

Engaging Ageing – DCU – 3rd November 2015

Good morning everyone, I'd like to thank DCU and the conference collaborators for the invitation to AGE Platform Europe to speak at this inaugural conference on the Age Friendly University.

I'm going to start with a question – **what age is old?** How will I know when I'm old? Think about it.

Put up your hands those who think old is 50 – 65? Any takers on 75? 85? 100?

Apparently, if you ask anyone over 50 what age is old, they will say it is at least ten years older than themselves. I suspect if you asked a teenager the question, you would get the same answer. Hold that thought – we will come back to it.

I'm going to give a brief introduction to what AGE Platform Europe is, look at how we influence policy at European level, outline our participation in the area of Age Friendly Environments and reference the Covenant on Demographic Change to be launched in December.

Finally, I hope to identify what, to an outsider, might be the characteristics of an age friendly university and outline what I see as some issues that need to be addressed if we are to achieve an age friendly Europe by 2020.

Age Platform Europe was set up in January 2001, following a process of discussion on how to improve and strengthen cooperation between older people's organisations at EU level. It is a network of organisations of and for people aged 50+ which aims to voice and promote the interests of the 150 million senior citizens in the European Union and to raise awareness of the issues that concern them most. Membership is open to European, national and regional non-profit organisations who work both of and for older people. Our work is financed by grants from the European Union, membership fees and donations.

I represent the Irish members of AGE Platform - who are

- Age & Opportunity: the national organisation which inspires everyone to reach their full potential as they age;
- Active Retirement Ireland which is a national network of groups that stand up for older people, empower them and support them to get the most from their retirement
- Third Age: which works towards an Ireland and a world where the third age of life is valued and celebrated.

Our work in AGE focuses on a wide range of policy areas that impact on older people. These include issues of anti-discrimination, employment of older workers, active ageing, social protection, pension reforms, social

inclusion, health, elder abuse, intergenerational solidarity, research, accessibility of public transport and the built environment, and new technologies (ICT).

Our guiding principles hold that a change of attitudes is needed to achieve a European society for all ages and that there is a need to promote solidarity between generations in a way that recognises and validates older people's contributions to society.

Through our 145 member organisations, we are in a position to gather the voices, opinions and concerns of older people and to input that information to the European Commission, EU parliament and other relevant bodies to inform policy. There is an old saying – if you want to know what someone needs or wants, it's usually a good idea to ask them. Optimal ageing is more likely to happen if the voice of older people is included in the discourse.

This approach will require a change in attitude – from all population groups, including older people themselves. A more positive image of ageing needs to emerge to counteract the stereotypes that prevail which can lead to discrimination. Common sense tells us that older people are no more a homogenous group than any other cohort – they may be male or female, straight or gay, married or not, mean or generous, rich or poor, healthy or frail, working, unemployed or retired.

Any stereotype is dangerous – the stereotype of 'aren't they great, old people?' is as bad as the assumption that once we reach a certain age, we are way past our sell by date.

At our forthcoming General Assembly in November, AGE Platform will call for a comprehensive **human rights** approach in relation to policy development and service provision to older people. In addition, we recently launched an online self-advocacy handbook aimed at older people and organisations working with them, to support the involvement of older people in all processes that affect their human rights. Nothing about us without us, as the slogan goes.

This focus on human rights has arisen within the context at European and indeed global level where the fact that, with any luck, we will all live longer, instead of being something to be celebrated, is frequently framed as a negative; particularly within the context of struggling economies. I have heard conference papers which refer to a **tsunami of older people** – expound on the **crisis of demographic ageing** - overall the picture that is painted is of millions of older people requiring long term care, soaking up resources, taking hospital beds all on the backs of the unfortunate young people toiling away to keep us in the manner to which we have become accustomed. This sort of discourse can contribute to a perspective where older people are seen as **people with needs, rather than people with rights**.

AGE Platform works to impact on policy in a range of ways, including:

- Policy papers on specific issues such as active citizenship, social innovation, adequate income
- Meetings with EU Commission and parliament
- Participation in the United Nations open ended working group to argue for a UN Convention on the Rights of Older People
- Drawing on the opinion of national experts from across the EU in our 14 Task Forces
- Participation in European projects with other organisations
- Collaboration with key influencers including the World Health organisation, the Social Platform and the Global Alliance for the Rights of Older People
- Engaging in the European Semester process
- Through an annual declaration on specific issues at our General Assembly

Our successes over the past year have included:

- Re-establishment in the new EU Parliament of the Intergroup on Ageing and Intergenerational Solidarity
- Launch of an EU Charter of the rights and responsibilities of older people in need of long-term care or assistance
- In April 2015, AGE Platform was granted special consultative status by the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)
- Became an Institutional Affiliate of WHO Global network of Age Friendly cities
- In December of this year, as a culmination of our work with the WHO, the Committee of the Regions and the Age Friendly Environments Innovnet Project, EIP we will launch the Covenant on Demographic Change

We heard yesterday from Hugh O'Connor of Age Friendly Ireland about the progress of Ireland becoming an age friendly country. In AGE Platform, we see age friendly environments as key enablers for active and healthy ageing: they support independent living and older people's participation in essential areas of everyday life.

