of long queue of things that I wanted to write about... so stepping off the train was one thing but at the same time I wanted to be, intellectually, to be connected. (Charles).

Bella, echoing Charles, sentiments said :

I think I probably would say that I wouldn't do it (stay on) if I wasn't working in a field that I'm really interested in. If I was doing things

like, all the marking and all the, you know, lecturing on things I don't want to do, I wouldn't do it. It's because I am in a place I want to sort of be.

If some older stayers are able to cherry-pick what they do, then this raises questions that need to be addressed about who will pick up any less desirable work. If older people are able to jettison some aspects of their work, does this mean that younger workers will have more unpleasant tasks? What would happen in terms of workforce modelling and management if there were too many older workers less keen to do some of their academic work? While Charles expressed relief and pleasure at being able to 'step off the train' and Bella reported that she was now 'in a place ' she wanted to be, the situation was less positive for Ruth and Molly. In their universities they reported that fewer posts were now being replaced when colleagues left or retired. In consequence, they experienced a hike in their workload. As Ruth said:

I'm still expected to contribute to teaching, read the same amount of outputs and make the same contributions to writing environment statements for the Ref (Research Excellence Framework) as if I were still working full time and not 0.4

When we coded the interview data we identified a mosaic of reasons that were given for 'staying on'; many that could be described as professional factors. These included a life-long commitment towards education as a common good, their own research, and delight in maintaining contact with colleagues and students. As James said, 'I like working with young people, it keeps me thinking, keeps me young'. More powerfully, Gail expressed her concerns 'in terms of the knowledge and experience that we carry with us and we need to pass on really... if we're active, if we're involved, we are passing it on'.

In sum, from what our participants revealed it seemed that senior male academics with robust research profiles working in research intensive settings were less likely to have to engage with the administrative tasks involved in departments with a strong profile in teacher education, as well as with the demands of the research assessment exercise (Acker and Dillabough, 2007).

Personal reasons for staying on

We identified a set of factors for staying on that we describe here as 'personal' reasons. Some of these reasons are fairly prosaic; five participants (four women and one male) mentioned financial reasons for staying on as they had experienced interrupted career trajectories and were trying to compensate for lower pensions by continuing in paid employment. Several of our participants lived in easy access to their institutions and they claimed that this made staying on more feasible. They could go into work quickly and cheaply. However other participants who lived some distance from their institutions mentioned that this factor mitigated against their more regular attendance. For example, Gail said, "You know I live some distance away and every time I get up at five thirty or six in the morning to get the train I think, why am I doing this?" Nearly all the participants claimed that staying on kept their 'brain going':

So, a little bit extra (money) helps but it's also something about it keeps my head in a space that actually makes it think and makes it tick... If I retired I don't trust myself... You know, people say 'Oh no, you'd be busy' and I think, 'No, no, no. I might just watch day-time telly (Ruth).

One of the contradictions involved in retirement is that it 'may reduce social contacts and induce isolation and mental health problems' but if work is too stressful, retirement may be a welcome relief (Gannon and Roberts, 2011, p.4751). However, somewhat contradictorily, Samuel observed that: 'The whole place (his institution) has become de-socialised and it's so huge now people work at home a lot or they sit in their offices at their computer'. However most of our relatively privileged 'stayers on' were engaged in aspects of their work that they loved and valued, and spoke about friendship and collegiality as well as the great pleasure they experienced in their jobs. For most of our participants work formed a significant part of their identities; it was where they managed a sense of participation and inclusion in the wider society. These more complex affective reasons underpinned their reasons for making the decision to 'stay on'. Liam and Samuel were very clear about how they saw themselves, their identities and their work:

so this stuff is identity forming, you know, it's not just a job is it?

You are an academic and it's the way you see the world, how you engage with the world, interact with the world, so you pull away from that... I don't have a huge number of hobbies which will

somehow compensate for that... so retiring fully is a bit of a challenge really, you know. (Liam)

For academics, particularly in the current context, I think you become invested in a, kind of, in a public persona and that becomes part of who you are. And of course, like other teachers, if you stand up and teach then that is also a kind of... a kind of performative version of yourself. And all of those things become embedded in your identity. And I think that... I think that is very difficult to give up. (Samuel)

Liam and Samuel are high profile academics and leaders in their respective fields and, from what they said, seemed to be more shielded than other participants from many of the more mundane and routine elements of academic work. Both worked in research-intense universities where they were regarded as outstanding scholars and their social and professional capital was high (Davies and Jenkins, 2013). To some extent their privilege may have also shielded them from recognising their advantages, one of which is 'staying on' without having to fill any gaps in the reduced workforce of their institutions by undertaking administrative work. No-one said they were staying on

because of a love of teaching and marking - although those involved in doctoral supervision highlighted this rewarding aspect of their work.

