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Academics ‘staying on’ post retirement age in English Universities:

Opportunities, threats and employment policies.

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Abstract

In recent years the number of academics working beyond traditional retirement age has increased. As a result of the UK Age Discrimination Act (2006) a default retirement age no longer exists and more people choose to ‘stay on’.

‘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 regarded as ‘bed blockers’ limiting employment and promotion opportunities for younger colleagues by staying in their posts. Drawing on twelve in-depth semi-structured interviews with academics who have stayed on, this paper explores these issues alongside more policy-related questions about employment in the sector.

Key Words:

Post-retirement work; reasons for staying in work; ageism; employment policy;

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 recent years in the UK the number of academics working beyond the traditional retirement age has increased. In the UK, 'for part-time academic staff, the largest increases have been from 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 (Schlosser and Armstrong-Stassen, 2011; Griffiths, 1999), the situation of those older 'stayers on' in higher educational institutions (HEIs) has been less widely addressed (Altman et al., 2019).

There have been two significant contributory factors involved in this change in the demographic of HEIs. First, legislation has been influential. The Age Discrimination Act (2006) and the Equality Act (2010) have resulted in a freeing up of 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 (Kristjuhan & Taidre, 2013).

This paper explores the narratives of twelve academics who have decided to 'stay on' working part-time in their institutions. All 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 chart some of the central issues involved in retirement in the U firstly through a consideration of some of the contextual issues raised by the removal of the retirement age , secondly through exploring the personal and social impacts of retiring as well as situating the baby-boomer generation. We also consider what is known about academics who continue to work post the traditional retirement age and decide to 'stay on'.

Contextualising 'staying on'

The introduction of the Age Discrimination Act was based to a set of 'equality 'principles and values that all should be treated equally in in our society and the treatment of older people based on stereotyped assumptions constitutes unfair treatment and is an affront to the dignity. A second and more pragmatic reason is that older peoples have skills , experiences and knowledge that are good for business and that employers want to be able to tap into . A third consideration is that this older population may need to work longer to firstly achieve a level of pension that will support them through their retirement years and secondly not to be a drain on the public purse (Manfredi and Vickers, 2009).

However whilst there is an emphasis on a mix of principle and pragmatism for the Age Discrimination Act there remains debates around its effects on employers and the impact it may or may not have on younger generations of workers. These arguments tend to circulate around stereotypical views of ageing, for example in an analysis of a submission to the Government on Employment Equality (Age) Regulations 2006, Sargeant found that there was a powerful narrative amongst employers that older workers would be unable to sustain a levels of competence and capability as they age (Blackman , 2006) Manfredi and Vickers 2009) draw attention to a position held by Fredman based on the notion of a 'fair innings'. The 'fair innings ' argument is that everyone starts young and as they age they will have had

time to accrue benefits, promotions and an increasing salary and in turn the young as they age will also enjoy these benefits and then ultimately suffer the inequalities of age discrimination . Fredman is making the argument that there is no discrimination in age as we all move from advantage to disadvantage at different stages in our lives. However as our data reveals the 'fair innings' argument fails to account for women who have interrupted careers .Discrimination is most often multi faceted and there is evidence that women in particular suffer discrimination in old age. For example women may have had some years away from their jobs to look after children or care for their elderly parents or start their careers later so will have had less years to build up their pension so expecting them to stop work at 65 is unfair. The gender pay gap follows women into their pension years resulting in the fact that women will have lower pension with men earningthan women which will directly impact on their level of income once they retire. There is a great deal of research which reveals how shorter working lives can and does lead to poverty in old age and how this disproportionately affects women (check ref).

Retirement is a major life transition and is influenced by wider changes in demographics and the labour-force (Altman, et al., 2019). 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 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).

One driver of this change in the labour-force is because of major demographic shifts. 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 on 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 threats and opportunities and in the UK a 'crisis' has been manufactured about the baby-

boomer generation. The baby-boomers are seen to have benefitted from supportive public policy initiatives (good health care, free education, available and affordable housing) but they are now remaining in their posts and limiting opportunities for younger people – Willetts (2011) calls this large cohort the ‘selfish giant’.

The ‘fair innings argument may have some purchase and resonance with the case made against the baby boomers in that older people working longer denies younger people the opportunity to move into their positions and enjoy the benefits accrued therefore they should retire . Fredman’s argument however assumes a finite number of jobs which will be unquestionably be replaced once the current occupier is removed. Our data shows consistently that this is not the case as it was reported by many of our participants that should they leave their posts neither they nor their post would be replaced.