Up to recently, as Head of Education and Training with the Irish NGO Age & Opportunity, I worked directly with Older People's Councils and Local Authorities across the country to facilitate the process of working together. It has been very encouraging to see how the age friendly process has become embedded in cities and counties. It really is an example of a growing sense of local democracy where both Local Authorities and older citizens are learning how to work together; in most cases, this is a new experiences for both parties.. Sitting on an Age Friendly Alliance in Fingal County with other service providers gave me an insight into how the process can influence issues such as local transport and planning. It also highlighted that an age friendly environment does not only benefit older people, but has knock on effects

on all ages. For example, in a walkability survey carried out in a town in Fingal, older people, people with disabilities and parents with young children participated to identify the common barriers.

We must ensure that the age friendly process remains high on the priority of local authorities. One example of how this can be challenging is the fact that in the recent reform of local authorities structures in Ireland, older people were not identified as a priority group. Fortunately, through the age friendly process, older people's councils and networks have been proactively encouraged to become involved in the appropriate local structures.

At European level, the members of the consortium of the AFE Innovnet project, comprised of 29 Stakeholders from 16 countries, were acutely aware of the challenge of keeping older people on the EU agenda and the need to spread the word about age friendly environments to all member states.

To that end, the members of AFE Innovnet project consortium explored ways to build on the progress so far, in particular, on the Dublin Declaration. The Dublin Declaration was developed collaboratively by World Health Organisations (WHO) Global Network of Age-friendly Cities, the Ageing Well Network (forerunner organisation to Age Friendly Ireland), and the International Federation on Ageing. The regions, cities, counties and communities, globally, who have signed the Dublin Declaration to date, share a common set of values and principles. They are prepared to commit to actions that will improve the quality of life of older people, strengthen and sustain our systems and services across all sectors and stakeholders, and promote a culture of innovation that will foster growth and development.

Taking commitment of the Dublin Declaration a step further, the Covenant on Demographic Change will become a formal legal entity that will gather public authorities, civil society organisations, research centres and industries willing to work together on the deployment and promotion of age-friendly environments across Europe as an answer to demographic change.

The Covenant has been the ultimate objective of the AFE-INNOVNET project and has been supported by the European Commission, European Parliament and Committee of the Regions since AGE started to campaign for such structure in the framework of the European Innovation Partnership on Active and Healthy Ageing.

Since our objective from the beginning has been to build synergies with existing initiatives, it was decided by the AFE-INNOVNET consortium to follow the Irish partners' suggestion and make it a requirement for applicants to "accept the Dublin Declaration on Age-Friendly Cities and Communities in Europe 2014 as the shared values and principles of action".

The Covenant will connect and align the existing initiatives such as the WHO Global network on Age Friendly Cities and Communities and its affiliated programmes, the WHO-European Healthy cities network, the Dublin Declaration on age friendly cities and communities and the European Innovation partnership on Active and Healthy Ageing. When you hear the plethora of initiatives that are focussed on this area, at global, European and national levels, you can see why an umbrella initiative such as the Covenant on Demographic Change will be in a position to facilitate communication, draw together learning, and disseminate the lessons to a wider public, in particular, to older people's networks at grassroots level.

AGE have worked very closely with WHO to ensure that the Covenant will be aligned with the WHO Global Network of AFCC and local authorities joining the Covenant will be allowed to join the GNAFCC with no further administrative requirement.

The objectives of the Covenant on Demographic Change are

- To improve healthy life year expectancy
- To enhance opportunities for independent living of older people
- And to support a society of all ages.

These objectives highlight some of the main concerns that are emerging in the research about how we are ageing. I recently attended the WHO Global Forum on Innovation for Ageing Populations, in Kobe, which focussed on the latest report from WHO on Healthy Ageing. What was interesting was how the report focussed on what they called 'intrinsic capacity', the composite of all the physical and mental capacities that an individual can call on at any point in time. This is useful in that it takes a very person centred approach, rather than setting a benchmark against which people could be measured. Another interesting finding in what is a fascinating report is that although we are living longer; the research does not confirm that our additional years are likely to be healthy unless certain changes are made at both individual and societal level.

When we think of ourselves living longer lives, as individuals, we generally visualise ourselves continuing pretty much as we are at present and yet that is not likely to be the case unless each of us takes responsibility for our future.

So where does the age friendly university fit in with all of the above.

Let me ask you another question: **what activity do you think brings people more happiness than any other?**

I was at a conference some years ago on lifelong learning. The research appeared to indicate that learning brought more happiness to people than any other activity. When the researchers were pressed on the point of ‘any other activity?’ they affirmed, yes, definitely, regardless of the other activity which I’d say we all had in mind.

