

# An Evaluation of an Age-friendly Intergenerational Service-learning Programme on University Campus.

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## Abstract.

With the ageing of the global population, universities internationally are increasing their efforts to become age-friendly institutions. This paper describes an intergenerational service-learning project that focused on the co-design and delivery of Age-Friendly University workshops with, and for, older adults in local communities. Older adults were defined as those who were over 65 years of age or those who identified as older adults. The service-learning partnership involved undergraduate occupational therapy students from the University of Galway and older adults living in Galway city. The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of the older adult participants who attended the age-friendly, intergenerational workshops on university campus. The workshops' content and structure were co-designed by students and older adult advisors recruited from the community. Workshops were carried out over three weeks. Data was collected from participants (n = 54) using a self-developed survey. Quantitative data produced descriptive statistics. Qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis. Overall, the older adults reported that attending the workshops was a positive, educational and social experience. Participants greatly valued the intergenerational and peer interactions. The results also highlighted important challenges experienced by the older adults while on campus and areas for improvement in planning future projects.

**Keywords:** Age friendly universities; Community-engaged learning; Intergenerational learning; Older adults; Service-learning.

## 1. Introduction.

The reduced fertility rates and improved life expectancies are resulting in the world's population aging (Gu, Andreev & Dupre, 2021). In Ireland, the Central Statistics Office estimates the number of people over 65 years of age in 2023 was 806,000 and this is projected to double by 2051 (Central Statistics Office, 2024). Older adults (OAs) are at greater risk of social isolation, and psychological and physical health issues, than the general population (Klinenberg, 2016; Jaul & Barron, 2017). Studies have shown that age-appropriate, meaningful activities are therefore essential to support and maintain their physical and mental wellbeing (Owen, Berry & Brown, 2022; Irving, Davis & Collier, 2017).

Internationally, third level education is recognised as having the potential to be a motivating and engaging occupation for older OAs (Ginsberg, 1998; Chippendale & Boltz, 2015) with lifelong learning shown to provide psychological, social and physical health benefits (Narushima, Liu & Diestelkamp, 2013). Over the past decade European legislation has supported and recommended age diversity in Higher Education (Mark, 2018; Bologna Follow-Up Group, 2012; Talmage, Mark, Slowey & Knopf, 2016) and a drive for Age-Friendly Universities (AFUs) has begun.

### 1.1 Age-friendly universities.

In 2012, the AFU initiative was launched by Dublin City University (DCU), Ireland. Ten principles of AFUs were coined to foster inclusivity, life-long learning and community integration. The principles incorporated the academic, social and physical aspects of university life. A partnership formed between DCU, Strathclyde University, Scotland, and Arizona State University, USA, that led to the formation of the Global Age-Friendly Universities Network (Talmage et al. 2016). This initiative encourages comprehensive campus-wide strategies that promote age diversity in all areas of institutional activity including teaching, learning, research and civic engagement activities (Hughes, Murphy & O'Kelly, 2022). Since its inception more institutions have begun to engage with retired staff, have established lifelong learning programmes and increased OAs' participation in research (Montayre, Maneze, Salamonson, Tan, & Possamai-Inesedy, 2023; Filinson & Raimondo, 2019; Montepare, Farah, Doyle & Dixon, 2019). All of these initiatives are increasing opportunities for intergenerational learning between young adults and OAs.

Intergenerational programmes began in the 1970's and have led to an intergenerational learning paradigm (Newman & Hatton-Yeo, 2008). This paradigm recognizes the need for OAs to be acknowledged as assets and learning resources within communities globally. It emphasizes OAs pivotal role in supporting communities to build high social capital and value civic engagement (Clark & Leedahl, 2019). Many benefits of intergenerational learning have been found including opportunities for OAs to meet other OAs, improvements in personal and professional competencies in younger learners, cognitive benefits for older learners, and building relationships between generations (Pstross et al. 2016). The universities' strategies for operationalising AFU principles have also been analysed. A scoping review by Montayre et al. found thirteen papers, most were from the United States (n=10), two were from Canada, and one paper presented case studies from Scotland and Ireland. Content analysis of the 13 papers revealed three themes universities were using to operationalise AFUs: 1.) Interdisciplinary collaboration within the university, 2.) Establishing a strong partnership with the community and 3.) Aligning with global initiatives and advocacy on ageing issues. Removal of barriers such as challenges with physical access to universities and issues related to ageism, and promotion of intergenerational learning were also seen as essential to encouraging participation of OAs.

