The Older Academic: Challenges for Australian Universities

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ABSTRACT

Australia, like other developed countries in the world, is experiencing significant demographic and labour market trends. An increase in life expectancy and a decrease in birth rates have contributed to Australia’s ageing population. The academic workforce is ageing and the implications of ignoring the ageing phenomenon could have consequences for the sustainability of universities. It is fundamentally important for university management to better understand their older staff. This includes the career development expectations of older academics. A proactive approach could involve the establishment of human resource management (HRM) strategies that would maximize the knowledge, skills and experience of older academics and provide opportunities that could continue to value their research, teaching and service contributions. This paper will argue the need for further research on career development expectations of older academics to better understand how to harness the knowledge and skills for the benefit of the individual and the organization.

Keywords: Human resource management, Human resource development, Strategic human resource management

This paper argues the need for further research on career development expectations of older academics to better understand how to harness the knowledge and skills for the benefit of the individual and the organization. It examines literature in several fields (higher education, career, psychology) and establishes that there is a paucity of research in this area, despite the demographics pointing to an ageing phenomenon. This paper considers Australia’s ageing academic workforce and the challenges this poses for Australian universities. There are four parts. The paper first outlines Australia’s demographic profile and the impact an ageing population has on its workforce. This part also refers to Australian universities in the context of these demographic trends. The second part discusses several adult development and career stage models in the attempt to define the ‘older’ academic. An explanation on the academic profession, academic work and academic career forms the third part. Finally, the fourth part briefly reviews the academic career literature, with an emphasis on the ‘older’ academic.

Australian Universities in the context of Australian demographic Trends

Australia, like other developed countries in the world, is experiencing significant demographic and labour market trends. The first trend is that people are living longer with the life expectancy at birth increasing due to advances in medical treatments and drugs and a reduction in some risk factors. (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2006). In 1980-1982 the life expectancy for men at age 50 was 75.1 years of age and for women at age 50 was 80.7 years of age. In 2002-2004 it had increased for men to 80.6 years and for
women to 84.6 years. (ABS 2006). The second trend is the steady decline in the total fertility rate. In 1961, Australia’s fertility rate peaked at 3.5 births per woman, but in 2001, it had a record low of 1.73 births per woman and it currently remains relatively stable between 1.73 and 1.77 births per woman. (ABS 2007) As a consequence of these two trends, the Australian population overall is getting older.

The number of people aged 65 and over is expected to grow from around one in eight in 2004 to slightly more than one in four by 2051. More significantly, the projected number of people aged 50 years in 2051 will be almost half the population (ABS 2005). Thus, a large sector of the population will leave the workforce and move into retirement over the next two decades. If not addressed, the number of people in retirement will exceed the number of people entering or re-entering the workforce. The consequences are likely to impact all facets of society. This is reinforced by the Productivity Commission (2005) who state: ‘Population ageing can only be conceived as a crisis if we let it become one’ (p339). Organisations will be challenged to respond proactively with the development of human resource management (HRM) strategies that will embrace the knowledge and skills of older workers and encourage workers to prolong their working lives. Currently both State and Federal Governments are addressing the challenges associated with Australia’s ageing population with the release of strategic documents such as Too Young to Go: Mature age unemployment and early retirement in NSW (NSW Committee on Ageing 2001); National Strategy for an Ageing Australia (Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Health and Aged Care 2001); Intergenerational Report 2002-2003 (Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Treasury 2002) and Economic Implications of an Ageing Australia (Productivity Commission 2005).

Among the workforce sectors, education is experiencing the most rapid age increase and has among the oldest workers. In 2001, the average age of all Australian workers was 38.6 years compared to an average of 43.3 years in the education sector. (Commonwealth of Australia 2005) The education sector is subdivided into pre-school education; school education from primary to secondary education to post school education which includes higher education and technical and further education (Australian and New Zealand Standard Industrial Classification (ANZSIC 1993). According to the Department of Education, Science & Training (DEST 2005), in 1996, around one in eight academic staff, was aged 55 and over compared to almost one in five academic staff aged 55 and over in 2005. Thus, approximately 55% of all Australian academics are aged 45 and over.

