



## **PASCAL International Observatory Briefing Paper 29**

### **University Responses to Population Ageing<sup>1</sup>**

**Peter Kearns AM, Associate, PASCAL International Observatory**

#### **The Paradox of Ageing**

This paper addresses the paradox of aging as we also consider ways in which universities are innovating in response to demographic shifts with aging populations. Innovative concepts such as Age-friendly universities reflect this development.

Joseph Coughlin, director of the MIT AgeLab, has described this shift in our concept of ageing in the following terms.

*Our very idea of old age, which is socially constructed, historically contingent, and deeply flawed-s falsely defined as a pull-to-open door with a “push” sign on it.*  
(Coughlin 2017: 12)

This imperative to rethink our concept of aging has brought into focus the question of how universities respond to population ageing, and the emergence of concepts such as Age-friendly universities. At the same time, this trend adds to the significance of the cultural foundations of education policy.

The cultural foundations of education policy has been a core aspect of the PASCAL approach to learning and learning cities since the Östersund conference of 2011. During this period, the following PASCAL international conferences have shaped the following developments.

- The Östersund conference of 2011 which led to a book entitled *Heritage, Regional Development, and Social Cohesion* which explored the key role of cultural institutions such as museums and libraries (Kearns, Kling. & Wistman 2011).
- The Pretoria conference of 2017 which led to two books, *Learning for Better Futures; Perspectives on higher education, cities, business and community* (Venter & Hattingh, 2021) and *Local Economies and Pandemics: Regional Perspectives* ( Venter. & de

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<sup>1</sup> This is an edited version of Keynote 7 on *University Responses to Population Ageing* that I delivered at the 17<sup>th</sup> PASCAL International Conference in Taipei on 6 July 2024.

Bruyn, 2023), which provided diverse perspectives on higher education, cities, business, and civil society, and policy and then in respect of pandemics.

- The Suwon conference of 2018 which brought the question of ageing populations into core PASCAL policy with the First Report of the PASCAL and PIMA SIG on *Learning in Later Life* (Kearns & Reghenzani-Kearns, 2018). The PASCAL and PIMA SIG report drew attention to the significant role of institutions such as community colleges in Taiwan, Volkshochschulen in Germany, Kominkan in Japan, and U3A in a range of countries.

The evolution of PASCAL ideas on culture, and the impact of culture on policy in response to ageing populations, has been taken further at the PASCAL 2024 Taipei conference where the concept of Age-friendly universities was added to PASCAL ideas on learning and place. A recent webinar identified the significant role of universities in supporting Lifelong Learning Festivals.

A further compilation of PASCAL ideas on learning cities occurred when the Taipei City Government published the PASCAL overview of *Learning and City Futures*. Addressing these policy challenges brought together a range of PASCAL papers on learning city futures (Osborne, Tibbitt & Kearns 2023).

### **Age-friendly universities**

The Age-friendly university concept evolved from the Age-friendly city concept developed by the World Health Organisation in its approach to healthy active ageing.

The transfer of this concept to universities was initiated by a group of Irish Universities led by Dublin City University, which developed a set of ten principles to define the features of Age-friendly universities. These principles are directed at the participation of older adults in the core teaching, learning and research activities of universities, while also recognising the distinctive educational needs of many older adults, including early school leavers and intergenerational synergies. There is a global network of Age-friendly universities that supports overall age-inclusiveness: see Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Ten Principles of Age-friendly Universities (Dublin City University)**

# Ten Principles for an Age-Friendly University

Developed and launched by DCU in 2012

- 1 To encourage the participation of older adults in all the core activities of the university, including educational and research programmes.
- 2 To promote personal and career development in the second half of life and to support those who wish to pursue "second careers".
- 3 To recognise the range of educational needs of older adults (from those who were early school-leavers through to those who wish to pursue Master's or PhD qualifications).
- 4 To promote intergenerational learning to facilitate the reciprocal sharing of expertise between learners of all ages.
- 5 To widen access to online educational opportunities for older adults to ensure a diversity of routes to participation.
- 6 To ensure that the university's research agenda is informed by the needs of an ageing society and to promote public discourse on how higher education can better respond to the varied interests and needs of older adults.
- 7 To increase the understanding of students of the longevity dividend and the increasing complexity and richness that ageing brings to our society.
- 8 To enhance access for older adults to the university's range of health and wellness programmes and its arts and cultural activities.
- 9 To engage actively with the university's own retired community.
- 10 To ensure regular dialogue with organisations representing the interests of the ageing population.

