

Competencies of older adults

Franz Kolland, Anna Wanka, Vera Gallistl (University of Vienna)

In industrialised societies age(ing) has long been perceived as a degradation process, characterized by loss of physical and cognitive competences. Recent (longitudinal) studies show, however, that cognitive functioning and enhancement of competences are also possible in older adulthood. It is actually lack of training, not age per se, that may lead to a decrease in competences. Lifelong Learning thus constitutes a crucial condition for social inclusion, active citizenship and employability into old age as well as a successful transition from working life to retirement in societies of longevity.

Despite the fact that cognitive development is possible throughout the whole life-course, significant differences in capacities persist. They are shaped by vertical characteristics of inequality, such as income or educational attainment, and horizontal characteristics of inequality, such as gender, race and generation. Intergenerational changes are of particular interest here.

Based on the PIAAC study 2011/12 the article addresses the following questions:

- Stocktaking: Which competences do the age groups between 50-65 years have in Austria?
- Intergenerational comparison: Does an „age effect“ exist in regard to the considered competencies, or does the age effect turn out to be an artefact? Can we speak of a “digital divide” in regard to the distribution of technological competences?
- Intra-generational comparison: How far does calendar age influence cognitive competences? Which effects do generation and the social situation have?
- Practical Implications: (How) Can skills shortages be compensated in midlife? Do participation in adult education and vocational training in later working life increase the level of competences?

Four central conclusions can be drawn from the results of quantitative data analysis: First, skills measurements require a life-course perspective, i.e. purely age-related correlations are often problematic and undifferentiated. Second, the acquisition of competences and the participation in adult education and vocational training in mid- and later life are social policy objectives, as cognitive competences and participation in non/formal education are highly dependent upon the social situation. Third, Lifelong Learning provides an opportunity to influence and compensate socially induced inequalities in competences. Particularly persons age 50 years and above with low (primary) qualifications and low educational status can profit from Lifelong Learning in building up competences. Fourth, in this context differences in learning styles between the generations 50 years and above and younger generations must be considered: The former rather learn informally and profit from more informal educational settings.

Keywords: Ageing, Lifelong Learning, Generations, Skills, Competence