IT'S THE GLOBAL "DECADE OF HEALTHY AGEING" — HOW CAN HIGHER ED MEET THE CHALLENGE?

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ABSTRACT: The United Nations (UN) declared 2021-2030 as the "Decade of Healthy Ageing." The World Health Organization (WHO) and other global programs developed initiatives in support of UN's goals, which include focus on lifelong learning. WHO refers to the "transformative pathway" in its 2021 *Decade of Healthy Ageing Baseline Report*, arguing there is no "typical" older person. Lifelong learning in the context of education for and about elder individuals has a wide and deep history spanning a century of scholarship; however, lifelong learning's meaning is inconsistent across disciplines, cultures, policy-makers, and constituents. This paper introduces and develops these concepts and argues higher education is positioned to bridge stakeholders' interests, lead taxonomic homogenization, identify universal gaps, establish protocols for filling them, and — in the end — advance and bolster the industry in the wake of unprecedented cultural upheaval and declining enrollments. The paper includes a selection of questions and options higher education institutions can evaluate and implement to meet the UN's challenge of transforming lifelong learning in the Decade.

Keywords: decade of healthy ageing, lifelong learning, older adults

On December 14, 2020, the United Nations General Assembly (UN) proclaimed the years spanning 2021-2030 "The Decade of Healthy Ageing" (Decade) as part of the UN's 2015 master agenda, known informally as the organization's *Sustainable Development Goals* (*SDG*) (UN, 2015, 2020). UN's *Resolution 75/131* (*Resolution*) was a prong of its 2002 *Resolution 57/167* that endorsed the *Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing* and several corresponding recommendations (UN, 2020). Among 17 goals and 169 targets described as "integrated and indivisible" (*SDG*, "Declaration" para. 18), *SDG* Goal 4 aims to "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all." Despite its expansive sub-parts, Goal 4 only refers indirectly to elder learners: "By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development..." with a distinct focus on "global citizenship" (*SDG*, para. 4.7). Lifelong learning is directly mentioned one time in the *SDG*s, again with no specific reference to elder persons (*SDG*, "Declaration" para. 25).

The *Resolution* referenced the World Health Assembly's parallel decree of the "Decade of Healthy Ageing 2020-2030" and "call[ed] upon" the World Health Organization (WHO) to collaborate with multiple UN departments and commissions and "lead the implementation." The *Resolution* includes education among crucial "goods and services" necessary to "fully and effectively enjoy their human rights and fully develop their human potential" (UN, 2020, pp. 2-3), but the document deals more with health, cultural inclusiveness, and financial stability than with learning. Notwithstanding the CoVid-19 pandemic that consumed WHO's attention and resources in 2020 and 2021, WHO published the *Decade of Healthy Ageing Baseline Report* (WHO, 2021) with a focus on interrelationships among Functional Ability, Intrinsic Capacity, and Environments. The word "learning" appears 56 times in the *Baseline Report*. The phrase "lifelong learning"

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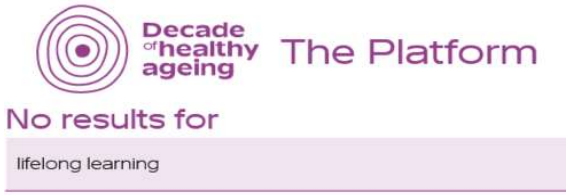
is sparser: once in conjunction with working, once in context with technological proficiency for "digital inclusion" (p. 68), and several times in a section entitled "Ability to Learn, Grow & Make Decisions" (pp. 122-127) primarily promoting lifelong learning as an informal activity aimed to enhance health-related matters.

Despite barely mentioning lifelong learning – mostly in conjunction with health care, safety, workforce, and inequity – in its *World Report on Ageing and Health*, WHO (2015b) acknowledged the importance of "abilities to learn, grow and make decisions include efforts to continue to learn and apply knowledge, engage in problem solving, continue personal development, and be able to make choices" as individuals age. Continued learning permits older persons to "do what they value" and make independent decisions to retain a "sense of control" (p. 174). Further, continued learning engages older persons socially, increases their self-fulfillment, reduces ageism, and enhances intergenerational camaraderie and trust.

