

The Health Benefits of Lifelong Learning

Pathways to promoting better wellbeing among older adults

Introduction

When the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science was introduced in 2020, further education appeared in the title of a government department for the first time, giving visibility to its important role in Ireland. Simon Harris, the department's first minister, has on many occasions highlighted the relevance of further education and training (FET), calling the sector 'one of our greatest national strategic assets' (Harris, 2022).

A key strategy of the department is to develop innovative pathways between further and tertiary education to promote the employability of graduates. This continues to be an integral aim of both third-level education and the FET sector. Lifelong learning is also integral to the strategy, to promote the inclusion and diversity of learners.

Lifelong learning, also called adult education, is defined broadly as 'any learning activity undertaken throughout life in a formal, non-formal or informal setting which results in improving knowledge, know-how, skills, competences and qualifications for personal, social or professional reasons' (UNESCO, 2023).

Ireland's population is growing older, with one in four adults today aged 60 or more (Age Action Ireland, 2022). They want to remain healthy and active not despite but because of retirement and ageing. In 2008, the Aontas report 'Don't Stop Me Now!' recommended that government policy ensure lifelong learning as a priority. It advocated for greater investment, development, and research in this sector.



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Lifelong learning is integral to government strategy on education, and there is great diversity of courses available, though also barriers to participation. This article explores the health benefits of lifelong learning among older adults, and the different forms of intelligence that it fosters. It concludes by outlining the opportunities that our new understanding presents for the FET sector and tertiary education.

Access and participation

Realising the potential of lifelong learning ‘requires political commitment and the development of cross-sectoral and multi-level policies’ (UNESCO, 2023). Creating systems that realise the right to education for people of all ages contributes to social justice, sustainable development, and global citizenship (ibid.). Speaking at the World Higher Education Conference in 2022, David Atchoarena, director of the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, highlighted the need for higher-education institutions to create opportunities for non-traditional students to participate in lifelong learning in their local communities, colleges, and universities.

Today, the variety of courses available for older adults in Ireland is as diverse as this population itself. Some courses are non-accredited and not listed in the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). Their real value is that they often represent learning for the love of learning across the life course. Many are more widely accessible through online media such as massive open online courses (MOOCs) or other flexible programmes. Some offer opportunities to avail of micro-credentials.

Access to this form of learning can be difficult for some, because of barriers such as a lack of information-technology skills. Social interaction is an important part of learning. Researchers in anthropology and sociology have emphasised the importance of social interaction for learning and development (De Felice et al., 2022). Many learners like to interact with other learners and tutors face to face.

Other barriers persist for older learners, such as lack of transportation, lack of mobility, and financial constraints. Some barriers are psychological, for instance difficult experiences of school in the past. Some adults believe their level of knowledge is inadequate for lifelong learning. These are just some of the barriers identified through research in Ireland and globally (Gibney et al., 2018; Moustakas, 2018; Meyler et al., 2023).

Health benefits

Participation in lifelong learning in Ireland is also important because of the health benefits for an increasing ageing population (Cabeza et al., 2018; Irish & Ramanan, 2021). The field of cognitive neuroscience and ageing explores the biological processes that underlie cognition, focusing on neural connections in the brain, while cognitive science explores how the human mind processes experience and information.

A landmark study found that lifelong learning can be associated with delay in the onset of age-related mental decline (Vemuri et al., 2014). People who took

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adult education classes between middle and older age were less likely 'to experience cognitive decline' later in life (Berman, 2023). De Felice et al. (2022) evaluated how social interaction benefits learning for adults across various domains, such as language skills, motor skills, and conceptual knowledge.

Conceptual knowledge, which allows us to collect facts and ideas and group them into clusters, is developed through reading, viewing, listening, experiencing, or reflecting thoughtfully. It contributes to fluid intelligence: the ability to learn new information, think abstractly, and problem-solve in new situations (Almeida-Meza et al., 2020). Crystallised intelligence is the knowledge, facts, and skills accumulated throughout life. Ageing affects fluid intelligence and crystallised intelligence in different ways (Bajpai et al., 2022; Tucker-Drob et al., 2022).

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Keeping the brain active as we age improves fluid intelligence. While it is not yet clear how lifelong learning may affect the risk of dementia, its benefits are clear for fluid intelligence (Vemuri et al., 2014), one standard by which cognitive performance can be measured. What these studies highlight is that 'intellectual lifestyle enrichment throughout life is increasingly viewed as a protective strategy against commonly observed cognitive decline in the older population' (ibid.).

An opportunity

Not only does staying involved in lifelong learning help develop new knowledge and skills, but it can contribute to overall mental stimulation as we age. This relatively new understanding of the health benefits of lifelong learning presents a new opportunity for the FET sector and tertiary education in Ireland.

While current government policies in this sector have been developed to promote pathways to employability, there is an opportunity to develop strategies to promote pathways to health and well-being through FET and higher education. This benefits all learners but especially older learners, who have much to contribute to this sector. Their participation can promote social cohesion and intergenerational engagement that helps the wider community. Their lived experience, knowledge, and skills can be shared as a valuable knowledge base for a younger generation in formal and informal learning.

Lifelong learning brings with it the potential to promote health benefits to the growing numbers of adults who participate. This can add value to our education system, which is maximised when the learning takes place through social engagement with tutors and other learners.

Wider participation in lifelong learning requires that existing barriers for older adults be addressed. The National Training Fund, with its focus on employment

and upskilling, could be one pathway at government level to ensure that funding is available for the development and sustainability of lifelong learning programmes at community level and in tertiary education. This would encourage greater participation by a wider population of older adults now and in the future.

Developing a clear rationale to promote health benefits through lifelong learning as we age would be a good investment for the department. To deliver on these innovative initiatives would be a watershed moment in defining the role and benefits of education in Ireland.

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Minister Harris launches Ireland's first Civil Engineering Apprenticeships at ATU



Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Simon Harris TD, launched new civil engineering programmes at Atlantic Technological University (ATU) recently, which will provide an opportunity for apprentices to earn and learn, and gain a higher education qualification. These apprenticeships based at ATU's Sligo campus are led by the Civil Engineering Apprenticeship Consortium made up of the Civil Engineering Contractors Association (CECA), the Construction Industry Federation (CIF), Association of Consulting Engineers of Ireland (ACEI), Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), Uisce Éireann, the Local Government Management Association (LGMA), Engineers Ireland (Advisory capacity only) and Atlantic Technological University.