The ageing academic workforce is not confined to Australia. Altbach (1996) conducted a pioneering international survey of the academic profession in most developed countries (Australia, Brazil, Chile, Egypt, [West] Germany, Hong Kong, Israel, Japan, Korea, Mexico, the Netherlands, Russia, Sweden and
the United States (US)) and found that in nearly all of the countries surveyed, a large majority of professors were aged 40 - 50. As this study was conducted over ten years ago, this would make this cohort aged 50 - 60 today.

To illustrate the ageing Australian academic workforce, Figure 1 compares the staff statistics from two Australian universities with the material from DEST (2005) statistics. The first example is University of Sydney, Australia and is a member of the Group of Eight Universities (Go8). The Go8 is a coalition of Australia’s leading universities that are internationally recognized for scholarship and research excellence (http://www.gr8.com.au). Calculated from the University of Sydney staff statistics (2006), 28% of academic staff are aged 45-54; 20% are aged 55-64; 2.5% are aged 65 and over and when combined, over 50% of academic staff are aged 45 and over. The second example is Macquarie University, also based in Sydney and is a member of the Innovative Research Universities Australia (IRU) which comprises six internationally recognized student-focused and research-intensive universities (http://www.iru.com.au). Calculated from the Macquarie University staff statistics from 2003-2005, 30% of academic staff are aged 45-54; 23% are aged 55-64; 3% are aged 65 and over and when combined, 56% of academic staff are aged 45 and over.

Figure 1: Selected Australian Academic Staff Percentage by Age Group compared to DEST (2005) Academic Staff Statistics. (DEST (2005), Macquarie University (2003-2005), University of Sydney (2006))
Given the phenomenon of an ageing academic workforce, universities are confronted with the potential sustainability consequences, otherwise the question of survival becomes imminent. Such consequences include attracting new staff; maintaining the morale of existing staff and harnessing the knowledge and expertise of older staff (see eg. Koopman-Boyden & Macdonald, 2003). Hugo (2005) examined the demographic trends in Australia’s academic workforce, with a particular focus on one Australian university. For a university to retain its global position in research and innovation, Hugo (2005) raises potential HRM issues which he refers to a new version of the ‘three R’s’: recruitment of high quality staff; retention of high performing staff; return of academics currently in overseas postings. However, the authors of this paper offer a potential fourth ‘R’, which would refer to the capacity to respond to change, as the university landscape is constantly in a state of change.

**Defining the ‘Older’ Worker/Academic**

There is no universal agreement on the meaning of an ‘older’ or mature age worker. There is a tendency to refer to ‘older’ workers as those aged 50 and over, but more recent considerations within the HRM literature have inclined to refer to ‘older’ workers aged 45 and over. The *National Strategy for an Ageing Australia* (Commonwealth of Australia 2001) and ABS (2005) refer to people aged 45 and over as being the current benchmark to describe mature age workers. There is clearly variation in the classification of ‘older’ worker, such as the recent anti-discrimination case of Hopper & Others Vs Virgin Blue Airlines (2006), where the age of an ‘older’ worker was deemed at 35 years of age, although this has not been reflected in other published works.

Adult development and career stage models can help develop the definition of an ‘older’ worker/academic. Influential are the adult development models by Erikson (1963) and Levinson (1986) and career stage models by Super (1990) and Greenhaus, Callanan & Godshalk (2000). Work forms a significant component of a person’s life and can be influenced by major life events. These models can offer further meaning to the concept of an ‘older’ worker/academic.