A year later, WHO (2016) described the five-year process for creating the Decade as a collaborative effort by 82 countries. The US-based Global Coalition on Aging joyously reported achievement of four Decade milestones by the end of 2022; however, none of those milestones addressed lifelong learning (Hodlin, 2022). The European Union (EU, 2020) endorsed the *Resolution* at its announcement, saying "healthy ageing is about enabling citizens to lead a healthy, active and independent life in older age," but the EU's endorsement did not mention lifelong learning (para. 3). Later, the EU touted Japan, home of the world's oldest-aged population, as a barometer for assessing and implementing initiatives to meet the Decade's goals. None of the EU's benchmarks mentioned lifelong learning (D'Ambrogio, 2020). Further, AGE Platform Europe (2021) delineated the Decade's action areas but ignored lifelong learning. Success is not subjective, yet none of the directives or pronouncements mentioned above specifies a method for evaluating the Decade's effectiveness.



1 *"The Platform" Advanced Search Screen Capture, June 15, 2023.*

WHO launched and continues to maintain a website named *The Platform* (decadeofhealthyageing.org) to provide resources and information for and about older persons. Highlighted "Decade Action Area" topics on the website are limited to "Age-friendly Environments," "Combatting Ageism," "Integrated Care," and "Long-term Care." As depicted in Figure 1, a site-wide search provides no results on the phrase *lifelong learning* (without delimiting quotation marks). Thus, WHO's mission to promote global health underscores its engagement with the Decade but does not respond to the *Resolution*'s challenge for WHO's leadership on lifelong learning in *SDG* Goal 4.

Similarly, other organizations fail to provide guidance or even information about *SDG* Goal 4. In June, 2023, my searching selected websites returned the following results for the phrase "decade of healthy ageing" (delimited with quotation marks):

- United States White House (whitehouse.gov) – zero results
- United Nations (un.org) – six results
- American Society on Aging (asaging.org) – zero results
- UNESCO (unesco.org) – two results, one of which was the CONFINTEA VII Programme
- Seventh International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA, 2022) (uil.unesco.org/en/confinteavii-programme-details) – one session

A cursory literature review in academic databases, including directed searches in adult education and gerontology journals, resulted in little scholarship related to the Decade.

UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL)'s website (uil.unesco.org) search returned 182 results. UIL hosted a virtual global event in June, 2023, to announce publication of two new reports exploring practices and trends among international higher education institutions. Director Borhene Chakroun opened the webinar, entitled *Lifelong learning: An imperative for higher education*, with a reference to *SDG* Goal 4, stating the collaborators' "common value" was "to embrace the transformative power of lifelong learning in shaping healthier, more prosperous, and more inclusive societies" — with a sweeping definition of "lifelong" to encompass "people for all ages...everywhere" (UNESCO, 2023).

UNESCO states it "actively helped to frame the Education 2030 agenda which is encapsulated in SDG 4," and is "entrusted ... to lead and coordinate Education 2030 through guidance and technical support within the overall SDG agenda" (UNESCO, n.d.-a, *SDG*s para. 3). Chakroun noted two watershed UNESCO events in 2022: Barcelona "centered on reimagining higher education"; while CONFINTEA VII "focused on adult learning and education." Chakroun included all ages in the scope of "lifelong learning" while describing changes necessary for the higher education industry to meet *SDG* Goal 4: "flexible learning pathways," "innovative pedagogies," and expansive life and career counseling services. Essentially, higher education institutions should reframe themselves as the central information hub for adults throughout their lifetimes (UNESCO, 2023).

Neither UIL publication mentioned the Decade or UNESCO's engagement – nor did UIL's 2022 *Annual Report*, which touted "1,000+ representatives, from 149 UNESCO Member States, mobilized to strengthen adult learning and education" at CONFINTEA VII (UIL, 2023). The 3rd UNESCO World Higher Education Conference (WHEC) ratified global stakeholders' support for the Decade and *SDG*s through "defin[ing] and prepar[ing] a roadmap for a new era of higher education... conceived as an open, living document..." that "looks at both the higher education systems...and institutions" (UNESCO, n.d.-b, para. 3). Withnall (2012) described research identifying five lifestyles that separate older learners into two axes: work-engaged and non-work-engaged. Statistical data framing the published reports placed older learners as a target for lifelong

learning well below "labor market-oriented" individuals and above remote and marginalized populations (UNESCO, 2023, fig. 13). Paradoxically, UN (2019) reported that lifelong learning focused on older persons while the global population ages aids support for "[p]rogress toward the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals...as the share of working-age population shrinks" (p. 27).