Within university settings internationally, a common educational approach that could promote operationalisation of intergenerational learning is '*service-learning*'. Service learning describes an organised service project, carried out by students, faculty members and community partners such as OAs. The aim is to meet a need in the community while offering a credit-bearing educational experience for the students (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). Intergenerational service-learning projects are fast becoming established as an effective means to fostering age friendly friendliness in universities (Yoelin, 2021).

## **1.2 Intergenerational service-learning projects.**

Service learning is a unique educational approach that offers benefits for both providers and recipients of the service (Leedahl et al., 2019), and for the universities. It represents a low-cost approach to curricula enrichment and an opportunity to connect the expertise fostered on campus to the wider community (Tyndall, Kosko, Forbis & Sullivan, 2020). While providing a valuable service to members of the community, service-learning helps students to consolidate learning, develop critical thinking skills, bolster civic duty and increase awareness of the needs of the community (Tyndall, 2020; Veyvoda & Van Cleave, 2020; Heo, King, Lee, Kim & Ni, 2014). For

healthcare students it can provide a sense of personal satisfaction and benefit their professional development and sense of preparedness for practice (Flinders, 2013).

In recent years, intergenerational service-learning projects have served to prepare students for working with older people while also providing a meaningful service to OAs (Filinson & Raimando, 2019; Leedahl et al., 2019; Augustin & Freshman, 2016). After COVID-19 this exchange is even more important. Isolation and social distancing were used effectively to reduce the rate of infection in many countries and protect OA populations who faced a higher mortality rate than the general population during the pandemic (Shahid et al., 2020). These policies however led to an increased risk of social isolation for OAs. The discourse misrepresenting COVID-19 as an '*older person problem*' also led to ageist attitudes from the general population (Fraser et al., 2020; Silva et al., 2021). Intergenerational projects can break down generational barriers and stigma (Andreoletti & Howard, 2018) that became more prevalent during the COVID-19 pandemic (Fraser et al., 2020). Holding workshops on-campus actively involves OAs in the university community, facilitating peer relationships and opportunities for intergenerational exchange. In-person workshops can also accommodate OAs who may not be proficient in using online formats.

Participating in intergenerational programmes has been linked to social and psychological well-being benefits for OAs (Morrow-Howell et al., 2020; Narushima, Liu & Diestelkamp, 2013), as well as a sense of overall community (Gardner & Alegre, 2019; Pstross et al., 2017; Andreoletti & Howard, 2018) with project content varying widely. For example, Leedahl et al. (2019) documented a reverse mentoring approach used by students from the University of Rhode Island to provide OAs with education in new technologies. The project improved the OAs' proficiency in utilising the benefits of modern technology while providing the students the opportunity to improve their leadership and teaching skills. In Indiana students participated in structured service-learning roles in the Indiana Senior Games (Heo et al., 2014). The students reflected that the project fostered intergenerational relationships, personal growth and their insight into ageing. The reciprocal sharing of expertise and experience within intergenerational service-learning is congruent to the AFU principles, making it an appropriate approach to promoting age-friendliness in universities.

### **1.3 Age-friendly university workshops.**

In this study, an intergenerational project was developed as part of a service-learning module for third-year undergraduate occupational therapy (OT) students at University of Galway. In line with the university's commitment to accessible and inclusive education (University of Galway, 2021) it followed the AFU principles through the involvement of students, the university's retired community and the external OA community (Hughes, Murphy & O'Kelly, 2022). The project was also guided by the ethos of the Age Friendly Ireland programme that focuses attention on the environmental, economic and social factors that influence the health and well-being of OAs (Age Friendly Ireland, 2025) with the aim of making Ireland accessible in older age. The workshops were co-designed by OT students and OA advisors from Galway city, and supervision was provided by occupational therapy lecturers.

