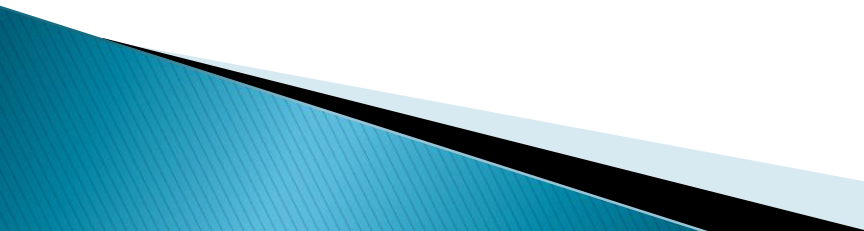# Professional learning and development for older workers; a study of one UK higher education institution

Dr Domini Bingham, Department Leadership and Learning, UCL Institute of Education, London domini.bingham@ucl.ac.uk

Research Questions

- To understand what older workers and management see **as valuable** professional development in a HE case study in England.

- What professional development do older workers **see as valuable** in the HE case study?

- What professional development does management **see as valuable** for older workers in the HE case study?

- How might any **differing views** on what professional development should be offered, **be reconciled**?

Background

- **Extended working lives are here !**

- The lifting of the default retirement age (DRA) in the UK, rising life expectancy, and demographic change throws the spotlight on extended working lives; the place of older workers; their engagement and professional learning needs. Older workers are defined as 50> years (ONS 2013).
- The rising skills gap.

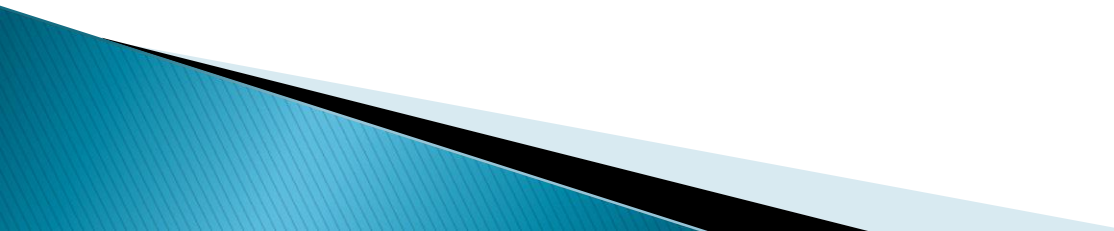## Higher education - the heart of the knowledge economy

The age of 'super complexity' and 'liquid complexity' (Barnett in Temple 2011) sees the world of professionalism in the university as one defined in the handling of multiple frames of understanding, of action and of identity (Barnett 2000: 6).

Such new models of knowledge have implications for professional, as well as academic staff, in adopting a more marketing-led and outward facing university.
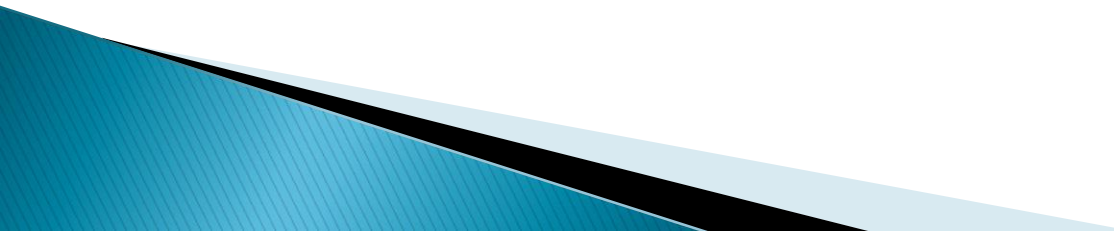
Professionals in HE - UK

▸ The Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) 2008-11 strategic plan emphasises 'the requirement for a HE system that is efficiently run, flexible, responsible and sustainable and which makes good use of limited resources'.