Describing the global escalation in number of older persons, Manheimer (2005) observed, "Never before in history will there have been such a demographic shift toward later life" (p. 211). UN (2019) reported the global population age 65 and over was 703 million — 9% of the total — in 2019, with that number projected to reach 1.5 billion persons by 2050. By 2100, 61% of the global population will be over age 65. In terms of worldwide sustainability focus, aging ranks in importance with climate, economic development, public health, and political balance of power. Manheimer proposed this demographic will create an "age-irrelevant society" that "reject[s] age categories as an imposed, artificial, and prejudicial label" (p. 211).

What Is Lifelong Learning?

As a new 20th century term, "lifelong learning" spawned a taxonomy with multiple definitions and synonyms in scholarship and popular literature across numerous disciplines. Arguably, the first use of the phrase "lifelong learning" occurred in the historically fascinating 1919 UK government-sponsored report (A. Smith, 1919) describing adult education as a "permanent national necessity, an inseparable aspect of citizenship" that "should be both universal and lifelong" (p. 5). However, M. Smith (2004) proposed "The notion of learning through life is hardly new, as a glance at Plato's *Republic* reveals" (para. 2). Plato's philosophical germination began with Socrates; therefore, one can argue lifelong learning began with history's greatest teacher.

In the past quarter century, especially, the concept of lifelong learning has developed to encompass Lindeman's (1926) belief that "education is not "preparation for life; [e]ducation is life" (pp. 6, 204). Lindeman maintained "[t]he whole of life is learning" (p. 6), and education should continue "so long as life lasts" to "rebuil[d] the total structure of life's values" (p. 28). Twenty-first century scholars generally extend "lifelong" to mean an individual's entire lifespan. For example, in early editions of *Lifelong Learning in Higher Education* (1985, 1991), Knapper and Cropley limited lifelong learning to adults; by their third edition (2000), the authors defined lifelong learning as something "deliberate" that "can and should occur throughout each person's lifetime" (p. 1).

UIL Policy Brief 14 (UIL, 2022) embraced lifelong learning as "the overarching concept and vision for education as reflected in ... SDG 4" (para. 1). The document profoundly captured the nature of lifelong learning as "rooted in the integration of learning and living ... in all life-wide contexts" (para. 1). Yet, the writers barely mentioned older learners and only in conjunction with intergenerational experiences.

"Lifelong" in the Context of Older Persons' Learning

The notion of educating and training elder citizens has been an ever-present consideration of modern US-based adult educators from the earliest mention of learning aimed at older adults by Howard McClusky, David Peterson, and their colleagues in the 1970s — to MacArthur Foundation's *Study of Successful Aging* beginning in 1988 and reported at length by Rowe and Kahn (1998) — through a plethora of academic and popular organizations and serialized publications — to wide-ranging debates among thought-leaders of the 21st century. The flagship peer-reviewed journal *Educational Gerontology* is in its 49th volume. My recent literature review indicates approximately forty years ago, international adult educators and policy-makers focused on learning needs among rapidly growing older adults, and international response outstripped United States' stakeholders'. Bespoke communities of practice — notably the brain trust of the UK-based *International Journal of Lifelong Education* — prodigiously publish extensive research.

Geragogy emerged as a term for the juncture of adult education and gerontology in the mid-20th century (Schuetz, 1982). Yet, scholars continue to disagree on the word's definition and scope. Hence, a large number of euphemistic terms for older people's education evolved and exist in the literature, including "Silver Learning," "Learning in Later Life," and "Third — or Fourth — Age Education" (see, e.g., Formosa, 2019; Istance, 2019; Laslett, 1987). McClusky (1976) reported "evidence of the fact that older people are learning and can renew their faith in their ability to learn. As a consequence, we must find ways to help people rediscover, reinvigorate and reactivate their latent interests and talents they never thought they had" (p. 119). McClusky (1973) noted "a climate of optimism" pervaded educators' perception of aging learners (p. 60). Balogová and Gazdová (2019) argued a geragogy department that trains future "geragogues" could benefit higher education institutions (p. 39).

WHO (2015a) proclaimed "[t]here is no typical older person" (para. 2). Renowned educational gerontologist Alexandra Withnall (2004) reported research suggesting older persons embraced learning and acknowledged its importance for their quality of life. According to McClusky's *Theory of Margin*, knowledge positively affects learners' Power-Load-Margin balance, and learning that leads to change and improved life satisfaction enhances a positive margin (McClusky, 1970, 1971, 1972).