The workshops aimed to offer an on-campus, age-friendly, intergenerational learning experience. The OT students possessed knowledge in gerontology and skills working with OAs, making them ideal candidates to be involved in the project. Valuing meaningful occupations is also core to OT (Taff et al., 2017) and this project offered the students an opportunity to gain knowledge of how OAs explore and maintain meaningful activities as they age. The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of OAs who attended co-designed, age-friendly, intergenerational workshops in the University of Galway, and their openness to further engagement with the University.

## **2. Methodology.**

The research describes the evaluation of a service-learning project using a self-developed survey. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Galway, Research Ethics Committee on December the 7<sup>th</sup> 2022. Funding was provided from the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion office, University of Galway.

### **2.1 The older adult workshop project.**

Thirty students were organised into seven working groups. Each group was allocated an area of Galway city from which they recruited two OA advisors. Each group had approximately three meetings with their OA advisors to co-design the workshops. Collaboration included possible content, advertising strategies and accessibility needs of the OAs in their community. The power

dynamic between students and community members can occasionally be imbalanced (Mitchell, 2008), through these meetings students tried to draw on their advisors' expertise to build a fairer collaboration.

Three distinct workshop strands were designed based on the overall topics identified during the collaborative meetings. Each workshop strand ran concurrently over a four-hour period, one day per week, for three consecutive weeks. To enhance acoustics, workshops were held in small lecture rooms throughout the University campus where there was minimal background noise, and where possible, carpeted floors. OA advisors assisted with the advertising and recruitment of participants for the workshops through their existing community groups. Retired university staff and the OA advisors were invited to participate in delivering the workshop content. The capacity of the workshops was limited to 60 participants with an average of 20 participants per workshop strand. Details of the workshop structure and content are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Workshop structure and content.**

<b>Workshop Strand Title</b>	<b>Topics covered in each workshop</b>
Let's Get Creative	Week 1: Photography Week 2: Storytelling Week 3: Creative Writing
Our World and Beyond	Week 1: Local History Week 2: Archaeology Week 3: Astronomy
Healthy Body, Healthy Mind	Week 1: Falls Prevention & Exercise Week 2: Nutrition, Wellbeing & Cognitive Health Week 3: Cooking & Kitchen Safety

## **2.2 Participants.**

Participants were eligible to take part in the workshops if they were over 65 years of age or identified as an OA. Other inclusion criteria included that the participants had to live in the Galway City area, could provide informed consent and communicate in English. Participants were excluded if they were unable to attend all three weeks of the proposed workshops.

Participants were welcome to take part in the workshops without consenting to the research study.

### **2.3 Procedure.**

At the end of week two, an independent researcher provided information and consent forms to all workshop participants. This allowed potential participants to review the information over the coming week before deciding whether or not to participate in the study. Participation to take part in the research was voluntary and feedback was anonymous. At the end of the final workshop the independent researcher distributed a self-developed survey to those who provided consent.

### **2.4 Data collection.**

Data collection was carried out in February 2024 using the self-developed survey. Participants were provided with a hard copy of the survey that included nine closed questions using a three-point Likert scale to investigate their experiences of the workshops. (Please see Table 2 for list of questions). Six open-ended questions were also included relating to the OAs' experiences of participating in the intergenerational workshop project, what they enjoyed, what could have been improved, challenges faced, and suggestions for future workshop content. The average time taken to complete the survey was ten minutes.

### **2.5 Data analysis.**

The data collected from the surveys was analysed quantitatively and qualitatively. Data was entered into an Excel document and screened for errors to ensure data integrity. Descriptive statistics were calculated from the three-point Likert scale questions. These statistics included totals (n) and percentages that helped to organise and summarize the data. The data collected from open-ended questions was imported into NVivo 14 (Lumivero, 2023), a qualitative software package used to evaluate and interpret the data systematically. The research team then analysed this data using the six stages of Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis. Using thematic analysis helped to identify and interpret fundamental features and patterns of the data that was relevant to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Examples of the coding can be seen in Table 3.

### 3. Results.

#### 3.1 Quantitative results.

A total of 54 participants took part in the research aspect of this project. The total responses for each quantitative question ranged from 51-53 participants. Percentages and totals for each question are included in Table 2.