▸ 'those in HE will need to continue to work with vigour and creativity, identifying and meeting the needs of all its client groups, building lasting relationships with them'. (HEFCE 2010)
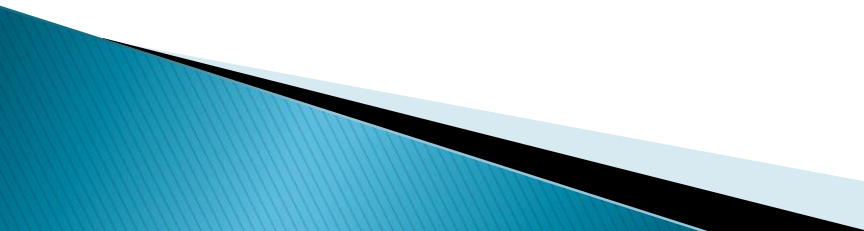
Conceptual framework: socio-cultural processes and relationships

- Flourishing through opportunities for professional development is central to conceptual framework.Pragmatic approach is adopted seeking high performance.

- Older workers are seen as agentic; contributing as well as receiving.
- The model provides a rationale for older workers as valuable.

- Lens of capability theory (Sen 1993).

- Lens of Habermas (1997) perspective of relational and dialogic spaces. Emphasises having work agency.
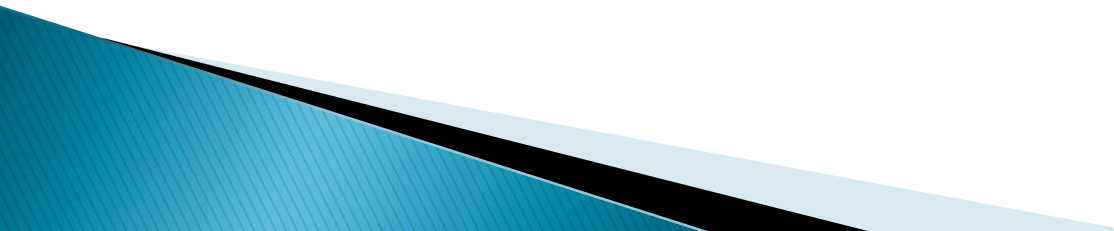
Methodology

- An interpretative, qualitative, case study methodology,
- Two phases of data collection.

- Multi-strategy survey and semi-structured interviews with staff and management,
- 28 survey responses,
- Interviews –semi structured, informed by survey themes
- 14 professional staff /6 management, including director of administration, head of HR and staff development. Piloted.

- Data analysis –constant comparative method. NVivo software/manual

- Triangulation: external/internal policy documentation on older workers. Including Equality Act (2008).

Research Question 1 Findings: What professional development do older workers see as valuable in this study?
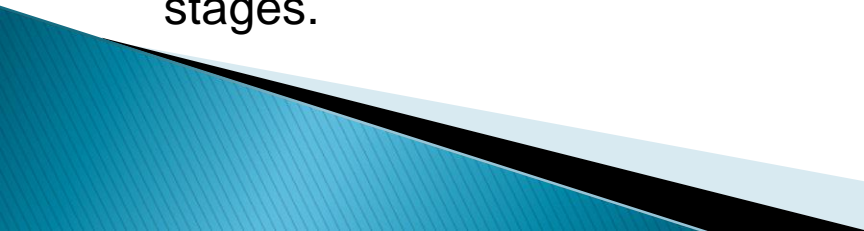
1. Perceptions of older workers needed shifting to acknowledge development.
2. Management may at best be lukewarm and at worst not supportive.
3. Informal learning experiences recognized by staff and management as representing value in the workplace. Plateauing evident. Underutilized (McNair 2011). Staleness and stagnation in roles (McNair 2006). Interpersonal skills valued by staff but not by management.
4. Staff realized they were not passive recipients; they should make efforts to close the gap in development. Role of 'work agency' (Harteis & Goller 2004).
5. Empowerment and improving confidence was a very significant finding
6. The staff review and development tool – reviewed to be more holistic.