Withnall (2012) questioned limiting "lifelong" to an old-age construct, asking whether the aging global population required "a new guiding principle for the twenty-first century" (p. 649). Hachem (2020) recounted Glendenning and Battersby, Percy, and Formosa provided "statements of first principles" for critical educational gerontology over a two-decade period, suggesting critical theory and praxis provide a framework for expanding the framework to clarify and find balance "between a humanist tradition and a transformational one" that meets all learners' needs (p. 466).

Older Learners' Transformation

As spirituality and aging began to flow together in the 1980's, older people realized "aging is a social construction that has been further reified by the field of gerontology itself" (Manheimer, 2005, p. 208). Older persons and their support systems sorted into multiple sub-cultures and began looking at learning as a way to evoke personal change and achieve goals.

McClusky (1972) described education for older persons as "essentially an affirmative enterprise" that "can be invested with a climate of optimism" and is "highly attractive" (p. 60). In the context of *SDG* Goal 4, lifelong learning under the aegis of the Decade *Resolution* should focus on transformation of the oldest learners. Mezirow (1997) said transformation is the goal of adult learning. WHO (2021) referenced a "transformative pathway" in its *Baseline Report* on the Decade. Peterson (1974) proposed "through learning, change can result which will improve the quality of a person's life"; change represents "positive potential" for growth that can affect destiny and improve condition (p. 50). McClusky (1971) described transformation as transcendence, identifying it as a need for older persons to overcome limitations and achieve positive margin.

Gerotranscendence as a Potential Solution

Swedish gerontologist Lars Tornstam first published the term *gerotranscendence* in 1989. Yet, little has been published about the theory in the adult education discipline. Gerotranscendence draws from Jung and Erikson (Tornstam, 2011) and has been equated to Self-transcendence, similar to Maslow's Self-actualization (see, e.g., Moody, 2006). Tornstram described gerotranscendence as "a developmental pattern that implies a shift in meta-perspective" (2011, p. 166) "from a material and rational vision to a more cosmic and transcendent one, usually followed by an increase in life satisfaction" (1989, p. 60). Tornstam (1997) further identified the concept as "the contemplative dimension of aging" (p. 143). Through reflection, individuals become less Self-centric and more socially focused. Tornstam proposed humans cognitively transform and maintain control of their lives through reflecting on aggregated experience as they age.

How do such shifts typically occur? Learning! Foreshadowing Mezirow (1997), Wacks (1987) argued Self-transcendence is a purpose of adult education. Brookfield (1985), however, had a more pragmatic view, stating adult education is not simply "a joyful, wholly fulfilling experience in self-actualization" (p. 44); rather, Brookfield argued adult learning aims to provide a framework within which adults can develop control over their lives. Nonetheless, Brookfield contended adult learning leads to an "internal change in consciousness" resulting from "critical reflectivity" (p. 46) that aligns with Tornstam's (2011) definition.

What does gerotranscendence look like in other cultures? Is gerotranscendence relevant? Can it be taught? Is it a legitimate goal? Hong (2021) posited gerotranscendence aligns with non-Western cultures because its continuous process and existential nature fit with individuals' notions of Self, their relationship to the world, and social order. Worth and

Smith (2021) argued Self-transcendence is achieved by following a path centering on curiosity and incorporating experiences individually and with others. Enter education!

Echoing the preponderance of scholars who believe gerotranscendence is innately spiritual, McCarthy and Bockweg (2012) maintained gerotranscendence is a component of aging successfully. Jewell (2014) argues the perspective shift may be both intellectual and spiritual. Reed (2009, as cited in McCarthy & Bockweg, 2012) found lifelong learning activities fostered Self-transcendent growth.

Heylen (2010) posited gerotranscendence "is seen as a normal, natural accompaniment of maturity and wisdom, and may imply a decreasing need for social contacts" (p. 1182). But what about lessons learned from the CoVid-19 pandemic? Higher education can lead the way toward global transformation. Framing their suggestion in terms of Mezirow's (1991) adaptive strategy, Eschenbacher and Fleming (2020) presaged the pandemic's effects on adult learners as they adapted in the face of disruption. While the authors wrote in the context of learning throughout life, they posited the pandemic would jump-start lifelong learning activities so people would be better prepared for future crises. A systematic review of 10 studies found "greater loneliness is associated with lower cognitive function" (Boss et al., p. 552), resulting in potentially detrimental physiological effects among older persons who have insufficient social contact.