There may be other affectual-identity based reasons for staying on that are, perhaps, less easy to voice. Leaving an occupation that is intimately related to the construction of an identity forged in a community of practice, supported by rituals (key annual conferences for example) and marked out by practices such as staying up late to finish off papers, working at the weekend, having an elastic approach towards what constitutes a working day, is bound to have consequences when it comes to an end.

As Molly said, in part acknowledging her privilege as well as her anxieties:

In my darkest hour, maybe it is to do with issues to do with death and dying. I think to myself, if I only have five years left, and then how do I want to spend them? Then I know it is not marking essays or teaching in the evenings ... So I am motivated by emotional-personal factors to do with professional identity and also because I

am in a privileged position doing research, writing, going to conferences.

Institutional experiences of ‘staying on’

Our participants valued a supportive culture and the opportunities that came with continuing their institutional involvement. They had access to their libraries, on line journals, some conference funding and an office - although as part time workers their work-space was constantly under threat, especially if they were not seen as institutional assets. Most participants said they had research time built into their contracts and enjoyed some flexibility and choice over their work. Some respondents, like Samuel, felt their institutions were ‘up front’ about policies regarding retirement and there was no pressure exerted on individuals to leave:

At my university there’s a kind of policy of trying to make people aware of retirement as being something you can do in different ways... there’s no pressure on anybody to think about that, but heads of department are primed to have conversations about that (retirement), if people want to.

However, our interviews did reveal that some respondents felt frozen out and marginalized on reaching the traditional retirement age and while one male respondent, Bradley, a Senior Lecturer, had experienced some problems, in the main our female participants (senior lecturers and professors from old and modern universities) reported more of these negative experiences. Bradley found accessing conference money almost impossible,

I get nothing for research. I would love to be able to do some... I did get some money for a conference from Barry by going to see him... and him saying 'well we could at a push, we could give you £250, sort of research money'. But I can't go back and ask him again.

Bradley had moved rooms four times in three years and was now in a shared office 'down in the dive, and it's a room mainly for the technician'. While space is often under pressure in universities, Fiona was also placed some distance away from her more immediate colleagues. 'I share with one other person, and that's fine. It's a horrible, horrible little room in another building.' Such things like the lack of an office within a common space can lead to a level of invisibility within a

department and reduced opportunities for dialogue with younger colleagues. If differently aged cohorts of academics are less able to meet formally and informally, then this social distancing may contribute towards stereotyped or mis-informed perceptions about one another and potentially underpin intergenerational tensions.

Molly, a professor in an old university, who like Samuel enjoyed institutional support, was sometimes on the sharp end of what could be defined at best as institutional carelessness or worse as explicit pressure on her to retire. As she explained:

A few weeks ago, HR sent me an exit form because they had heard from one of our managers that I might be leaving this year. I contacted my head of department and the manager and the HR person and said I felt that I was being nudged out and that I have not formally made this decision... Felt like I wasn't wanted - surplus to requirements.

More explicit and overt forms of discriminatory behaviour were experienced by Fiona and Gail. Fiona (a professor in an old university) described the complete lack of institutional support for her late career decisions. She felt this more acutely with the arrival of a new manager:

he'd only been in place a few minutes and he said to somebody, "Fiona Collins, can't we find a cheaper option?" And I... I sort of brazened it out... but inside I wanted to die. ... And when the book came out he didn't send a thing round saying to people, you know, like everybody else gets. You get a grant, you get a book published, you get an article published, he didn't send ... he didn't congratulate me or anything. He hasn't bullied me but he's frozen me out. What's it called – ghosted me?

Fiona's 'ghosting' was made worse in other ways: 'When I asked for a bit of time in my contract for research, and writing, the response was, "I don't think ,I don't think I can pay you to do your writing" '.

In the US, Kahana, et al. (2018) explored the responses of younger academics to a proposed research initiative aimed at older colleagues. They found that, 'in addition to broad opposition to new grant funding for senior investigators, many commenters also advocated for other punitive actions toward older investigators, including forced retirement' (p.251). If research achievements by older academics (like Fiona's book) are not celebrated, then the perception of declining levels of

output cannot be challenged and misconceptions as well as ageist discourses may be allowed to circulate.

This feeling of marginalisation was also evident from our interview with Gail (a professor in a new university) .

