

Introduction: Themed section on Age, Employment and Policy

Kerry Platman and Philip Taylor

*Cambridge Interdisciplinary Research Centre on Ageing (CIRCA), Faculty of Social and Political Sciences
University of Cambridge
E-mail: kp277@cam.ac.uk*

Older workers have moved up the policy agenda within the industrialised nations. In the 1980s and first half of the 1990s, policy-making in much of the European Union emphasised the virtues of early retirement, partly as a response to high levels of unemployment. Since the late 1990s, there has been an increasing emphasis on overcoming age barriers in the labour market and on extending working life. This has been driven by concerns over ageing and shrinking labour forces, the sustainability of public pension systems, evidence of age discrimination in the labour market and the potential influence of the 'grey' voter. By contrast in the USA, the pronounced trend towards 'early exit' which has characterised Europe never existed. This is even more the case in Japan.

This special issue of *Social Policy and Society* examines developments in public policies on age and employment and offers a critical appraisal of their genesis, scope and likely impact. It begins with Fritz von Nordheim of the European Commission who charts the rapid change in policy approaches among EU Member States from 2000 onwards. He argues that the ten-year strategy to make Europe 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world', agreed at the Lisbon European Council in March 2000, started a chain of events which led to two landmark agreements: the Stockholm target (committing EU Member States to increase, by 2010, the employment rate of older workers to 50 per cent) and the Barcelona target (delaying by five years the age at which older workers stop working, also by 2010).

Chris Phillipson of Keele University follows by casting a sceptical eye over policy measures which aim to extend working lives. He argues that retirement will remain an enduring and popular institution over the next few decades, despite pressure from governments to encourage workers to postpone their departure from paid employment. Retirement may prove especially difficult to reverse among the 'baby boom' generation where he believes early retirement has become an entrenched expectation.

Philip Taylor of the University of Cambridge offers a critical perspective on developments in public policies on age and employment, concluding that the efficacy of current approaches is unproven and these may, in fact, offer little to either older workers or employers. Sara Rix, of the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), focuses on the apparent contradictions between the popularity of flexible work options in later life and their low incidence. The difficulty for policy-makers, she notes, is in reconciling the seemingly impossible: creating flexible job opportunities which appeal to older workers and yet which, at the same time, are voluntary for employers, come at no extra financial or administrative cost, preserve managers' rights over the dismissal of under-performers and maintain opportunities for younger workers.

Next, Kerry Platman of the University of Cambridge assesses the role of flexible employment in promoting increased labour force participation among older workers, concluding that this may not be the policy panacea it is often assumed to be, and risks disadvantaging older workers still further. Chris Phillipson of the University of Keele then offers a critical appraisal of the literature, arguing that there is an urgent need for new paradigms, questions and theories. He calls on the field of social policy to take a lead by building on the important work already carried out in areas such as age discrimination and income inequalities. The final article features a number of useful web sources leading to information and further links on older workers.

These articles draw attention to the profound challenges that lay ahead, not least in terms of reversing the early retirement trend which has been dominant in the European Union in the last two decades. Rather than simply being a matter of pulling this or that policy lever, these authors point to a need for coherent policy solutions. They also point to a limited, but we would concede, growing understanding of the problems confronting older workers and the issues of ageism and age discrimination among policy makers. Without systematic and broad approaches, there will be limits to the effectiveness of current policies and a risk of embedding age stereotypes still further.

What is required, we would argue, is a fundamental reappraisal of policies affecting older workers. It needs to be accepted that early retirement is both desired and in many cases desirable, and that fundamental changes in the attitudes and orientations of older workers will only come about over the long-term. In addition, we need long-term, life-course perspectives which focus on making lifelong learning a reality, which aim to even out working and leisure time over a lifetime, which help individuals to make successful transitions at key points in their working lives and which make work attractive, not just a necessity. Our point is that arguably older workers may best be supported not by 'special' treatment but by tackling institutionalised discrimination; not by accepting the inevitability of age barriers but by vigorously challenging and removing them. This means considering age in the development of an employment policy for all, not as an adjunct or an after-thought.

For us, the acid test will not be the growth alone of participation and employment rates among older workers in the coming decades, but the variety and quality of employment that they undertake. This means not accepting that their employment will inevitably be on the periphery of the labour market, as sometimes appears to be the case in the current policy discourse. This is the real challenge facing policy makers.