**EDITORIAL**

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# Editorial

**Volker Wedekind · Josef Schrader**

In motivating for a special issue focused on learning in later life, it was noted that ZfW had not focused attention on this theme since it had become more international in orientation. While gerontology and learning in later life are well established fields amongst the traditional readership of this journal, how this focus is addressed in diverse international contexts was less clear and had not been a feature of the journal.

The popular and research literature is replete with reference to disruption. Whether we focus on workplaces, families, communities, or nations, the semblance of predictability and order is being disrupted by economic forces such as globalisation, technological developments, climate change, political realignment and human mobility amongst others. Given this 'Time of Disruption' we asked researchers to explore what this means for thinking about learning in later life.

In putting out the call the guest editor was particularly keen to attract researchers who were exploring the consequences of aging and learning in later life in contexts other than the OECD countries where the bulk of research has been focused. We were aware that demographic trends in different regions of the world are in some instances reversed. For example in OECD countries and China the dominant pattern is of a generally aging population, increasing longevity and declining social security. In other parts of the globe populations are expanding, young, urbanising, and mobile. In these contexts the educational challenges faced by older people are quite different,

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and receive very little policy or research attention. Migration too is experienced differently in different regions. Migrants are predominantly younger people, which means older people are left behind, sometimes caring for children, sometimes left far away from their families. In receiving countries, older people have to adjust to people entering their communities and economies from places and cultures that may be radically different. What has to be learned, and how, in these different contexts?

*Cameron Richards* explores some of these themes through the lens of life reviews. Arguing that policy and research has focused predominantly on the economic and health related consequences of aging societies, he suggests that there has been too little focus on the importance of the reflective integration potential of the 'life review' function of later life. The story sharing, knowledge exchange and learning that happens is key to learning, and is cross-culturally relevant. Richards argues that developing countries (or people in the global 'South') have much to offer our thinking about research into these processes and should influence how policymakers, whether in the North or South, incorporate a 'life review' perspective into policies that promote active aging.

Drawing on a different methodological approach and conceptual framework *Alexandra Massmann* and *Regina Egetenmeyer* explore how subjective age and chronological age influence the functions that participating in further education serves for a group of older learners. In much the same way that Richards points to the potential for thinking about learning processes as a review that integrates life experience, Massmann and Egetenmeyer's analysis points to the importance of subjective age in how people approach studying as a social function. Given policymakers' tendencies to focus on chronological age, the research presented here in different ways highlights the need to understand the changes in aging patterns in terms of subjective understandings rather than narrow chronological ones.

*Bibiana Graeff* and colleagues show how methodologies, in a context where youth dominate the policy agenda, nevertheless have wider relevance for the discipline. They explore the World Health Organisation's 'Age-Friendly Cities' methodology in the context of a country where an estimated 62% of the population are under 29 years of age. As the authors note, while the particular neighbourhood of São Paulo had demographic characteristics similar to developed countries, the resources and public policies were more representative of an emerging economy concerned with youth unemployment. Using Content Analysis on the transcripts of two focus groups, Graeff et al. explore a range of education related themes that emerge out of the age-friendly city framework. While the explicit linkages to formal education are not that prevalent, learning and its relationship to the infrastructure and also the social, leisure and work opportunities is very clear. As is noted, the participants' reports reinforce the importance of thinking about education, culture and leisure in an integrated way with the different areas of public policies. The participants seem to recognize that lifelong learning is not only achieved through educational activities for adults and older people, but critically with education on gerontological themes for all. This highlights the relevance of the discipline in both developed and developing contexts, regardless of the demographics.

The three papers included here represent research on aging in the context of disruption and change from three very different geographic locations and methodological traditions. Each presents different insights into the field. They also demonstrate the heterogeneity of international approaches to adult education. We hope that they provide a basis for discussion across some of those traditions.

The next four papers, published under the rubric "Forum", had been submitted for a previous special issue of our journal. The focus of this previous special issue addresses the recognition of adult competences.

*Silke Schreiber-Barsch* and *Hanna Gundlach* tackle the question whether university applicants perceive the procedures for the validation of competences (in this case: competences based on vocational qualifications) as obstructive or supportive with regard to their decision to aim for access to higher education. The authors aim for a qualitative reconstruction of individual decision-making processes during their transition period. The sampling lead to a triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data. For the evaluation of the qualitative data, the authors made use of the coding process of Grounded Theory according to Strauss and Corbin; the quantitative data were evaluated on the basis of descriptive statistics. The study shows that the interviewed subjects consider the validation procedures to be legitimate and feasible instruments for assessing their ability of study. None of the subjects questioned the appropriateness or legitimacy of the evaluation procedure as such.

*Petra H. Steiner* is interested in the individual perception of the benefits of validation procedures. The author reports some results of an online survey of graduates of the Austrian Academy of Continuing Education (WBA). Based on a quantitative analysis of a standardized survey and a qualitative content analysis of answers to open questions the author shows that WBA enhances individual as well as structural professionalization, even though individual professionalization is significantly more pronounced.

*Andreas Fischer, Christin Hecker* and *Iris Pfeiffer* analyze the recognition of non-formally and informally acquired occupational competences of refugees who are interested in the field of metal working. Using the example of the "IdA Competence Check Metal", the authors address the question, how the occupational competences of refugees can be tested. As of yet, no recognized system exists for developing tests that measure occupational competences. The authors therefore suggest a 9-step procedure for this purpose that can also be used as a template for other occupational contexts. The Rasch-Modell is used for evaluating the test results. The study shows that the IdA Competence Check allows to capture occupational competences in a reliable, valid and time-efficient way. As such, the IdA Competence Check contributes to the validation of non-certified, non-formal and informal learning.

In the fourth article, *Martin Fischer, Magdalene Follner, Ines Rohrdantz-Herrmann* and *Cüneyt Sandal* present a web-based tool to make informal learning visible within the field of electrical and metal industries. The paper addresses the development, features and usefulness of AiKompass, which is a tool for rendering informal and non-formal competences. The AiKompass was developed within a participative design process and is based on an interview study and a task inventory. The task inventory was developed successively with reference to documentary analysis, guided interviews and workplace observations. The tool even supports less-expe-

rienced individuals to compile a profile of their competences, which can work as a stimulus for further educational aspirations. The authors consider AiKompas to be a useful instrument regarding two of the four steps towards the validation of informal competences (*identification* and *documentation* of relevant experiences); however, AiKompass alone is not considered to be sufficient with regard to the *formal evaluation* and *certification* of competences.

## 1 Note from the editors

Some explanation of the limited number of articles linked to this issue's topic is however warranted. While we received a number of interesting submissions, venturing out of the traditional focus of this journal has not been without difficulties. Finding suitable and willing reviewers has been a challenge with a number of articles requiring us to approach as many as ten different reviewers. This has led to inevitable delays. Secondly, by deliberately trying to encourage a wider international focus, we had to navigate the different traditions and methodological approaches to writing and research, which has made the process of editorial decisions more complex. The consequence is that some of the submissions around the theme have had to be held over to the next issue. Yet, this does not apply to special issues only.

The logistics and feasibility of a double blind peer review process as a core quality assurance mechanism in the context of increasing pressures to publish raises wider implications for scientific dissemination. Increasingly, researchers are understandably reluctant to commit more and more time to reviewing journal submissions at the expense of their own research time. As an editorial board this problematic is something that is being explored. The ZfW is considering, as are many other journals, to experiment with innovative models of review in the near future.