Erikson’s (1963) stage of development for adults aged 40 - 65 is termed ‘generativity versus stagnation’. In this stage, ‘generativity’ implies that adults are challenged to develop the capacity to focus on the generations that will follow. One of the challenges at this stage is to undertake the role of mentor for a younger work colleague. Adults who fail to resolve this stage, either due to unwillingness or inability to assume such responsibilities will experience stagnation. Given that there is an increase in life expectancy, the issue of stagnation will become increasingly relevant to today’s working life and thus creates HRM
challenges for organizations. A possible HRM challenge could be with the issue of motivation that ultimately impacts productivity. It raises the question about how organizations attempt to address stagnation. For universities, there are a range of possible scenarios that could create stagnation. One example could be an academic who has reached the top of the academic classification structure, Level E (professor) at the age of 45. This academic has potentially twenty years of working life remaining and this would create a challenge for universities in terms of devising strategies that will effectively manage such a situation, to prevent the likelihood of stagnation.

Levinson’s (1986) model argues that the stage of an adult’s life is closely related to age. Adults aged 45 - 60 are termed as ‘middle adulthood and culmination’. Characteristically, adults at this stage tend to reflect on their life and are likely to contemplate their future. Like Erickson, Levinson emphasizes the process of mentoring, its significance for both parties and the dynamics of this working relationship which has important implications for career adjustment and development. If there are no mentor opportunities, what impact would this have on one’s career adjustment and development? If this were the case, what is the impact on work performance? In the case for ageing academics, Koopman-Boyden & Macdonald (2003) signal the possible deterioration in overall work performance and suggest that there is dual responsibility between the individual and the organization to address the effectiveness of work performance.

While it is the university’s role to offer the conditions of successful career management, older academics also have the responsibility to participate, such as taking advantage of opportunities for training, being mentor to younger academics and adjusting to horizontal rather than vertical career shifts (Koopman-Boyden & Macdonald 2003:38).

A third perspective offered to the definition of an ‘older’ worker, is Super’s (1990) life-span, life-space theory, which is considered to be the most influential within the field of career development. It aims to make sense of a person’s chronological age, their state of development and their career stage. According to Super (1990) the stage for adults aged 45 - 56 is termed ‘maintenance’, where there is consolidation of one’s achievements and the challenge is to preserve one’s position in an organization to combat the up and coming younger rivals. Given that today’s work environment is dynamic and competitive, this model has relevance in terms of recognizing the interaction that exists between the individual and the organization and the extent to which one adopts a more prominent role in career management and development.

Greenhaus, Callanan & Godshalk (2000) identified five stages based on Levinson’s (1986) model of adult development. They term the stage for adults aged 40 - 55 as ‘mid-career’, which involves a re-examination of one’s life structure and the choices that were made during the early career period from age
25 - 40. In this stage, there are two possible important events that can occur. One is known as ‘plateauling’, that impacts one’s responsibilities and job advancement and the other event, is ‘obsolescence’ that impacts one’s knowledge and skills. According to Greenhaus et al (2000) adults who successfully resolve these challenges will remain productive, while those who fail to resolve the challenges in this stage are likely to experience stagnation and frustration. This suggestion could have practical application in understanding and managing today’s working life. In reference to the scenario mentioned earlier, the professor at age 45 years, the challenge for universities is to develop innovative and flexible HRM strategies that would continue to develop and challenge the knowledge, skills and expertise of this ‘older’ academic.

Having considered the adult development and career stage models outlined above, for the purposes of this paper, an ‘older’ academic is aged 50 - 55. Table 1 shows the number of full-time and fractional full-time Australian academic staff by age group and classification level for 2005 and the highest percentage of academic staff are aged 45-49. As these are 2005 statistics, this cohort now would move into the 50-55 age range. It is relevant to explain that the academic classification structure in Australian Universities comprises of five levels: Level A (Associate Lecturer) to Level B (Lecturer) to Level C (Senior Lecturer) to Level D (Associate Professor) and to Level E (Professor).