Furthermore , Hamilton and Hamilton, (2006) suggest that baby boomers’ experiences, contrary to their image of being successful, lucky and economically independent, 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).

By staying on, older academics may run the risk of being positioned by the negative discourse of being 'bed blockers' who are limiting employment and promotion opportunities for younger colleagues (Willetts, 2011). However, '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 preventing younger academics from being promoted (1).

In a study by Blackman (2015) which compared the manging of default retirement age in Australia universities with those of the UK she found that evidence from the UK university sector had abandoned fixed retirement ages with the exceptions of Oxford and Cambridge who have adopted EJRA(Footnote this?) for some of their staff.

The University considers that the (EJRA) is important to ensure inter-generational fairm=nessto ensure that the University continues to work towards a diverse workforce and to refresh the academy in providing opportunities for career development to those at an early stage of their career.

Interestingly 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->

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 collegial relations between the cohorts and this contributed to feelings of satisfaction among the older workforce. In contrast, Altman et al., 2019 found that more junior academics were sometimes critical of their older and more experienced colleagues and considered some to be 'dead-wood'.

More recently, the burgeoning economic costs for UK universities have resulted in many academics not being replaced when they leave their post, nor when they retire. The 'fair innings argument may have some purchase and resonance with the case made against the baby boomers in that older people working longer denies younger people the opportunity to move into their positions and enjoy the benefits accrued therefore they should retire . Fredman's argument however assumes a finite number of jobs which will be unquestionably be replaced once the current occupier is removed. Our data shows consistently that this is not the case as it was reported by many of our participants that should they leave their posts, neither they nor their post would be replaced.

This, alongside the global expansion of Higher Education (Macfarlane, 2012) has created a shortage of adequately trained and qualified young academics. Macfarlane (2012) argues that this situation requires HEI managers to think more clearly about how the knowledge and skills of older professionals can be better utilised. However, academics, like other occupational groups, tend to have different retirement trajectories and some academic environments value age and experience more than others. In these institutions, many older academics will work beyond the traditional retirement age (Dansen and Gilmore, 2009).

As we have noted, there is now a growing pattern where more academics are choosing to 'stay on' post 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). A reluctance to 'give up' 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, found 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). Furthermore 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 set to play an increasingly important 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. They will also have different perceptions and experiences of being a 'stayer' in their own institution and also have views about policy and practice in this area as well as on arguably malign discourses such as 'bed-blocking'.

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 also wanted to explore any possible influences of institutional culture (White, 2013). We wanted to listen to the stories that our participants had to tell about their decisions to 'stay on' and remain working in higher education. We also wanted to try to connect their accounts of 'staying on' within a broader socio-historical and socio-political policy framework taking account of the cultural and policy contexts in which they/we are located (Goodson and Sikes, 2001). Thus we also asked them about their views on 'bed-blocking' as well as their institutional experiences of being older workers.

We conducted in-depth semi-structured individual interviews with twelve academics, aged 65 and over who had decided to 'stay on'. 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). Some participants were introduced to us by other academics in the field of education that were known to be 'staying on' (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). In constructing this sample, we deployed aspects of snowballing at the start but because we wanted to take some account of issues of gender as well as institutional cultures. We spoke with male and female academics and also with academics in modern/new universities as well as old universities (Boliver, 2015) to explore any diversity of experiences in terms of research cultures and expectations of academic staff. We were aware that different disciplines could

have different propulsions to stay/go (Dorfman, 2000) and decided to start within a field with which we were familiar.

(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, their experiences and views about potentially being seen as 'bed-blockers', so 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 (Saunders et al., 2018). Pseudonyms have been used in the reporting of the findings concealing the identity of both Institutions and academics.

Although our sample is small and limited, individual accounts can be valuable resources in 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. From these discussions we raise more policy-related questions about choosing to stay on, despite discourses that problematize and 'other' the baby-boomer generation.

Professional reasons for staying on

There are no current studies that foreground the choice to 'stay on' in the UK academy in relation to the discourse of 'bed-blocking'. However, many studies do explore academic moves into retirement (Davies and Jenkins, 2013; Cahill, et al., 2018) 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) have categorised transitioning academics coming up to retirement as being either 'continuing scholars', 'opportunists' who take up work outside the university, and 'avoiders' who do not seem to have plans and who avoid talking about their retirement. All of our participants could be best characterised as 'continuing scholars'; however it might be that for our participants their seniority and their 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'. In all

our twelve cases, these academics 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).

