

# Old Dogs and New Tricks; Re-Training Older Workers In UK, Australia and USA.

- Kirk Mann
- School of Sociology & Social Policy, Leeds University. Leeds
- LS2 9JT. UK.
- **Email**  
**K.Mann@leeds.ac.uk**

**“OK... so they had to start with the easy stuff – sit, here and fetch .. But I was hoping to get on to Web design soon....”**



# Paper Reviews Activation Policies & Rhetoric for 50+ in 3 countries – Australia , USA & UK.

- Existing academic literature & research – Draws on Soc Pol, HR, Education, Sociology.
- Government publications & pronouncements,
- Employer stated attitudes to training and hiring older workers.
- What service providers say and appear to do (but need to know more, esp in UK).
- Has an extensive bibliography that I have still to tidy final version of paper in 2 weeks. **Please email**

[K.Mann@Leeds.ac.uk](mailto:K.Mann@Leeds.ac.uk)

# **Activation Policies tend to focus on younger people but Govt in all 3 countries say they want to improve skills & employability of older workers.**

- **Benefits to older workers.**
- Enhanced skills improves labour market opps.
- More social networks improves well being.
- Improved income and future pension.
- More “choice” re move to retirement esp if flexible.
- <http://campaigns.direct.gov.uk/fulloflife/>
- **Benefits to employers.**
- Experience and reliability of older workers.
- Role as mentors for younger workers.
- Skills training to address specific needs of employers.
- Potentially more flexibility; e.g. part timers.

# 2 other “narratives”

- **Needs of the economy during growth.**
- Dependency ratio seen as big issue in UK
- Participation ratio in all 3. (80% target for 50+ but approx 60% in all 3 countries) .
- Costs of public welfare & savings if 50+ in work.
- Skills needs in global context but ....
- “a system that responds to the needs of industry and the economy “ (From Skills – Aus 01.04.2008).
- **Need to change behaviour/culture of passive benefit claimants (& providers?).**
- Personalised services focusing on individual are best able to prompt change.
- Private training & skills services with \$\$ targets better than “bureaucratic” (much criticised by employers) public sector.
- Sanctions and conditions for those who remain passive.
- “People entering stage three of the Flexible New Deal – those who have been receiving benefit for six months or identified by their personal adviser at the start of their award as needing additional support – will be required to do more to improve their skills (DWP 2007)“

# Employers “Needs” & Labour Market. Anti age discrimination in all 3 but...

- “If they can get to work, then they can still have a job. Unless it’s a physical one.’ [And] It depends on the profession. I couldn’t have someone croak it on the job.” (Manchester, small business in Hall et al for DWP 2007).
- Metcalf & Meadows. 2006 (UK) - Over half of employers surveyed (no = 2067) had maximum ages for recruitment and/or training.
- In Oz- Messinis & Olekalns 2007; “firms seem to be less inclined to pay for job training if workers are older, of NESOB background or are on casual employment”.
- In US extensive research suggests employers value reliability of THEIR older workers but see them as resistant to change, re-training and new skills.(Eschtruth et al 2007; Munnell et al 2006;AARP. 2000).
- “Older white collar workers tend to be valued – but seen as costly. ‘Several surveys report that recruitment, training ... decisions are based on a narrower set of considerations, and especially forward-looking considerations such as “trainability” and potential length of service.’ (Munnell, et al 2006).
- In all 3 countries employers (& training providers) focus overwhelmingly on those who had few skills & or “blue collar”.

# Training for poor (older) people = poor training?

- Similar conditions apply – to qualify for training (small grants) in all 3 countries older workers have to be on public welfare or low income (125% of poverty line in US) and over 50 (55 in US). So not for top end of lab market.
- Targets may mean staff focus on some more than others – e.g.;- in UK 2 lone parents = 3 ND50+. Creaming in US schemes has meant having to review performance criteria (Finn 2007).
- The value/return of training older workers lower & less likely to see longer term benefits unlike younger people
- In US & Oz big variations depending on location. Eg; Wisconsin (supposedly a model of laissez faire) provides more resources for training older workers than many States and with additional funding from City (and voluntary orgs). And Job Placement Services in Australia (Govt funded) boasts “400 orgs delivering services from over 2500 offices” - but duplication in big cities and little choice in rural areas.
- Employer attitudes also similar – tend to retain “valued employees” (skilled/professional, reliable, etc) but not hire & train new ones.
- Govt in Aus & UK keen to get employers to sign up as training partners, much employer scepticism & mainly retail & service sector. Larger employers main partners.

# Activation & Training clearly does benefit some older workers.

- “The amount of people over 50, over 60, that work for B&Q is unbelievable. There’s an opportunity for everyone”

Geof Kershaw, B& Q website,



- “Doris decided to retrain as she had heard that pole dancers were paid quite well”.



# The Fit Between The Means & The Modes of Activation

- Tailored individual advice and support - “agreed” actions with individuals and advisor – ensuring a “contract” between indiv & provider. But not a contract between equals.
- Skills tend to be literacy, numeracy, CV, basic IT, presentational, etc. How to “perform well” and sell themselves.
- Focus is on the flaws of the older unemployed person - individuating them.
- The personal advisor will only refer candidates (to employers) who they think are able and willing to do the job advertised. (DWP 2008 UK) So discretionary/subjective.
- Remarkable similarity twixt DWP, US and Aus gov web pages for those seeking work, employers seeking workers and job placement agencies.
- Engagement via Govt & training agency sites also v similar. Use a series of interactive sites to take indiv to the “right” choice,
- Inside the velvet glove of personal support there is a steel claw of sanctions if claimant “fails” to meet with advisor or agency he/she<sup>8</sup> has agreed to let “support” them. These include stopping benefits.

# Conclusions.

- The different narratives complement one another – not contradict.
- “Activation” conditionality and language of needs for individuals, employers and economy go hand in glove.
- Little evidence of employers, service providers or Govt investing in training older workers in skills that compete at top end of lab market.
- Focus is on getting low skilled off benefits for a couple of years (at best) – some success in US but only 49 days in UK (& of these 24 days are NOT in work or training, DWP 2008).
- No evidence that 50+ from ‘top end’ of PLM are sanctioned, enskilled or retrained etc. They can choose early exit NOT “longer working lives” – (OECD 2006, various by Vickerstaff et al,)
- In all 3 countries sanctions rarely applied but when they are it is usually men –In UK failing to attend can = sanctions but rare, in Oz 50+ are 6 times less likely (proportionately) to be sanctioned than 18- 24 y o. (Eardley et al 2006, 2008).
- 50+ a Reserve Army of Labour competing with unskilled migrants, w/class women with care responsibilities and students?
- But considerable variation at local level in services with some focussing more on needs of individual & others on targets.
- Older workers retain “deserving” status, for now at any rate.