Table 1: Full-time and Fractional Full-time Australian Academic Staff by Age Group and by Classification Level (DEST 2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Level A</th>
<th>Level B</th>
<th>Level C</th>
<th>Level D+</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;25</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>281 (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>1,470</td>
<td>453</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1,946 (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>1,919</td>
<td>1,785</td>
<td>337</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>4,086 (10.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>1,273</td>
<td>2,278</td>
<td>989</td>
<td>277</td>
<td>4,817 (12.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>994</td>
<td>2,468</td>
<td>1,731</td>
<td>863</td>
<td>6,056 (15.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-49</td>
<td>738</td>
<td>2,341</td>
<td>1,896</td>
<td>1,583</td>
<td>6,558 (17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-54</td>
<td>477</td>
<td>1,796</td>
<td>1,871</td>
<td>1,892</td>
<td>6,036 (15.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-59</td>
<td>298</td>
<td>1,366</td>
<td>1,582</td>
<td>2,209</td>
<td>5,455 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-64</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>514</td>
<td>766</td>
<td>1,425</td>
<td>2,830 (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;64</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>189</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>462</td>
<td>887 (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>7,621 (20%)</td>
<td>13,193 (34%)</td>
<td>9,379 (24%)</td>
<td>8,759 (22%)</td>
<td>38,952</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In terms of understanding what is meant by an ‘older’ academic, it is important to firstly explain the concept of career as well as the academic profession, academic work and academic career. The concept of career, just like the concept ‘older’ worker, can have different meanings. The concept of career will have a different perspective, depending upon whether it is from the individual or from the organization. A key difference is who takes on the responsibility for the management of careers. Super & Hall (1978:334) define career as a ‘sequence of positions occupied by a person during the course of a life-time’ and refer to career development as the process by which people seek self-fulfillment in their work profession. Furthermore, like Koopman-Boyden & Macdonald (2003), Baruch (2004a) asserts that although a career belongs to the individual, it is important to recognize the role of the organization in the planning and management of an individual’s career.

Although much of the career literature has focused on the individual perspective, there has been considerable interest in the last two decades about the importance of the organization’s role in career development and management. There is no doubt that an organization cannot survive without its employees. Employees who are offered the opportunities to further develop and enhance their knowledge and skills are likely to perform at their best and this will inevitably create benefits to the individual as well as to the organization. Career development and management is typically a HRM responsibility. Part of the role of HRM within an organization is to effectively select and utilize the knowledge and skills of its employees, with the intention to achieve the organization’s goals and strategies, as well as the individual’s needs and goals. With reference to the management of an academic career (an explanation follows in this paper), there are arguments to recognize the roles of both the individual and the organization, namely the university.

An explanation of the academic profession is necessary before academic work and an academic career can be outlined. First, a profession is considered to be a vocation that requires knowledge and there are certain characteristics that define ‘profession’ such as exclusive powers to judge who is qualified and can train new members; regulates the quality of professional work and is grounded in a complex body of knowledge (Light 1974). In a landmark study, The Academic Life, Clark (1987) examined extensively the research and teaching functions of academic life in the US and highlighted the diversity within the academic profession. The diversity refers to the many contexts of the academic profession which include the different disciplines, the different types of universities and different countries. According to Clark (1987) the academic profession is a ‘matrix of disciplinary affiliations and
institutional assignments… conditioned by national settings, are differentiated by institutional sectors and are affected by the increasingly powerful thrust of the discipline’ (p8).

Based on the structure of knowledge, Becher & Trowler (2001) categorize the academic profession into four distinct academic disciplinary groupings. Table 2 summarizes the four academic disciplinary groupings and the different knowledge domains. They are described as ‘Academic tribes, each with their own set of intellectual values and their own patch of cognitive territory’ (Becher 1994:153).