**Table 2: Participants' responses to closed questions.**

<b>Closed questions included in the survey</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Undecided</b>	<b>Disagree</b>
The pace of the workshops suited me	94% (n = 48)	4% (n = 2)	2% (n = 1)
The content was relevant to me	91% (n = 48)	9% (n = 5)	0% (n = 0)
The speakers were knowledgeable	98% (n = 50)	2% (n = 1)	0% (n = 0)
I had a chance to contribute to the workshops	96% (n = 50)	4% (n = 2)	0% (n = 0)
I am happy with how much I contributed to the workshops	86% (n = 44)	12% (n = 6)	2% (n = 1)
I learned something new from the workshops	94% (n = 50)	6% (n = 3)	0% (n = 0)
I had the opportunity to connect with new people	100% (n = 53)	0% (n = 0)	0% (n = 0)
I feel more connected to the University now	85% (n = 45)	9% (n = 5)	6% (n = 3)
I would engage with the University again	98% (n = 52)	2% (n = 1)	0% (n = 0)

The results indicate that the majority of participants (85%-100%) agreed that all aspects of the workshops were appropriate to their interests and needs. Participants were given the opportunity to meet new people, contribute to the sessions and engage in new learning. Overall,

participants were happy with how much they contributed to the workshops and felt more connected to the university following the sessions. Few respondents (n=14%) were undecided or not happy with how much they contributed to the workshop or were undecided or did not feel more connected to the institution after participating in the workshops (n=15%).

### 3.2 Qualitative results.

Thematic analysis identified three main themes and seven subthemes. These are included in Table 3. Codes and example quotes from the data are also detailed in this table.

**Table 3: Summary of thematic analysis.**

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Sub-Themes</b>	<b>Codes</b>	<b>Examples of Quotes</b>
<b>Introduction to University Life</b>	<b>Joys of the student role</b>	Participation	<i>"Being part of a large group, being facilitated and helped"</i>
		University environment	<i>"It was my first time to partake in University"</i>
	<b>Accessibility challenges</b>	The physical environment	<i>"no accessible public transport where I live"</i>
		Importance of Acoustics	<i>"young people might ask their classmates to wear silenced earbuds to simulate age related deafness"</i>
<b>Connections</b>	<b>We All Learned - We All Taught</b>	Inspiration and interaction	<i>"The young people were a breath of fresh air. So courteous and interested in us and well as we being with them"</i>
		Intergenerational knowledge exchange	<i>"The transfer of knowledge from student to participant and also participant to student"</i>
	<b>A Sense of Belonging</b>	Peer friendships	<i>"Meet new people in my own age group"</i>
		Identifying as a learner	<i>"We don't belong in a pasture, just yet. I want to learn more"</i>

<b>A Voice for the Future</b>	<b>Room for Improvement</b>	Changes in structure	<i>"Perhaps 4 hours per day – more often in the year and shorten the lunch hour to 45 mins"</i>
		Increased Inclusivity	<i>"Descriptive handout would be useful"</i>
	<b>Future Content</b>	Trying another strand	<i>"Any subject really would be of interest to most people"</i>
		New topics	<i>"Maybe something on books we could read! Pastimes that we could explore"</i>

### 3.3 An introduction to university life.

#### 3.3.1 The joys of the student role.

In the survey responses, the participants conveyed how valuable it was to be given the opportunity to explore the university campus. For some, it was their first experience in a higher education institution. One participant revealed that they had *"never been to university so this was a great opportunity to actually be in this space"*. Another OA noted that, despite being local to the area, they had never had the chance to use the university's facilities, *"It was great to be in the college buildings - I pass them every day"*. Although the university plays an important part in the city's identity and history, most participants had not engaged with the university directly. One participant expressed how being in the University buildings fostered a sense of familiarity with the campus while others reported that they enjoyed *"being in a learning institution"*.

#### 3.3.2 Accessibility challenges.

Although the participants reported that the campus felt inclusive, some accessibility issues arose during the workshops. A minority of participants that attended had difficulties due to the lack of public transport in their local area. For those who drive, the only parking option available was a paid park-and-ride service which some participants found challenging to use. For others, with mobility challenges *"mobility was difficult getting to [the] location"*. Inside the campus buildings, heavy fire doors and poorly ventilated rooms were also highlighted by some

participants as accessibility issues.

