How should universities respond to the abolition of compulsory retirement?

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Background

Australia is following the lead of North America in introducing legislation to protect older academic staff, previously classified as "permanent" or "tenured" academic staff, from compulsory retirement at age 65. In South Wales and South Australia, however, the states have abolished compulsory retirement. Queensland legislation came into effect on July 1, 1994 and Western Australian legislation in January 1995. Victoria currently has no legislation but is reviewing it. Reports by the Industrial Relations Reform Action Group 1994 indicate that some universities have more generous pension schemes for older staff than the traditional pension awarded at retirement.

While some older staff have found early retirement attractive, others have resisted the idea of retirement when they perceive their work to be unfinished. The introduction of compulsory retirement has therefore been seen as a way to force many older staff to retire. The loss of older staff can have a negative impact on the academic community, as well as on the educational outcomes of students. It is argued that older staff contribute to the intellectual and cultural life of the university and have a role to play in the development of new ideas and strategies.

Endnotes

1. All pre-Dawkins institutions were asked to provide documents on management changes. Most responded but few were able to provide an accurate list.
2. "There have been always been ratios specified in personnel, especially associated with the professoriate, but they were not always revised for academic excellence (at least in theory) in keeping with the general aims and policies of the University.
3. This pattern of combining existing faculty/teaching departments into larger faculties with larger departments is widespread and has many similarities, all developed over a discrete time period, that the presence of a "guiding hand" seems to be inescapable.
4. These conclusions are based on a small sample and may well be challenged after further research.

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Table 1: Age at retirement of academic staff - %

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age (years)</th>
<th>55-60</th>
<th>61-64</th>
<th>65+</th>
<th>N/Sure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expected</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is a marked difference between the age at which people expect to retire and the age at which their recent predecessors actually have retired. Possible reasons for this include:

- The intervention of unexpected life events (e.g. poor health, family demands, opportunities to take up alternative work or possibly unexpected inheritance).
- Self-selection: those who want to, or are able to continue working do so for as long as possible, whereas those who do not retire early and so were not included in the study are of the age group who have retired.

Although most retired at age 65, in view of expected changes, university administrators expected a relative high proportion of both academic and non-academic staff to continue working past the age of 65 (Table 2). Almost all of academic and administrative staff were interested in remaining at the University after age 65.

Table 2: Interest in continued employment after age 65 - %

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interest</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Not</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is still some self-selection evident, those who are older and of a higher rank (e.g. professors) are more likely to want to continue. Respondents who were aged under 60 are more likely to be unsure of their future work preferences.

The age at which academic staff had retired in the preceding 10 years was highly correlated with rank, with more senior academic and administrative staff more likely to have retired than academic staff aged 65 than those at lower levels. Discriminant analysis suggests that rank was also important in preferences about defying retirement post age 65 (Professors, Readers, senior administrators) were more likely to wish to continue than staff who were at other levels.

flexible working conditions, shorter hours or special types of employments, but requiring them to give up their tenure in return.

An important variable affecting retirement outcome and retirement options must be predicated upon financial flexibility that would facilitate continuation in such phased work arrangements. It is likely that the planners must be mutually beneficial to both employer and employee, and it requires a different attitude towards older staff than that prevailing in many General Staff, such as the attitude "we're "thankfully just" at more junior levels and in jobs without career paths, suggesting that control over work and opportunities to participate is the more intrinsically motivating. Thus, a flexible working arrangement may not be more than a technical fix or a change in the definition of what constitutes full time. A work force becomes a more efficient and participative managerial role, which can also serve to reduce the organizational commitment and the greater sense of self-esteem among those who choose to retire.

It is clear that a range of options needs to be put in place to give all staff, and particularly older staff, the option of changing their employment terms and conditions without losing their job at the University more in the short term for the increased salary and superannuation contribution, but gains certainty about retirement date. 

b. Personnel Management Policies

Since universities become the “full back option” in terms of managing unsatisfactory or sub-optimal performance it is possible that employers will acquire at some stage in their tenure to be made available to staff on a full time basis (a) the option of phased retirement or (b) early retirement at a lower salary as an option to retrain “non-performing” staff.

Alternatively, it seems more useful to establish effective performance criteria and targets for all staff rather than relying upon phased retirement and early retirement incentive programs as the main strategy for getting rid of unwanted or unproductive staff.

Academic staff in this study anticipated problems whereby older staff who continued working were unable to recognize that they had ceased to be productive in research or perhaps appear in teaching. It was recognized that open communication regarding performance needed to be developed so that employer and employee could part with dignity and respect instead of the situation where the academic staff was forced out of the system. Universities are more likely to afford enhanced employment options later in life to “more valued” staff. Secretarial, cleaning and lower level academic staff, the positions that most women are concentrated, are usually full time occupied. This particular group would benefit from the possibility of retirement or early retirement benefits, for example, female employees need particular consideration in the development and implementation of late life employment and retirement options.

The need to open up opportunities for women in given as the reason for the establishment of the Equal Opportunity Act of 1975. The arguments appear to overlook the fact that mandatory retirement will affect both male and female workers. It is unfair to minimize discrimination against women as the excuse for maintaining discrimination on the grounds of age.

3. Attitudes Towards Older People:

Perhaps one of the greatest barriers to flexible and creative options for continued employment grows in the form of resistance on the part of employers to employ older workers. As older workers tend to retire at a younger age it is often safer for the older workers to use this as a career strategy to avoid the prospect of discrimination.