Since then, there appears to be a growing body of research linking learning to happiness, happiness to an older age with better mental and physical health. So, lifelong learning would appear to be emerging as a significant player in our quest for more healthy and happy life years.

If there is anything we have learned from the Age Friendly Ireland experience it is that becoming age friendly is a process, not a box that can be ticked. One of the issues that can be confusing is the definition of an older person – which in the European context is anyone over 50. That can be a bit depressing for people who have just got used to being in their forties, they turn fifty and suddenly they find out they are old. You wouldn’t take the cohort aged 1-50 and attempt any type of generalisation about them, yet there is a tendency to do that for people over 50 and certainly for people over 65, which is when many of us feel that older age begins. As someone who is 65 in two weeks, I just wonder will I wake up and feel different?

When I was thinking about what an age friendly university might look like, I had a look at what John Henry Newman had to say in his ‘Idea of a University’. Newman envisaged the function of a University as (and I am summarising – he was a bit long winded) the exchange of experience and understanding between participants with each other and with their tutors as enabling people to engage in the dynamic and interactive exchange which would allow for new developments in thinking.

It seems to me that DCU is perfectly placed to offer that dynamism and interactive exchange between all ages. With its range of courses from the science and engineering areas to the humanities, arts and culture programmes, DCU can offer a truly lifelong learning experience informed by research and experiential learning.

As with access programmes of which DCU has long been a proponent, it would be important that the University didn’t see that it had to sacrifice any of its intellectual integrity, rather to see its mission as enabling people to access learning within the real university experience. The proposal to allow older people to audit some courses in 2016 is very welcome in that it enables learning for its own sake, without the necessity to take exams – let’s face it, sitting exams at any age is a challenge and of course is not necessary to the learning experience. This type of activity is often given some financial support and that might be something the government might look at particularly for people who were not in a position to participate in third level education when they were younger.

Following my participation in the WHO Global Forum in Kobe, I arrived back in Ireland full of good intentions and determined to put into practice what I had learned and immediately joined the DCU Gym. As I was plodding away on the instrument of torture normally called a cross trainer, I could see people of all ages processing through the centre – some for post cancer physical exercise, some post diabetes, cardio surgery etc., some just like myself trying desperately to stave off the threats to future health. There were of course also the students and staff so it was, I have to say, a truly age friendly environment with **everyone participating according to their need, their capacity and their desire to fulfil their individual potential**. That is really what an age friendly university should be.

Along with climate change, the EU recognises demographic ageing as one of its key challenges going toward 2020. So what does AGE Platform see as the issues which remain to be addressed?

There is no doubt that in times of crisis, when countries feel themselves under threat from external or internal forces, whether it be terrorism, the huge migration upheaval currently taking place across the Union or financial constraints, allied to the increasing privatisation of goods and services, human rights can tend to slip down the priority list. Our member organisations who work at the coalface with older people tell us about older people whose pensions have been so eroded as to be totally insufficient, and yet have the burden of supporting their adult children who are unemployed; older people who are homeless, who experience physical or financial abuse; older people who are made redundant due to their age and cannot get another job due to discrimination.

AGE Platform is working with other NGOs from across the globe to press the United Nations to bring in a Convention on Human Rights for Older People. At the moment, this is somewhat of an uphill struggle. The European Commission is currently not in favour of such a convention. Their argument is that there are enough measures already in place and that older people are covered by the UN Convention on the rights of people with disability. If we accept that not all older people have a disability, the weakness of that argument is apparent.

AGE Platform is particularly concerned about one specific group – older people in long term care. When a person goes into long term care, it is often in a crisis situation for the family – and the right of the older person to fulfil their human potential and their personal autonomy can be overwhelmed by issues of health and safety, medication, supervision and accommodation. And yet, the day to day lived experience of many older people in long term care can be very bleak, long periods of boredom punctuated by meals.

What we might take for granted such as the right to make a cup of tea for a visitor, decide to do a bit of gardening, even go for a walk, paint a picture, stay up late is

often either extremely restricted or totally denied to older people in long term care settings.

Let's face it; there are not many nursing homes you would come away from, where you would say: 'I wouldn't mind going there'.

Within the context of Age Friendly environments, older people will have to take responsibility for proactively engaging in planning processes with Local Authorities to jointly come up with new ideas and solutions to how and where we will live as we age. An age friendly university is well placed to support such processes by facilitating evidence based research into smart solutions to living spaces, such as the initiative in the Netwell Centre in Dundalk Institute of Technology.

I would encourage DCU and University of Strathclyde as the European age friendly universities in this collaborative partnership to become members of AGE Platform – I think there is tremendous potential there for exchange of research findings, models of good practice and ongoing dialogue. I look forward to discussing that with the DCU in the coming weeks.

This is a really exciting time to be growing older – a new phase in history where for the first time we have the exponential growth of smart technology and the communication capacity to work together at a global level to come up with a new and ever evolving vision of ageing. We can truly create a new old!

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