Table 2: Academic Disciplinary Groupings and Knowledge Domains. (Becher & Trowler 2001:36)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Disciplinary Groupings</th>
<th>Knowledge domains</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pure Sciences ‘hard pure’</strong></td>
<td>Cumulative, concerned with universals, quantities, simplifications; clear criteria for knowledge verification and obsolescence; results in discovery/explanation eg. Physics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Humanities &amp; Pure Social Sciences ‘soft-pure’</strong></td>
<td>Reiterative, concerned with qualities, complication; dispute over criteria for knowledge verification and obsolescence; results in understanding/interpretation eg. History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Technologies ‘hard-applied’</strong></td>
<td>Purposive, concerned with mastery of physical environment; uses both qualitative and quantitative approaches; results in products/techniques eg. Engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Applied Social Science ‘soft-applied’</strong></td>
<td>Functional, concerned with enhancement of [semi] professional practice; uses case studies and case law to a large extent; results in protocols/procedures eg. Education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Given the complexities of the academic profession, there are multiple entry requirements and these are associated with the different academic disciplinary groupings. Clark (1987: 190) states:

*There are so many frontdoors, backdoors, sidedoors, and hidden passageways for entering the vast force of the American academic profession, that no simple picture of attraction and recruitment can be constructed.*

For some academic disciplinary groupings, in particular ‘hard-pure’, a doctorate is mandatory plus an expectation of post-doctoral experience in order to commence an academic career. This may not be the case in other disciplinary groupings such as the ‘soft-applied’ fields, where professional experience outside academia may be preferred for entry into academia. Once in an academic position, there is the expectation to undertake a doctorate. The likely scenario for ‘hard-pure’ is that an academic career may
commence when one is aged in their mid to late 20’s, compared to ‘soft-applied’, an academic career may commence when one is aged in their late 30’s to early 40’s (Clark 1987). Thus, the multiple entry points due to the different academic disciplinary groupings generate challenges for universities in managing their ‘older’ academics, as the career development expectations are likely to differ based on one’s academic disciplinary grouping and on how many years one has been in academia. This is reflected by McInnis (2000:143) who states:

*Work role problems are not experienced in the same way by academics at different ages and career stages, or indeed, in different institutions and disciplinary fields.*

Henkel (2000) broadly defines academic work as being about knowledge. Acquiring, producing, re-shaping and disseminating knowledge are the key roles of academics. Their primary communities are knowledge communities described as disciplines or subject communities. The primary professional activities are teaching, research and service. This three-fold categorization of academic work indicates that academic work is not only part of the university that employs academics but is also part of a wider academic community beyond the university (Farnham 1999).

The multiplicity of academic work should not be underestimated. Academic work roles can be categorized as ‘teaching-only’, ‘research-only’ and ‘teaching and research’ Anderson, Johnson and Saha (2002) in their report on *Changes in Academic Work*, describe the ‘teaching-only’ role as curriculum development; preparation of courses; face-to-face teaching and interaction with students; assessment of students’ progress and provision of feedback. However this description is not definitive, as the activity of teaching is diverse (McInnis 2000). The ‘research’ role also varies and can range from laboratory research in the science disciplines to library research for the humanities disciplines, with the focus on the generation of new knowledge in the form of scholarly writing as the primary publication objective. It is often connected to research grant/project funding. In terms of the ‘teaching and research’ role, this involves both teaching and research as core activities of academic work. The current trends in these three academic work role ‘categories’ are significant, as reported in *The Higher Education Report 2005* (2007): In 2005, ‘teaching-only’ staff had steadily decreased by almost 22% since 1996, while growth was evident for both ‘teaching and research’ and ‘research-only’ staff, which had increased by 7% and 39% since 1996 respectively. Based on these trends, it would be reasonable to speculate that this highlights the increasing division that appears to exist between the teaching and research work roles and thus, creates implications for the management of academic careers. Table 3 shows Australian academic staff numbers in selected NSW universities by academic work roles and it is evident that the highest proportion of academics are in the teaching-research work role, followed by research-only then teaching-only.
Table 3: Australian Academic Staff Numbers in Selected NSW Universities by Academic Work Role (DEST 2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>Teaching-only</th>
<th>Research-only</th>
<th>Teaching &amp; Research</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Macquarie University</td>
<td>31 (3.5%)</td>
<td>148 (16.5%)</td>
<td>704 (80%)</td>
<td>883</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of NSW</td>
<td>405 (11%)</td>
<td>968 (26%)</td>
<td>2,377 (63%)</td>
<td>3,750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Sydney</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>911 (34%)</td>
<td>1,792 (66%)</td>
<td>2,703</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Technology</td>
<td>2 (0.5%)</td>
<td>105 (11.5%)</td>
<td>793 (88%)</td>
<td>900</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The academic career, according to Light (1972) cited by Clark (1986), is conceptualized as three interrelated strands: disciplinary, institutional and external. The disciplinary career includes activities that are connected with the discipline and its goals; the institutional career includes activities associated with employment at a particular university and the external career includes those work-related activities pursued outside the employing university but requires the academic’s professional expertise. Another perspective is offered by Rice (1986) who discusses the academic career as one that continues to narrow as one further develops commitment to their chosen discipline and specialization. It is reinforced by the reward structure in both professional associations and universities, such as study leave and research grants being awarded to academic staff who continue to build on and narrow their specialization.