Research Q1 Findings: Professional development approaches

- Using dialogue to help identify age related professional development.
- Widespread recognition that insufficient dialogue taking place.
- Segregated PD not the way forward.
- Types of professional development for older workers most supportive; forums, role models, cross-fertilisation. More dynamic PD.
- Making work more 'attractive to older workers' encouraged retention and professional development (tacit learning
- Role of line manager crucial
- Keeping pace
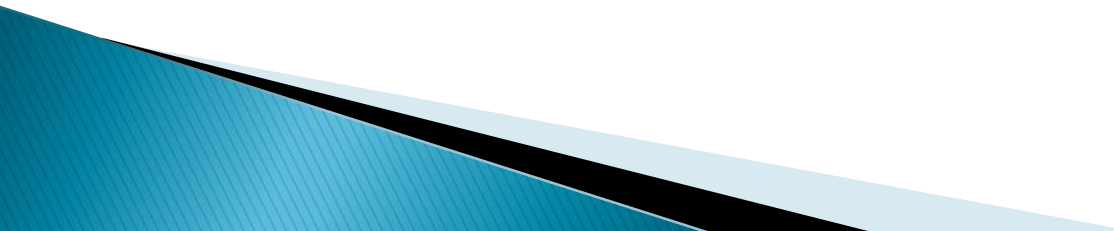- Staff review and development- transparency over submission.

RQ 2 Findings: **What professional development does management see as valuable for older workers?**

- Organisational policy at variance with Public Sector Equality Duty (Equality Act 2010) for staff diversity relating to age.
- Business objectives did not include acting as a champion for equality or social justice.
- Ad hoc processes needed formalizing into policies and procedures around later life learning
- PD anchored to existing focus not career development
- Insufficient robust strategy planning and process for strategic Human Resource Management.
- Priority not given to development for professional staff. Management conceded clear pathways for academics only.
- Recognition of management of vulnerability of older workers.
- Management vehement that discrimination around development would be seriously dealt with.
- No age-related professional development as no-one had requested it. But management recognised staff required development at different ages/career stages.

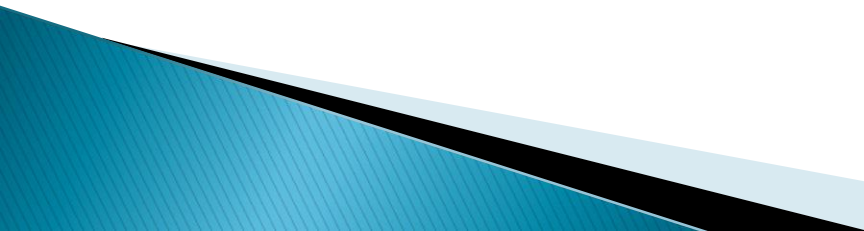## RQ 3 Findings: How might any differing views on what professional development should be offered, be reconciled?

- Older workers perceived themselves to be **viewed by others as career irrelevant** . Contrastingly showed keenness to continue careers (in line with Greller 2006).

- **'Seductiveness of age'** needs challenging (conspiring to underperform). (McNair 2010)

- **Spaces for dialogue needed** – importance of dialogue, enabling spaces to ensure inclusion and equal opportunities

- **Lack of strategic clarity at leadership level** on who decides development

- **Value** - Some discriminatory sense seen, especially female professional staff.

- Inconclusive agreement on extent organisational culture values older workers.

- Managing of diversity crucial – diversity management policies. Massive vulnerability.

- Recognition of older workers **informal learning experiences** (tacit learning) important to staff.