The pandemic taught global society important lessons about the need for older citizens to be engaged with others. Lemon et al. (1972) distilled previous research to conclude "activity in general, and interpersonal activity in particular, seem to be consistently important for predicting an individual's sense of well-being in later years" (p. 512). Their study reported social activity with friends and life satisfaction were positively related among older persons. A search of academic databases shows literature continues to cite this article 51 years later. The nature of social relationships changed dramatically, especially in the digital age, with a complete paradigm shift resulting from the CoVid-19 pandemic.

Higher Education's Opportunities

I submit change – and the Decade's success – will come from higher education institutions, not governments or agencies. Adult education, via higher education-framed and supported programming, is better positioned to respond to older persons' diverse learning needs and interests than other service providers.

I propose educators put more industry-wide focus on measures the academy can take to meet the UN's Decade challenge. Higher education's institutional efforts can remedy the deleterious and negative effects of aging by providing specialized programs and courses that provide opportunities to develop social relationships. Research suggests cognition does not necessarily decline with age (Gunstand et al., 2006). Thus, universities should be unconcerned about long-term prospects when marketing to older learners. Kidahashi and Manheimer (2009) proposed a variety of opportunities in which higher education can

engage older learners. In summary, their research promoted creativity in finding niches that respond to learners' diverse lifestyles and interests while anticipating their needs.

Singer (2004) introduced narrative identity research in psychology with a focus on meaning-making across individuals' lifespans. Meaning-making as a pillar of adult education is well-established (Merriam & Heuer, 1996). Singer noted cognition is related to affective processes, and adults develop meaning from the stories of events and experiences. Fraser (2018) proposed wisdom and meaning form through language, especially through metaphor and shared vignettes. Sharing stories in higher education settings provides learning and bonding, especially intergenerationally. McClusky (1990) encouraged intergenerational learning, which he described as a "community of generations" (p. 59). Such a community is possible today, and higher education institutions are positioned to provide the foundation.

Adult education through lifelong learning as formal programs (not just informal, nonformal, or non-credit/auditing) has the potential to bring senior/elder adults into the higher education learning space to enhance their lives through guided intergenerational learning and socialization. WHO (2015b) pointed out "policy-makers need to consider how resources are distributed across the life course and not only to younger populations, which is currently the case" (p. 175). Acknowledging significant barriers to older learners' participation, WHO enumerated strategies for removing the obstacles within learners, their immediate circles, service providers, and the community at large.

Senior/elder learners can expand the population base for higher education institutions facing upheaval resulting from declining enrollments. Designation as an Age-Friendly University (dcu.ie/agefriendly) is a popular option encouraged by WHO. Manheimer (2005) provided an overview of Institutes for Learning in Retirement, Elderhostel (now Road Scholar), Universities of the Third Age, and Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes. Formosa (2019) described rifts and suggested further research to create a comprehensive catalogue of resources.

Internationally, higher education is often free or low-cost for everyone. A benefit of aging in the United States is tuition-waiver for senior/elder students in many states. Long and Rossing (1978, 1979) surveyed individual states following amendments to the *Higher Education Act of 1965* (20 U.S.C. 1001; Public Law 94-482) in 1976 authorizing federal grants to states for lifelong learning – defined to include "education for older and retired people" (§§ 132 & 133). Every US state sets its guidelines, and some actively market to senior citizens. In most states, older learners can complete programs up to, and including, advanced certifications and terminal degrees.

Conclusion

Over the 50 years since lifelong learning in the context of society's older learners became an education-industry focus, little has changed in the adult education discipline's services to this population. Peterson (1974) observed, "Gerontology is pointing to the potential of education to meet numerous growth and maintenance needs of the older population. ...

The role of gerontology in adult education is to bring to light a neglected clientele group which should be served...for an adjustment in the attitudes of the adult education programmers which will allow all of this to occur" (p. 67). Peterson explained, "In order to respond to the challenge of the various educational needs of older adults, it will be necessary for the field of adult education to adjust in at least five ways. These include expansion of programming, adjusted emphasis in the psychological base, alternative financing mechanisms, expanded recruitment, and a changed philosophical stance" (p. 51).

Withnall (2012) recommended educators and policy-makers consider a "dynamic model of learning throughout life" that includes every age and individual circumstance (p. 662) — a plan that sets the stage for the next generation of older persons. Peterson put forth the challenge: "Education for older people has been sorely neglected in the past. It must not be so in the future" (1974, p. 67). McClusky (1974) echoed Peterson: "In brief, it is believed that we are at a point in societal development when the growing domain of lifelong learning promises to transform both the character and dimensions of the entire educational enterprise" (p. 106).

What are you — and your organization — waiting for?

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