Career advancement or promotion in an academic career depends upon several factors. Anderson et al (2002) refers to advancement in an academic career as to ‘the extent to which academics have opportunities to advance in both their expertise and recognition’ (p87). An academic career commences upon the first appointment to the university and to progress further upwards along the hierarchical academic structure, staff are promoted on merit on the basis of several criteria related to their research, teaching and service roles.

Another conceptualization of an academic career is suggested by Kaulisch & Enders (2005) in their analysis of academic careers within the context of both the traditional and contemporary career literature. They point out that there is empirical evidence that academic careers are becoming more boundaryless. To clarify, the concept of boundaryless can be equated to the removal of barriers such as organizational barriers and geographical barriers and that there are multiple contexts. Although they appropriately acknowledge Becher’s (1989) study, Academic Tribes & Territories, as being valuable to understand certain traditional features of academic careers, they indicate that:

More academics face a situation where they are kindly invited to move from a bounded world of academe to a project of academic career and work living multiple worlds with blurring
boundaries which encompasses a growing emphasis on the quasi-entrepreneurial role of academics (Kaulisch & Enders 2005:137).

Therefore, it is important to recognise the multiple and changing contexts that govern academic careers and this reinforces Clark’s (1987) analysis of the academic profession.

From the career literature, Baruch & Hall (2004) examined the academic career model in the context as a leading model for the conventional world of work. They argue that ‘academic careers are moving towards a corporate direction as universities have become more customer focused and business driven’ (Baruch & Hall 2004:241). They discuss in detail and acknowledge the classic study of academic careers by Caplow & McGee’s (1958) *The Academic Marketplace* and draw attention to the authors’ conclusion that an academic’s career success would be virtually set by the age of 40. However, given the age of this classic study, the enormous changes in universities internationally through massification and today’s ageing phenomenon, one could question its relevance.

As an alternative to the traditional career models, Baruch (2004b) presents an academic career model. The advantage of this model is that it offers multiple options and argues that multi-directional careers may emerge. ‘More fundamental, the academic career model builds on networking within and across organizations’ (Baruch 2004b:68). This proposition is consistent to the earlier reference by Kaulisch & Enders (2005) who commented that academic careers are becoming more boundaryless.