- Development differentiation not answer; age blind CPD – should be needs related regardless of career path, Wide ranging– open to all , including opportunities for older workers. Informal development seen as **very** valuable
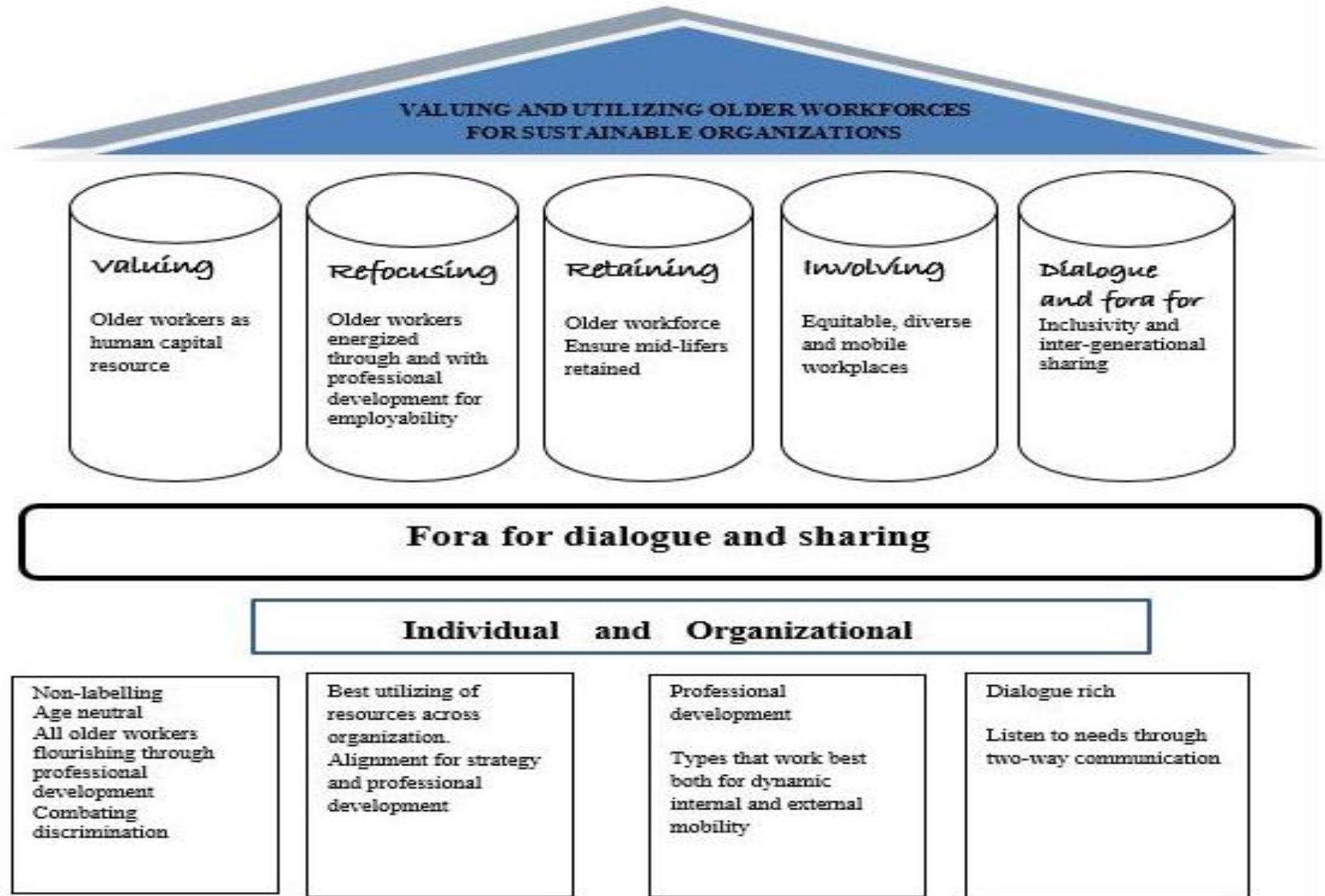
Elements of a diversity led model

- Age as part of diversity model;
- Dialogue to promote inclusivity and empowerment;
- Changing the culture to one recognizing transitions;
- Organizational model for developing older staff;
- Perceptions of organization and staff career progression and development.
- Retention of older workers' policy and support;
- Development of a learning organization;
- Holistic development, learning and wellbeing;
- Model creating a strategic continuum for professional and personal development;
- Professional learning communities and networked learning (aligned to knowledge sharing).