Within the workshops, the participants appreciated the effort made by the students to make the space inclusive and accessible. One participant noted that *“personal attention was given to each attendee”* and another expressed their gratitude that gluten-free options were provided for people with coeliac disease. Many of the participants, however, identified difficulties in hearing the workshop content as the presenters did not use microphones. One attendee stated that background noise hindered their intake of information. Due to difficulty hearing the presenters, the OA attendees felt that some information was not clear, and one participant explained that they *“missed a lot of the instructions”*.

A few participants also commented on the accessibility of the content and pace of the workshops. For most the content was appropriate. For some however, the content of the workshops was reported to be overly academic with one participant expressing *“I felt the astronomy one was a bit over my head”*. Another attendee felt that *“presenters should avoid their material becoming too academic”*. Contrastingly, one participant revealed that they felt that *“topics were being dumbed down - but I do have some previous exposure to these subjects”*. Other participants commented on the pace of the workshops with one attendee reporting that they would have preferred *“a little more time - there seemed to be a lot of information imparted in such a short period of time”*.

### **3.4 Connections.**

#### **3.4.1 We all learned – We all taught.**

A broad range of responses consistently highlighted the positive experiences of the OAs with the intergenerational exchanges and connections that occurred throughout the workshops. As voiced by one participant, *“It was very enjoyable working with quite bubbly personalities. All the students seemed to be enjoying learning from us as well – learning both ways”*. The benefits of the reciprocal shared learning experience were also recognized by many others, with one participant noting that *“the intergenerational working is a huge benefit to both age groups”*. Another echoed that *“the students were exceptional. Cross-generational sessions work both ways”*.

The efforts of the students to create an enjoyable and informative experience were appreciated

by the OA participants. As one revealed, *“the students were marvellous, and we learned a lot”* while another felt that *“the students were so kind. So much information I will use... [a] 100% course”*. The OA participants recognised the student’s efforts in the production of the workshops, with one participant acknowledging *“the enthusiasm of the students and all the hard work to make the 3 days enjoyable”*. An appreciation for the friendliness and care provided by the OT students was also revealed by the OAs throughout their responses, with many attributing their positive workshop experience to the genuine kindness and enthusiasm of the students. For some participants, intergenerational learning was *“a new experience and the interaction of adults and students was excellent”*. While other participants expressed a deep appreciation for the collaborative and inclusive environment the workshops fostered, with one participant mentioning *“it was lovely to be involved with the younger students, to feel wanted and of interest”*. Another participant similarly described their gratitude stating, *“thanks to the OT students who were very respectful and helpful to our age group”*. These intergenerational connections enhanced the workshops, providing a comfortable and engaging learning environment and a platform for meaningful interactions. One participant illustrated how this environment helped the OAs to feel valued and integral to the learning process, *“the interactions with students were beneficial and encouraging, helping the participants to feel listened to and useful. All presenters and students exhibited caring, consideration, kindness and awareness of the attendees”*.

Overall, the intergenerational workshops challenged age-related stereotypes and barriers. This was evident in one participant’s reflection that *“age was proven not to be a barrier to learning or teaching. We all learned – we all taught”*. This was further supported by another participant expressing that the workshops enabled *“a great breakdown of generation[al] barriers”* with *“[the] older people mixing with the younger ones”*. These responses highlighted the success of the workshops in bridging generational divides and promoting a collaborative learning environment.

### **3.4.2 A sense of belonging.**

The OA participants reported that the workshops provided an opportunity to share, connect and learn with other participants. The group setting created a sense of community and positive belonging amongst the OAs. Participants particularly enjoyed the *“discussions and the humour”* and the *“interactions with other participants to learn from them”*. Sharing their experiences in the group was also meaningful with one participant revealing that they *“enjoyed the storytelling and creative writing. [It was] great to hear other stories”*. Contributing to the group also helped

the OAs feel valued with one participant noting that they *“felt included, heard, and an important part of the workshop”*. While the large groups fostered a sense of community for some participants, another participant reported difficulty in *“speaking up, [I’m] not confident in speaking in large groups”*.

Participating in the workshops with other OAs from the community also enabled the attendees to meet people of a similar age and make social connections. Attendees noted that the workshops facilitated group discussions and activities, and the lunch break allowed the attendees to mingle naturally. Participants reported that it *“was a very sociable setting”* which *“was helpful in developing friendships and acquaintances”*. As all participants were from the Galway city locality, these relationships were sustainable. One participant noted *“I loved meeting the other participants. Numbers were exchanged and friendships made”*.

