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## The Changing World of Work: The Need for Adult Education

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## **THE CHANGING WORLD OF WORK: THE NEED FOR ADULT EDUCATION**

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My art pieces were inspired by the street artist, Banksy. The title of the first piece (Fig. 1), *revolution*, describes education as revolution. In the picture, there is a woman, representing me, throwing a book as a bomb to my past, using education to change my future. With no fear, I am looking in front at 'new' me. The second piece (Fig. 2), *CANCELED (Follow your dreams)*, is me erasing the word 'CANCELED' from the top of my dreams. My dreams are not cancelled, just staying on hold, and are now revived again.



Figure 1: revolution



Figure 2: CANCELED (Follow your dreams)

## **Academic Commentary**

When I attended my university's open day event, I tried to find information about mature student studies. Unfortunately, I found just one kiosk. Most of the people thought that I was the mother of a student and not a student myself. My experience at the university this year has been difficult at times, as some tutors seemed uncomfortable in online meetings once they realized my age. The undergraduate prospectus was full of pictures of young faces, without any reference to mature students.

Yet, according to a House of Commons Library briefing paper (Hubble & Bolton, 2021), "mature entrants to full-time undergraduate courses have increased to new record levels in 2018, 2019 and 2020 [...] They have funded the same level as other full-time undergraduate students despite many of them having extra financial responsibilities." But the briefing paper also notes that mature learners are more likely than younger students to have characteristics associated with disadvantage and underrepresentation in higher education, namely: non-traditional qualifications, a lower socio-economic background, family responsibilities, a disability, or being from a black and minority ethnic group. As a society, we must be mindful that people are living longer while technology is advancing rapidly. Mature students, and older workers more generally, will not be able to thrive in today's competitive working environments without decent and continuous education.

We live longer, healthier lives. We have better education, beautiful houses, and a lot of choices.

A utopia...

### **An Ageing Population**

The population of England has increased steadily over recent decades. At the same time the population has also been ageing, and in 2017 the percentage of the population aged 85 years and over was 2.7 times greater than it was in 1971 (Public Health England, 2018).

The number of people aged 85 years and over is expected to increase substantially in the future. In 2017 there were 1.35 million people aged 85 and over in England. By 2023 this is projected to reach 1.54 million (an increase of 14%) and in 2031 (when 'baby boomers' born after World War 2 move into this age group) it could reach 2.01 million (Public Health England, 2018).

Let me introduce myself. I am a mother and grandmother in my 50s. I came to the UK five years ago (I left my country because of financial crisis and came for a better future—for myself and for my children). A year ago I made the big decision to follow my dreams. I started university and

learned what my true passion is: design. I will have a new career. A fresh start. Why not? I have half of my life still to live and I want it to be full and happy.

In our ageing society we need people to work longer, and to keep learning to minimize their need for healthcare. But to do this, people need better support from the government to allow them to access higher education, and the benefits it brings, throughout their lives. There is evidence that adults who keep learning have better health, are more productive, are more active, and have better paid jobs (Government Office for Science, 2017).

Adult learning can help people satisfy their personal needs and achieve their professional goals. But, more than this, adult learning can be life changing. This was the reason that I started higher education at my age.

Of course, the challenges are many. Older people must balance the responsibilities in their lives with the demands of learning. Such responsibilities add barriers to learning: the lack of time to balance career and family demands, the pressure on finances (the most important factor, in my opinion—adults who come from higher socio-economic backgrounds tend to participate more in higher education programs (Desjardins et al., 2006)).

There would be more incentive for adults to continue in education if the benefits of learning led to getting a promotion or a better job. But in our society, the qualifications that older adults obtained in previous years can often seem outdated—and therefore less valuable and relevant to employers—compared with those of young people (Field & Guez, 2018).

What is the solution? What can those working in higher education do to help mature students to thrive throughout their studies? In my own experience, I was nervous because I thought that as an older student, I wouldn't fit in. I was the same age as some of my tutors—in some cases older! It would be helpful if I could meet or have contact with other mature students—such as an informal meeting—to share my experiences and struggles. It is difficult to get back into learning after many years without any contact and I think the university should provide some resources to support this problem. Also, the brochures and information flyers need to be more attractive to mature students and show that everyone has the chance in education, not just young people. Universities can help by having clear entry requirements for qualifications (including older or different qualifications and degrees) and named contacts for providing guidance with the application. The most important thing is to educate the tutors and inform them about the background and the age of their students.

As for my future, I have four more years of studies. I hope to find a placement without any problems because of my age, and, hopefully, after graduation, continue my studies at Masters and PhD level.

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