Recommendations

- **1 Organisational Diversity Management**
- Authentic promotion of diversity ;a business case for diversity.
- **2. Dialogue - challenging culture and unconscious bias for mutual benefit**
- Forums, working groups and other ways to show staff they are valued need creating. Intergenerational spaces.
- **3. Empowerment and confidence in changing demographics**
- Empowerment is critical in the development of work agency. Confidence is a major issue and concern.
- **4. Professional development approaches**
- Reviews at mid-part of working life. Evening out equality in learning opportunities. major competitive advantage in recognising the role of informal learning. Instituting a broader conception of staff development to widen out the learning, including tacit learning is needed.
- **5.Robust strategy planning and process** for strategic HRM. Line of sight between annual reviews and strategic planning. Future career progression is as important as other development. Sustaining motivation and engagement is required.
- **6.Line management training** to adopt specific approaches, understanding how age impacts perception, feelings and confidence and tools to support individuals explore other opportunities.
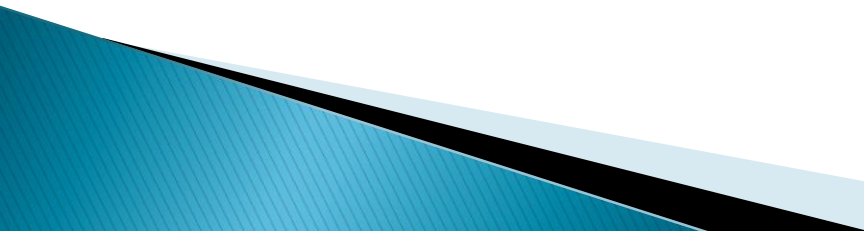
- **7.Organisational policy climate for learning**
- A learning organisation should be implemented which includes Illeris (2004) competence development and takes into account praxis of action of educational gerontology
- **8. Expectations and empowerment for professional development and reversing plateauing**
- The organisational model would include a positive workplace climate for empowerment. Placing responsibility to develop firmly *in both the staff and organisation's expectations* makes the expectation part of the learning landscape.
- **9**. **Knowledge sharing**
- There was evidence of *gaining value from* and *giving value to* others in knowledge sharing and staff had adopted it more widely in some departments. Knowledge sharing helps break down silos and encourages more effective learning.
- **10. Intergenerational and intra-generational sharing and team working**
- The value of mixed age workplace communities is recognised and that healthy communities have mixture of age groups, while business effectiveness is improved through team working.
- **11. Improving employability**
- The OECD (2006) agenda for reform for older worker views employers as gatekeepers with one approach being greater investment in their training as there is better ROI through longer pay off time. Promoting professional careers in HE as a valid choice through enhancing their image (Duncan 2014) to retain and attract the best would help ensure staff feel valued and improve retention.

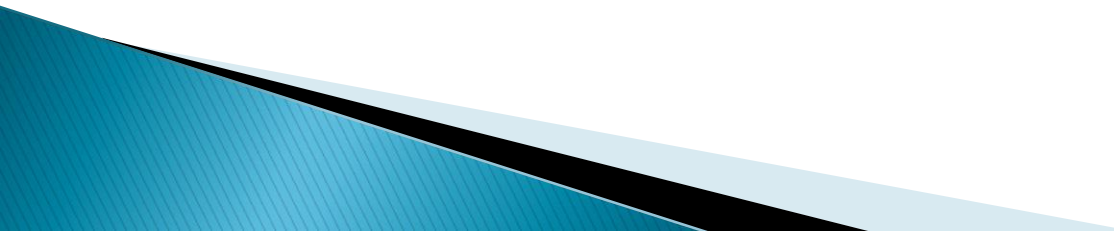**Valuing and utilizing older workforces for sustainable organizations**

Summary : Approaches to working with older workers

Strategy and planning for PD

▸ Constantly needs reviewing to adapt to external and internal changes

▸ Segregation or age blind development

▸ Management: potential inadvertent discrimination

▸ Broader conception of professional development would help in participation and make PD more relevant and an everyday occurrence.

▸ Line management approaches

▸ Ageist views and perceptions around development needs challenging.

▸ Retaining motivation and engagement is crucial

Contribution to learning

- generated **new perspectives** on what older professional staff and management understand about **learning** and **professional development** of **older workers**;

- **implications** on what it is to be engaged in learning in higher education as an older worker. Characteristics not homogenous.

- **recommended** strategic responses for HE management ; at micro-and   macro-organisational level for affecting wider social policy change.

- uncovered new insights into **vocabulary, practices** and **approaches** for professional development and recommended **strategic responses.**

Outputs and next steps

- Continuing to develop theory through further studies on older workers and workplace learning on best practice for professional development and workplace learning across differing sectors.

- Commissioned book– Rising to the opportunities and challenges for older workforces, (2018), Routledge.

- Articles: methodology, professional development, organisational aspects of leading
- Thank you for your time domini.bingham@ucl.ac.uk
- Twitter @ DominiBingham