We had this head of department and I, well, I said to him, “Look, I’m down to two days a week but I’m very happy to contribute, I’ll support the new head of research.” And basically, he didn’t want me to do that. He just, he wanted to push me aside. But I was still leading a very successful centre, but after the REF he closed that down.

The way that these heads of Departments behaved towards Gill and Fiona, in different institutions, raises questions about how ageist discrimination is still able to flourish in a university setting. Tilly (1999) describes how inequality can become institutionalized. She maintains that some of the most enduring forms of inequality come out of the distinctions between two categories, e.g. young/old, rather than from individual characteristics. She argues that categorical pairs become formally institutionalised giving rise to what she describes as ‘durable inequality’. This may explain, in part, the experiences of some of our

participants in a context where, according to Walker (2018) ageism is a widespread phenomenon.

Bed Blocking and Baby Boomers

All of our participants were aware of the term bed–blocker and rejected this as a view of themselves in their university setting. James and Molly argued that they brought accumulated experience and skills to their departments which would not be easy to replicate. As James observed:

even though I know there are many unemployed young people out there, not many could fill the slot I occupy... they'll have to find someone with my background, my experience, who's done gender work, early years work and who's male, so you know I'm a rare commodity in the area that I work in.

Liam's department's staffing policy led him to believe that if he did retire, the economic difficulties faced by the university would almost certainly mean that he would not be replaced and this was a view shared by many of our respondents. 'In the case of this department it's no longer a case of one person out, somebody else in, it's people going

out and nobody being replaced'. All of our respondents had a strong sense that if someone was not being productive they should not be taking a salary and should move on: 'We would be irresponsible if we were just sitting there holding onto a salary. I think that would be unforgivable... if all I'm doing is treading water'. (Charles)

Samuel saw the end of default retirement as being far more complex than older workers simply restricting the opportunities for younger employees.

In a small degree, the stayers-on are contributing to that in terms of hanging onto posts that might otherwise go to somebody else. But, who knows? It may just go into a pool of money to employ more contract-based workers, so you can't assume that there's a simple relationship between the two. I think there are difficult balances involved. You can't say, "Well, you can stay on because you're a Nobel Prize winner but you can't because you haven't got any distinction." And it becomes very messy. But to simply call it bed-blocking, I think, is a rather simplistic and insulting way of thinking about it or referring to it.

Of our twelve participants, six are women and of these, three had had interrupted periods of work while shouldering the main responsibility for childcare and care giving. Fiona and Gail felt that they had lost out on opportunities because of gendered expectations and having to put their careers on hold.

Thinking from the point of view as a woman, it seems to me that the idea that you shouldn't be there because you've reached 65 or 68, or 74 doesn't take into account at all the fact that we put our careers on hold to have children, that we've looked after parents, there's no way I could develop my career. So what about that time? What about those spaces? What about the... the profound sexism that has absolutely dogged my generation of women in the earlier days, you know, and to some extent now as well (Fiona).

Bella had little sympathy for any possible labelling of herself as a bed-blocker. In her academic career, after time spent in schools, she had fought hard as a woman to gain recognition as a researcher;

a lot of women, like me, I think are saying we are just getting to where we want to be and then suddenly we are too old. So I think

this is part of a fightback that you think, I don't care how old we are, we carry on until, you know, we get perhaps what we want.

Our participants recognised the term baby-boomer as a toxic expression and although they recognised the plight of younger academics, they rejected the fast growing and mobilising discourses that draw attention to the seeming 'contrast between early-retiring, asset-rich Baby Boomers and debt-laden, precariously housed and insecurely employed Millennials' (Alexander Shaw, 2018, p4).

As Melody exclaimed:

that's an ideological thing. It's, it's politically expedient to present people who work beyond retirement as somehow wrecking the chances of young people, just as it's a political statement to say that because we had free education we're now, you know, we've pulled the ladder up. I don't think that's true at all. That's divisive politics to try and set the young against the old, you know, it's as simple as that.

This disadvantageous positioning of the young compared with their parents and grandparents led David Willets, a Conservative minister in

the 2010 UK coalition government, to urge the older generation to forgo their privileged positions in order to benefit the young (Willets, 2011). In contrast, Howker and Malik (2010, p. 97), 'see the generational differences as less of a passive by-product of the size of the boomer cohort than the active outcome of neoliberal policy failures'.

Melody pointed out some of the contradictory discourses that underlie the bed-blocking trope. On one hand the 'baby boomer' generation are selfishly blocking career opportunities for younger colleagues by actively choosing to work beyond the traditional retirement age. But on the other hand these same people are being encouraged to 'stay on' through an extension of the retirement age in order that the cost of the care of an increasingly aging population can be reduced.