A distinctive feature of population ageing has been the emergence of the longevity society and economies with altered relationships between generations (Kearns, & Reghenzani-Kearns 2021). This feature of the emerging longevity societies means that a key feature of Age-friendly universities is to 'promote inter-generational learning to facilitate the reciprocal sharing of expertise between learners of all ages. (Principle 4).

The University of Queensland (UQ) in Brisbane has become Australia's first Age-friendly University while also serving as the lead Age-friendly university for Oceania. UQ has listed on its website the same ten principles that were developed by Dublin City University. A questionnaire was developed seeking the views of older people on what they wanted from a university. At the same time the director of the initiative, Professor Nancy Pachana, held extensive consultations across faculties to establish the current situation of the University in respect of the guiding principles.

While UQ is still at an early stage of development as an Age-friendly university, this aspiration holds promise that the outcomes will bring 'the longevity dividend' with increasing complexity and richness that ageing brings to our society.

## **Harnessing Technology in Addressing the Needs of an Ageing Population**

A further key feature of university responses to ageing populations has been harnessing the role of technology in extending opportunities for learning by older people. Chinese government policy to address the learning needs of its large ageing population has included the key role of the Open University of China.

## **The Tsinghua International Symposium on Ageing Well and Public Service Delivery; Policy and Practice**

The bones of this approach were laid at the International Symposium on Ageing Well and Public Service Delivery convened by Tsinghua University, Beijing in 2019. The spectrum of ideas from national and international sources were brought together at this symposium in a report published in Chinese by Tsinghua University and circulated across the country (Reghenzani-Kearns, 2019). The government policy announced a little later by President Xi gave a key role to the Open University of China which is owned and managed by the Ministry of Education with over 3,700 study centres located in urban and rural areas across China.

### **Rethinking our Concept of Ageing and Being Old**

Innovations in University responses to ageing populations, such as the Age-friendly university concept, have been accompanied by changes in our concept of age and an ageing society.

These shifts have included the promotion of learning throughout life by older Australians with the development of a Lifelong Learning Policy by National Seniors Australia which recognizes life deep learning as well as life long and life wide learning. This new approach to the 100-year life has been articulated by authors such as Gratton and Scott (2017) and set out in government policy in countries such as Japan, China, Singapore and in innovative international longevity centres such as those in Stanford and London. The Stanford ILC has been particularly innovative in developing a White Paper on the *New Map of Life* (Kearns, 2021). This revolutionary approach to the 100-year life has brought with it the concept of ‘stages, not ages’ set out with concepts such as the Third Age (mid-life) and Fourth Age (later life) being designed in ways that foster healthy active ageing (see Figure 2).