It has been suggested that a number of the respondents to this study was retiring at part time or part year employment and continuing in the same role for as long as possible. Full time retirement of older adults is often difficult, emotionally and financially.

The situation that was preferred by many of the respondents to this study was being seen to retire to part time or part year employment and continuing in the same role for as long as possible. Full time retirement of older adults is often difficult, emotionally and financially. It is often seen as being less willing to adapt to new technology and unable to keep up with dates in their field. While most research confirms that older workers are able to do so, recent research indicates new and unusual changes on male and female workers.

The older respondents to this survey thought that they were fair for their retired friends in giving up personal growth opportunities. It was clear that the desire to continue working is not limited to those who are employed full time but those who are employed part time.

A strong commitment to working in the perceived best interests of their employers and the university was evident, and many staff were willing to continue in a modified capacity to continue. If the university was also prepared to adopt a flexible and positive approach.

It is clear also that a range of options need to be put in place to give all staff, and particularly older staff, the option of changing their employment terms and conditions without losing their job at the University. It was suggested that Universities more in the short term for the increased salary and superannuation contribution, but gains certainty about retirement date. It is clear that a range of options need to be put in place to give all staff, and particularly older staff, the option of changing their employment terms and conditions without losing their job at the University.
In Reply

Knowing, learning and the ideal of knowledge in higher education

Tony Coady and Seamus Miller

In a recent issue of the Australian Universities’ Review (1993, No.2) we presented a qualified defence of the relevance of John Henry Newman’s views on universities to the debate about contemporary higher education. Subsequently, Graham Hendry (AUR, 1994, No.1) argued against a number of the propositions we put forward. While Hendry accepts our main point about the importance of reasoning and knowledge as ends in themselves, as well as means to other good things like economic development, he rejects our conception of knowledge (and reasoning) as objective. Hendry attributes to Newman a conception of knowledge as some kind of constructivist, and puts forward a particular view of tertiary teaching as co-operative learning which he believes conforms perfectly with his constructivist account of knowledge. By contrast, Hendry sees our “objectivists” as wedded to a teacher-centred transmission model of tertiary teaching. We think that Hendry’s position embodies a number of common, and not so common, misconceptions, but we welcome the opportunity to clarify and elaborate our outlook in opposition to his.

The term “constructivist” like the term “objectivist” is used in a variety of ways in philosophical discourse. In some of these, such as the “Kantian constructivists” of the political philosopher, John Rawls, it is not at all clear that it is incompatible with the commitment to objectivity that we favour. Indeed, Hendry’s own commitment to a constructivist account of knowledge is certainly one we reject. Furthermore, we do not accept Hendry’s claim that our commitment to objective knowledge entails a teacher-centred transmission model of tertiary teaching. Let us consider knowledge first.

We agree with Hendry (and just about everyone else) that our beliefs and theories are quite often false and should be subject to some rational scrutiny and, on occasion, rejection. But this is not, as Hendry thinks, a truth which entails “constructivism”. Rather it is a commonplace of elementary philosophical discussion about knowledge. Similarly, it is not contentious that we have developed all manner of methodological principles to test our beliefs and theories. This fact is not, again contra Hendry, in any way inconsistent with objective accounts of knowledge. Objective accounts need only be that there can be a common-sense of elementary philosophical discussion about knowledge. That is, in some sense, it is itself an objective truth (to the extent that the “objective” knowledge claims we make about this world are true), and the extent that the “true” knowledge claims are true.

Hendry’s analysis of the nature of objective knowledge is itself something that is unknown, and that the attitude of objectivity requires us to accept. The need for modesty about our own views, and respect for the rationality and educational benefits from divergent opinion, is (what appears to be) a correlative of the objective stance, not an objection to it.

Hendry also accused us of misunderstanding the nature of objective knowledge and indeed on his own constructivist scheme, it is very hard to see how he can sustain any distinction at all between truth and falsehood. Hendry is not really explicit about his philosophical assumptions regarding truth and knowledge but he seems to oscillate between mutually inconsistent conceptions. One moment he seems to be an objectivist, and by implication, to be committed to a perfect truth which is not to be known but to be discovered. The other moment he seems to be a constructivist, and by implication, to be committed to a perfect truth which is not to be known but to be constructed. But perhaps in saying that one cannot get outside of one’s own beliefs, Hendry is simply emphasizing the evidential fact that knowing involves a subject with psychological states directed upon the object of knowledge. This is evidently true, but nothing about the objective truth or falsity of what is believed follows from this.

There is a conclusion on the part of Hendry here between the trivial claim that beliefs are subjective, in the sense that they are states of a subject, and the substantive - and, we believe, false - claim that the content of belief cannot be objectively true. But there is the fact that if a belief state is true, it is not necessarily subjective, not necessarily false, but is an objectively true that the person’s belief is true. But it is still an objective fact that the person’s belief is true, and it is an equally objective fact that the person has that particular belief. Someone who thought that they or their community was in liberty to “construct” or make up an equally valid belief that they had no head (while keeping the meaning of such terms as “head” constant, and engaging in no metaphysical speculations) would be deluded. The fact that related discourses about in various of the “new humanities” merely shows how infectious such conflicting confessions can be.

It must indeed be acknowledged that inquiry is a human process, fraught with uncertainties, and with its outcomes necessarily conditioned by the social and cultural context in which it takes place. While, however, there is something that is known, and that the attitude of objectivity requires us to admit. The need for modesty about our own views, and respect for the rationality and educational benefits from divergent opinion, is (what appears to be) a correlative of the objective stance, not an objection to it.