We're being told... that the retirement age has to go up because we can't afford the care, so we've all got to keep working, but somehow if we keep working we're ruining the chances of the young. (Melody)

Somewhat ironically, Bristow (2016) claims that many of the dominant discourses about older generations stealing the future of younger cohorts are produced by influential (older) figures in the UK public domain. As Alexander Shaw (2017, p. 10) puts it, ‘baby boomers versus millennials may be being propagated by newspaper editors who, like Willets, are themselves members of the boomer generation’.

‘Staying on’ – opportunities, threats and employment policies

In this paper, our purpose has been to start to chart the perceptions and experiences of a number of older academics who have stayed on in paid employment past the default retirement age of 65. All of our participants made their decision to stay on in paid employment some time ago. Thus, this paper is not concerned with their transition into partial retirement as much as their perceptions and experiences of staying on. Overall, our participant’s views reflect well-established discourses about ‘fulfilling’ work being sustaining emotionally and in relation to health and well-being for elders, circulated in anti-ageist and gerontological circles (Marvell and Cox, 2017). They also reflect public

policy discourses that are intent on keeping elders at work – thus reducing social welfare costs and increasing tax gains for the national economy.

Staying on poses threats as well as opportunities in the academy.

Some more individualised threats relate to perceptions and experiences of ageism in the workplace; some participants, mainly females, reported careless actions that resulted in their feelings of exclusion and neglect of their contribution. Other more systemic threats relate to complex questions about whose identity matters in the workplace. Should some academics be able to select out what work they want to do and do not want to do on the basis of being older? What are the implications of this method of workload management for other (younger or mid-aged) academics? There are also questions related to the status of those who have elected to stay on.

In our sample, two thirds of our participants are professors who may possess more social and professional capital and therefore may be better able to manage to navigate the demands of the neo-liberal university with its high workloads, research grants, outputs and impact.

Those participants like Bradley, James and Bella, although senior academics from both the new and old university sectors were not protected in the same way. The male professors in our sample, also working in both types of universities, enjoyed better support systems and were more likely to be regarded as assets to be protected. This protection was not offered to their female equivalents to the same degree. From our small sample, no significant differences emerged between the different types of institutions with issues associated with gender and status being far more influential.

Our participants were aware of the fragile financial situation of UK universities and conflicts over issues of 'staying on' potentially reducing the capacity to appoint new academics. Most of our participants argued that if they were to leave, their post would remain unfilled as their university needed to make cuts. They could see that there were 'difficult balances involved' (Samuel) as well as some 'divisive politics' in play (Melody). There was recognition that balancing things out to create fair employment practices is both very difficult and very complex. However,

as Blackham (2015) suggests, there may be a need in the future to revisit the removal of the retirement age.

However, some senior managers were reported, by our participants, to be embracing and perpetuating stereotypes that could be regarded, at best, as careless of the contribution of older academics. Finding a socially inclusive solution to the policy conundrum surrounding older academics needs an awareness of their experiences in order to interrupt and refuse institutional inequality in the arena of 'staying on' if and where it occurs. Simultaneously, policy must address the needs of differently aged academics who need to experience the same sorts of supports and inclusive policies.

In this paper we have drawn on a sample of older academics to illustrate how power/positionality/ageism and gender interweave to produce a level of privilege in the context of 'staying on'. We believe our findings raise some complex but necessary questions for managers and more specifically university human resource development professionals.

There is a need to challenge any aspects of workplace policies that may lead to perceptions of age discrimination such as space allocation and resourcing. At the same time, while concepts of a 'fair innings' may still influence attempts to restructure the university labour force, work-force managers have to ensure that employment policies are not driven by these discredited ideas while ensuring that staffing fits the changing needs of higher education provision. There is a need to support and sustain the workforce taking into consideration the complexities of different axes of difference and working to extend policies and practices that are inclusive and socially just. At the same time, as all our participants recognise, there is a need to accommodate to longer term workforce planning, succession and change- management. Regardless of this policy complexity, universities should not lose sight of their fundamental goals including promoting mutual respect and enhancing more inclusive ways of working.

Note:

1. In December 2019, a UK employment tribunal ruled that an Oxford professor, forced to retire before his 70th birthday, was unfairly

dismissed and was discriminated against on the basis of his age. Oxford University had introduced its employment policy in 2011 in order to employ younger and more diverse staff.
<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/physicist-wins-employment-tribunal-over-oxford-retirement-rule>

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