### **Figure 2: Stages, not Ages**

# NAVIGATING THE STAGES OF LIFE

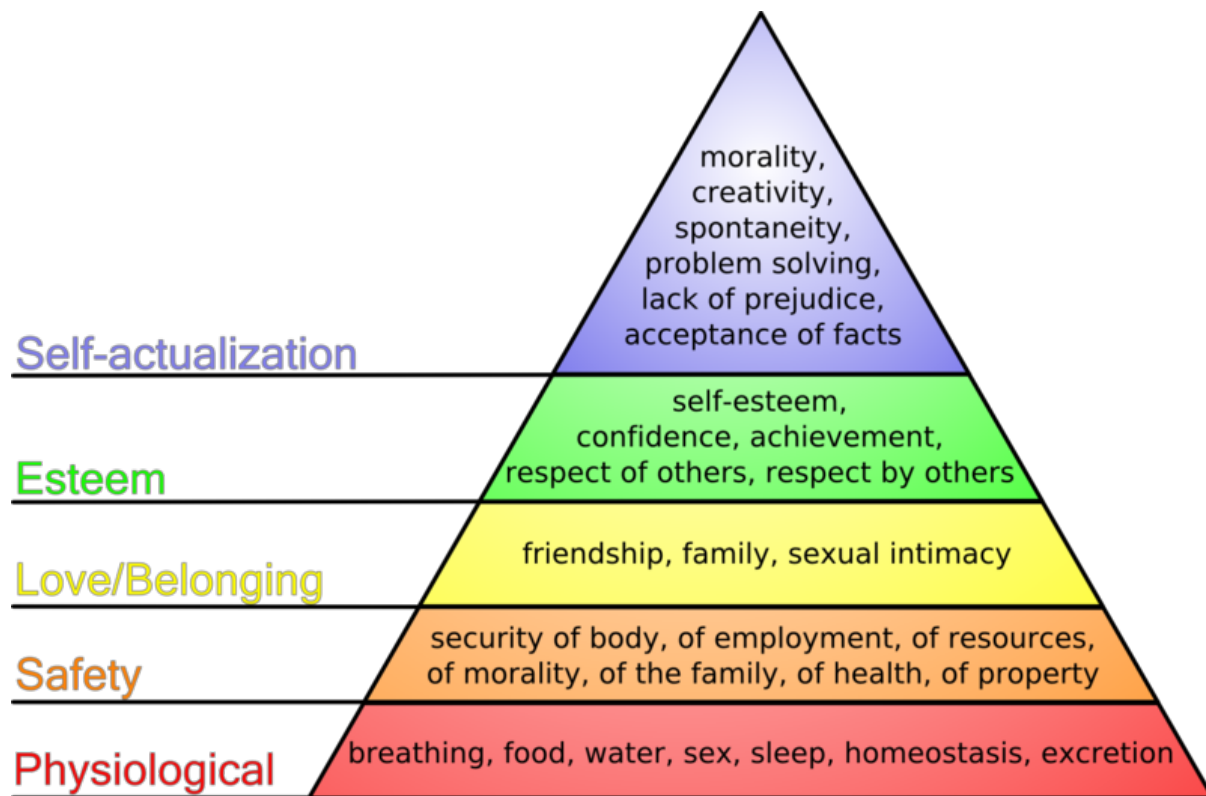
Third Age/Mid-Life	Fourth Age/Later Life
<p><b>Common Features</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A period of adjustment</li> <li>Sometimes mid-life crises</li> <li>Preparing for old age</li> <li>New interests/travel</li> <li>Happiness maybe low</li> <li>Return to education (e.g. U3A)</li> </ul>	<p><b>Common Features</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Often health concerns</li> <li>Contented (despite concerns)</li> <li>More concerned with values and where society is going</li> <li>Maintains interests and reading</li> <li>May have to deal with isolation &amp; loneliness</li> </ul>
<p><b>Good Practice</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Social connectedness</li> <li>Joins National Seniors branch or similar</li> <li>Volunteers/part-time work</li> <li>Develops an approach to ageing and values</li> <li>Reads widely and pursues new interests</li> <li>Develops sense of empathy towards others</li> <li>Good transition to later life</li> </ul>	<p><b>Good Practice</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Self actualisation (personal fulfilment)</li> <li>Leadership in community continues</li> <li>Resilience in continuing healthy/active life</li> <li>Overall, a good citizen</li> <li>Advisor to family on changing life course</li> <li><i>"There is one more mountain to climb"</i></li> <li><i>"I can still contribute to family and society"</i></li> </ul>

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This is particularly appropriate in the era of the United Nations Decade of Healthy Ageing 2021-2030 which is giving an international presence to ideas promoted by the World Health Organization since 2002 & 2007. Universities are starting to respond to this new approach for demographic change and population ageing. The trail that the University of Queensland is blazing in Australia will surely lead to more older Australians ascending the 1943 Maslow Hierarchy of Needs to experience self-actualization in the emergence of a society for all ages (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs**





Finkelstein, J., 2006

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