**Academic Career Literature**

The academic career literature emerged during the 1980’s and despite studies being conducted nearly twenty years ago, the findings remain relevant to today’s workplace. An example is Baldwin & Blackburn (1981)’s study which was to determine how universities could effectively capitalize on the potential of their currently employed and experienced staff. From a sample of 106 male academics from twelve liberal arts colleges, their findings revealed that the academic career is complex and there were difficult and easy phases of career development. Their recommendations to universities were four-fold: to pay greater attention to the characteristics and concerns of each phase of the academic career; provide appropriate services and opportunities; maintain flexibility to encourage professional growth and to attend to individual needs. Despite the age of this study, these recommendations have relevance for university management today, particularly given an ageing academic workforce. In light of Beecher & Trowler’s (2001) categorization of the academic profession into four distinct disciplinary groupings, it is evitable that ‘older’ academics will be at different career stages and thus, have different career needs.
Stein, Rocco & Goldenetz (2000) conducted a case study within a large US Midwestern research university in order to explore the changing demographics and assess how workforce policies encouraged older workers to remain, retire or return. They found that university policies were not age biased and there was evidence of some conflict within the university ranging from policies to attract older professors to ways to retain expertise. They suggest universities rethink how they allocate training opportunities and flexible employment options to older workers.

Almost two decades ago, Over (1985) examined the barriers to entry of the Australian academic profession; the factors affecting the academics’ career development and the academic female representation. This was an insightful examination that suggested universities address potential problems of obsolescence and rigidity. This raises an important question about the extent university management takes into consideration the issues raised in this paper.

A longitudinal Australian study from 1981-1989 on academic career development by Dunkin (1991) involved the analysis of university records from one Australia’s oldest and largest universities. The findings revealed that both age and gender operated as informal criteria for important stages of career advancement. In light of an ageing academic workforce, what does this mean for an older academic’s career development?

Over (1993) examined the characteristics Australian academics undertaking career development in one university from 1978 to 1988. He found that career advancement was associated with achievement in research rather than commitment to teaching and suggests that universities should monitor the promotion criteria and processes underlying evaluation of applications for promotion. In light of the recent trends reported by the Higher Education Report (2005), this highlights possible implications for the management of academic careers.

A small scale Australian study on the growth and development as an academic by Akerlind’s (2005) found that career stage did not limit the range of ways in which academics understand their own development. A large variation in the meaning between the terms ‘academic development’ and ‘professional development’ was revealed by the differing responses of the twenty-eight staff interviewed.

A ‘one-size’ fits all strategy in order to address career development for academics would appear unsuitable given the complexity and multiplicity of academic work roles. In addition, as there are multiple
entry points into academia due to the different disciplinary groupings, the issue of managing ‘older’
academics poses a valid challenge for universities that signals the need for further research in this area.

**Conclusion**

The statistics show that the ageing academic workforce cannot be ignored. The university landscape is
experiencing dramatic change, operating in a dynamic and competitive environment and the ageing
academic workforce demographics have a fundamental impact on the future sustainability of universities.
This paper has reviewed the literature in a number of research fields on the ‘older’ academic, career
development and university sustainability. It has shown that there is a paucity of research in the area of
older academics. The paper has argued the need for further research on career development expectations
of older academics to better understand how to harness the knowledge and skills for the benefit of the
individual and the organization. A pertinent quote by Clark (1987: 188) affirms:

> Academic careers thus become locations in a matrix of disciplinary affiliations and institutional
> assignments, occupancies that are fluid and shifting for some and stable and constant for others.
> Careers may or may not be a moveable feast; they are always a mixture of opportunity and
> constraint. Career lines operate as tapering tunnels down which academics are beckoned, by
> whatever rewards, intrinsic and extrinsic, particular specialties in particular types of institutions
> are able to muster.

A proactive approach would be for university management to consider the development of HRM
strategies that will benefit both the ‘older’ academic and the university. One such approach would be to
embrace the talent of their ‘older’ academics, so as to keep them motivated, inspired and encourage them
to continue with valuable research, teaching and service pursuits.
REFERENCES


NSW Committee on Ageing (2001) Too Young to Go: Mature age unemployment and early retirement in NSW. December.


