
Lecture - Transferable skills and midlife learning; making sense of skills reviews for learning and working in later life

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Abstract

Transferable skills are poorly understood by individuals and their (potential) employers, and to a lesser extent by career and adult educators. Though transferable skills are mentioned as important by job coaches and advisors in employment support roles, frequently little is done to support an increased understanding.

Given the current focus on later life employment, and therefore an increased need for appropriate training and education, enabling an enhanced understanding of transferable skills in midlife has become ever more important. But are educators and other professionals equipped to support individuals in this task?

One possible route forward is to enable people in midlife to gain access to a review. To this end a series of projects examined support for employed or unemployed learners in midlife. The first was Midlife Career Review (in the UK), which trialled approaches with 3,000 participants; this focused on a 'whole life review' which included future work, wellbeing, finances and life outside work as well as retirement planning. It was here that the paucity of skills review opportunities was evidenced.

Subsequently an Erasmus Plus project expanded a peer mentored toolkit for skills reviews called Value My Skills, which was converted to an online offer in 8 languages. More recently, a further Erasmus Plus project, European Mid-life Skills Review (E-MLSR) across 5 European countries introduces further on-line support for mid-life learners.

Meanwhile however, the situation facing older workers has become even more difficult. The Covid-19 pandemic led to large numbers of older workers in Europe leaving the workforce, resulting in economic challenges at individual and national levels, while also placing demands on career and adult educators, in terms of guidance, advice, retraining, updating skills and broadening educational opportunities. However, midlife support for workers must further consider the barriers that older people face, as well as encountering a contested policy context and some potentially contradictory practice.

Older workers may face difficulties if employers discount their skills and abilities, especially in low skilled sectors, or having lower levels of prior education, and/or are in groups likely to face discrimination in the labour market (such as gender and race). Work is changing and some people need retraining to remain employable. However, individuals in midlife have not typically focused on retraining as a priority. With the pressure to prolong working life led by rising state pension ages across Europe, workers need to find ways to ensure that they can stay in employment just as employers require their services. Simultaneously, there are opportunities for wider learning to which older adults may not have access; there can be tensions between skills adaptation and lifelong learning aims. Can skills reviews make any contribution to improving this situation?

This lecture shares some of the results of the E-MLSR project and explores, in conclusion, what might be needed to offer a better range of educational options for learners in mid-life, based on the identification and utilisation of transferable skills?

Biographical note

Newly 'retired', my background is in community and adult education practice and policy. For some time my research interest has focused on learning in midlife and the employability of older workers. I worked for many years on EU funded projects, most recently the European Midlife Skills Review Project, led by the UK's Trades Union Congress. <https://www.unionlearn.org.uk/european-mid-life-skills-review-project>

I am an Associate of: the Learning and Work Institute (formerly NIACE); the Centre for Policy on Ageing; and, the University of Derby, International Centre for Guidance Studies.

I am an active member of both ESREA's working group on Education and Learning of Older Adults and the Association of Education and Ageing.

My other interest is in the co-operative movement, particularly in worker co-ops, and in community development learning. I am a member of the Leicester Vaughan College Co-op.

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