Most participants indicated that they enjoyed the *“opportunity to learn something new”* and felt that it contributed to maintaining their self-identity after retirement. One participant reported that *“many retired people are lost, bored, without direction and looking for a way to continue to use their knowledge and skills as well as learn new skills”*. Respondents noted that the workshops helped to expand their knowledge in topics that interested them and how they introduced them to new subjects. Several workshop attendees described how astronomy and archaeology inspired new hobbies in their daily lives, while another participant in the health and well-being group highlighted that she enjoyed *“learning so much about ageing... it doesn’t seem so bad getting old”*.

### **3.5 A voice for the future.**

#### **3.5.1 Room for improvement.**

It was clear from the responses that there is a need and a desire for future age-friendly and intergenerational workshops to be provided regularly. With one participant stating that the workshops were *“most enjoyable and sorry it’s so short lived. It would be wonderful if this initiative continued but also to build and progress to a next or stage 2”*. There were various requests for an increase in the duration of workshops provided for a *“longer period over 6 weeks”* or even *“a workshop for a full semester, 8-10 weeks, would be great”*. In relation to the structure of the workshops, most participants felt the lunchtime duration could be shortened and some recommended an earlier start time with one participant noting *“timing 12-3 encompassed both morning and afternoon, better to be one or the other”*. With *“the agenda for the day”*

recommended by one participant and *“larger print”* requested by another.

Also, in their suggestions for the future, many participants expressed a need for the presenters of the workshops to have access to and use microphones. With one participant noting *“Girls need to project their voices more - most of us are elderly and hearing is difficult”*. This would ensure all participants who have experienced a decline in their hearing ability are included. Allowing more time for the intake of information and using a *“circular seating”* arrangement were suggested to improve inclusivity. One participant also shared their desire for the workshops to reach a broader range of participants in the future, *“I feel strongly that the University should reach out to some people who might feel intimidated about attending workshops/lectures in the University”*. This highlights that some OAs in the city may feel that the University is out of their reach.

### **3.5.2 Future content.**

Many participants contributed suggestions for future workshops, ranging from *“exercise classes to keep fit”* to *“craft and computer courses”*. Some participants expressed their desires to prepare themselves for the future, suggesting a workshop on *“health and ageing well”* and *“anything that addresses physical, emotional or cognitive needs of seniors”*. In addition, areas such as *“banking/investments”* and *“education on problems about power of attorney, preparation for care at home”* were requested, suggesting a desire to maintain independence in their later lives. Although covered in the workshop *Our World and Beyond*, Irish and local history were commonly requested topics. This may have originated from participants who attended the other workshops as one participant reported *“I did workshop 3. I would like to do 1 and 2 in the future”*. While music and art were regularly mentioned as future topic suggestions, there were also individual requests such as *“flower arranging, gardening”* and topics related to *“nature [and] environment”*.

## **4. Discussion.**

This research aimed to explore the experiences of OA participants who attended age-friendly intergenerational workshops on the University of Galway’s campus. The results showed that the OAs found the workshops to be a positive, educational and social experience. The opportunities for peer engagement and intergenerational partnerships were highly valued. The participants also recognised the value of holding workshops on campus which, for some, was their first involvement in university activities. A number of accessibility issues were highlighted, and

suggestions provided for the structure and content of future programmes.

Using an intergenerational service-learning programme to meet AFU objectives is a novel approach (Gautam, Sritan, Knumrungsee & Melillo, 2023; Montayre et al., 2023). This study supports its use, highlighting that along with the intended educational outcomes, OAs greatly valued the intergenerational interaction with the university students. As reported in previous studies, this helped to break down generational barriers (Andreoletti & Howard, 2018; Veyvoda & Van Cleave, 2020), and is an important outcome given the increase in ageist stereotypes during the COVID-19 pandemic (Fraser et al., 2020). Co-designing also introduced an element of intergenerational collaboration to the service-learning programme which is unique to this study.