Of our twelve participants, eleven 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 twelve 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) also found, happiness and enthusiasm about continuing to work were factors in sustaining 'staying on'. Nearly all of the participants were now working part-time and using their unpaid days off to focus on their research interests and other scholarly activities. From this part time position they were relieved to be able to have 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)

However both Ruth and Molly experienced a hike in their workload resulting from fewer and fewer senior colleagues being replaced on leaving .As Ruth said

‘Im still expected read the same amount of outputs and make the same contributions to writing environment statements for the Ref 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 their life-long commitment towards education as a common good, their own research, and their 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’.

Personal reasons for staying on

We also identified a set of factors for staying on that we describe here as ‘personal’ reasons. Some of these reasons are fairly prosaic; five participants 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.

There were also other practical reasons such as the fact that the institution was ‘local’ to some of the stayers on. Several of our participants all 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 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 twelve ‘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 work.

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 and these more complex personal 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)

But 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 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 rooms were constantly under threat. 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, what our interviews revealed was that some of our respondents felt frozen out and marginalized on reaching the traditional retirement age, Bradley, a Senior Lecturer, for example, 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 an 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 opportunities for dialogue with younger colleagues may be lost.

Molly, 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 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 (above) 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 flourish.

This feeling of marginalisation was also evident from our interview with Gail.

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, although ageism is a widespread phenomenon (Walker, 2018).

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 for a variety of reasons. For James and Molly it was the accumulated experience and skills they brought 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, 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 issue of bed-blocking 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.

Discrimination is most often multi faceted and there is evidence that women in particular suffer discrimination in old age. For example women may have had some years away from their jobs to look after children or care for their elderly parents or start their careers later so will have had less years to build up her pension so expecting them to stop work at 65 is unfair and this was the case for half of the women in our study. Fiona, Gail and Bella had all had interrupted periods of work while shouldering the main responsibility for childcare and caregiving. Fiona and Gail felt that they had lost out on opportunities because of gendered expectations with regard to childcare, caring for the elderly and having to put their careers on hold, hardly a 'fair innings'

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. Over her career 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). Howker and Malik however, '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'. (2010, p. 97)

Melody pointed out 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.

It's not true (bed-blocking) we shouldn't be going to the lowest common denominator. So there's that political dimension, and it doesn't even hold because then 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 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' – a process of discursive discontinuity

In our study some key reasons have emerged in relation to why these older academics have decided to stay on post retirement. These reasons include a love of their work, a concern to carry on with their research interests as well as their wish to continue to participate in a community of scholars. Other reasons include issues of

status and identity; their identity is bound up with the occupational role of being an academic - this is who they are. Overall, what our participants have said reflects those discourses that make up affirmative claims about 'fulfilling' work being sustaining emotionally and in relation to health and well-being for elders that are 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.

In contrast to these arguably more benign discourses, alternative and conflicting discourses position older workers as a 'burden' or as less creative or less valuable in the labour market. Discourses have practical outcomes; those that position older people as 'other' can have malign consequences in institutional settings, as we have detailed in this paper. All of our participants were asked about the sorts of concerns expressed most powerfully in the UK by David Willetts (2011). Unsurprisingly, no-one has seen themselves or similar peers as 'bed-blockers'. In contrast, most of our participants argue that if they were to leave, their post would remain unfilled. In these circumstances, the intergenerational conflict that has been stirred up by the media and the government seems to have led to some of our participants being disparaged and stereotyped in their treatment by HE managers. Our participants were very aware of the fragile financial situation of some universities and conflicts over issues of 'staying on' potentially reducing the capacity to appoint new colleagues. 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.

In our study, some senior managers were caught up in ageist discourses embracing and perpetuating stereotypes that could be regarded at best as careless of the contribution of older academics. One way forward is to see these antagonistic discourses as evidence of complexity and instability as well as revealing ways in which 'educational sites are... centrally involved in the propagation and selective dissemination of discourses' (Ball, 1990, p. 3). Finding a socially inclusive solution to the policy conundrum surrounding older academics must attend to their experiences in order to interrupt and refuse institutional inequality in the arena of 'staying on'.

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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Table 1. Participants

Pseudonym (still real name)	Position/HEI
Liam	professor – old university (1)
James	senior lecturer – old university (1)
Bradley	senior lecturer –old university (2)
Molly	professor –old university (2)
Bella	principal lecturer- modern university (B)
Charles	professor –old university (2)
Gail	professor – modern university (A)
Fiona	professor –old university (3)
Ruth	professor –old university (1)
Diana	professor – modern university (A)
Melody	senior lecturer – old university (1)
Samuel	professor -old university (3)