The workshops provided in this study appeared to enable participants connect with meaningful student roles. Being in an educational institution, sharing their work with peers and meeting other OAs were all highlighted as meaningful experiences. Data revealed that the workshops also provided the OAs with a renewed sense of purpose after retirement. Engaging in education and interacting with new people were highlighted as contributing to regaining their self-identity. This is consistent with studies that show the use of intergenerational learning activities can improve OAs' sense of purpose and meaning in life (Chippendale & Boltz, 2015).

The structure, duration and content of the workshop series is also worth considering. OAs noted that the group format within workshops allowed relationships to form between the participants. They indicated a preference for a programme of longer duration as this project was limited to three weeks. As studies have found a positive correlation between the duration of participation in programmes and psychological well-being (Narushima, Liu and Diestelkamp, 2013) a longer-term programme should be considered in the future. Also, in Ireland, there is a large proportion of early school leavers in the OA population (Central Statistics Office, 2022), therefore learning opportunities should be adapted for OAs with varying levels of formal education.

There were several accessibility issues identified in the data gathered in this study. Difficulty hearing was the most common issue described by the participants and for some, this affected their engagement with the group. Although participants acknowledged the efforts made to promote accessible learning, a few participants reported issues related to processing large amounts of information. Aspects of the physical environment were problematic for some other participants. Educational courses for OAs must be designed to account for varying abilities and learning preferences (Takagi & Marroquin-Serrano, 2024; Hughes, Murphy & O'Kelly, 2022). By

adopting the principles of universal design for the physical and learning environment on campus, universities can accommodate OAs' needs and preferences effectively (Cumming & Rose, 2022; Carr, Weir, Azar & Azar, 2013). An inclusive campus will also help to sustain age-friendly initiatives and benefit younger students with varying needs.

Most of the participants in this study were active in their communities prior to attending the workshops. Participants highlighted that recruitment for future workshops should be broadened to attract OAs who are socially isolated within the community. This is especially important as literature on intergenerational programmes have been shown to be effective in reducing social isolation in OAs (Steward & McDevitt, 2023; Ho, Ma, Tan & Bajpai, 2021). The literature exploring AFUs recommends building relationships with community groups that service OAs (Montayre et al., 2023). Future researchers should connect with these groups to explore how they can reach the most socially isolated of OAs. A recent scoping review by Gautam et al. (2023) reported a lack of intergenerational learning activities that included retired staff. In this study, retired staff from the university attended the workshops. Although they had also been invited to deliver segments of the workshops, there were no volunteers to this role. Facilitators of future age-friendly projects may wish to explore strategies to further encourage or incentivise retired staff's participation.

Overall, participants reported that they felt more connected with the university after the project and were keen to engage with the students and the university again.

## **5. Limitations.**

Two members of the research team who analysed the data were also involved in the service-learning project. This increased the risk of confirmation and reporting bias when interpreting the results of this project. To minimise bias, a third, independent member of the research team reviewed the data.

Demographic characteristics of the participants were not collected in the surveys. This may limit the applicability of the findings across different subsections of the OA population.

Although the OA advisors were invited to provide anonymous feedback on their experience of attending the workshops, their experiences of being an OA advisor who helped co-design the

workshops were not captured. The voice of the university students who participated in the project was also not formally obtained. This additional data may have provided a wider evaluation of the programme.

## **6. Conclusion.**

The results of this intergenerational service-learning project demonstrated that the workshops were valued by the OA participants. The workshops fostered a strong sense of purpose and enabled the formation of intergenerational relationships and social connections. Despite facing challenges in hearing, retaining information and navigating the campus, the OA participants expressed a strong desire to continue and expand on such projects. Recommendations included extending the workshops duration and broadening the recruitment and advertising strategies. These changes could further enhance the project's impact and highlight the practical requirements of an age-friendly environment. Other universities in the early stages of implementing AFU principles could benefit from using these findings to enhance the inclusivity of future service-learning projects as part of a wider interdisciplinary approach. In this study, a co-designed, intergenerational, service-learning project has been shown to be an age-friendly initiative with the potential to build and strengthen intergenerational relationships and community connections for universities. These findings can be used to advocate for further development of age-friendly policies within an Irish education context and help shape future initiatives in Higher Education.

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The older adults from Galway city who co-designed and took part in this programme

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