



## **The 21<sup>st</sup> century multiple generation workforce: overlaps and differences but also challenges and benefits.**

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**Abstract:**

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to explore the issues around a multiple generational workforce and more specifically the challenges and benefits for education providers and employers.

Design/methodology/approach

Reviewing research papers, analysing academic texts, interrogating market intelligence and contextualising case studies, the paper examines the 'experience' or 'qualifications' debate alongside the similarities, differences and overlaps of the cross-generational workforce with a view to offering education/training solutions.

Findings

Demographic forecasts suggest that the UK workplace will imminently be dominated by older, experienced employees. As the composition of the workplace shifts examining the inter-relationship between groups of workers of different ages/profiles who have different skills, attitudes, expectations and learning styles is vital. The synergy caused by this inter-mingling cannot help but impact on employers, sectors and HEIs.

Research limitations/implications

Data around the 'older' graduate is not readily available – there is still an implicit belief that 'graduate' means approximately 21/22 years old. Whilst many general demographic forecasts are produced the future is still relatively unknown.

### Originality/value

The paper builds upon the authors' own original research into the employment market from an HE perspective. Little has been so far published around how the generations might usefully work together, especially the idea of adapting the skills and maximising on the overlaps of different generational profiles. The exploration of the hybrid graduate is also a new area for academic research.

**Keywords:** Young workers, Older workers, multi-generational workforce, cross-generational working, Generation Y, Baby Boomers, higher level skills, higher education, experience, graduates

**Article Classification:** Research paper

## Introduction

A natural response to the challenges facing the UK economy has been to analyse both the profile and skills sets of the current workforce. Inevitably there has been evolution and change within the workforce; one of the most obvious developments is that the UK's workforce is ageing and will continue to age. Between the years 1945-1965 (approximately) the UK birth rate increased dramatically due to post-war affluence and an increase in living standards (this generation of babies became known as the 'Baby Boomers'). Since 1995 the number of people aged between 50 and 64 years old has increased (Houses of Parliament, 2011). In the decade 2001 to 2011 the percentage of workers aged over 65 doubled (ONS 2011B). Demographic forecasts suggest that these trends will continue and confirm that by 2020 one third of the workforce will be over 50 years old (Houses of Parliament, 2011).

As the Government struggle to cope with the country's financial burden they have sought to encourage individuals to stay economically active as long as possible, for example plans to increase the state pension age from 2018). Interestingly this situation is by no means isolated to the UK; projections for the European Union anticipate a considerable increase in the number of people aged between 50 and 64 in the workplace between 2010 and 2060, with Spain, Malta and Slovenia expected to see the largest increases (28%, 25% and 25% respectively compared to 12% in the UK):

As the European Union tries to tackle its chronic debt problems, the costs associated with ageing have come into focus. Rising life expectancy just as the Baby-Boomer generation approaches retirement means it is becoming harder to fund today's system across most of the continent (Pignal, 2012).

The European Commission has been encouraging governments to, either, dispense with retirement ages, and/or, bring them into line with life expectancy, as well as reducing early

retirement schemes. In fact the Commission has designated 2012 as the year of 'Active Ageing and Solidarity between the Generations' (European Commission, 2012).

### The Ageing Workforce – the facts

In 2011 the first of the 'Baby-Boomers' reached retirement age, causing much debate about the future of these individuals in the labour market. Many however, have decided to defer retirement, taking advantage of the opportunities afforded to them by the abolition of the default retirement age (from October 2011). According to recent statistics whilst the employment rate for people aged 16-64 years old has decreased by 7.4% in the period 2008-2010, the employment rates for over 65s has increased by 0.5% (ONS 2011). Recent surveys suggest that pre-recession roughly 40% of employed people, who approximately fulfill the 'Baby Boomer' profile, were planning to work beyond the state pension age; but by 2008/9 this figure had massively increased to 71% (EHRC, 2010). Clearly, for many in this age group financial necessity is a key motivator; the economic recession and poor returns on pensions have meant that older people in our society will need to continue working beyond formerly established retirement dates. From a sample of the working population aged between 50 and 59 as many as 50% of these workers stated that they needed to work for financial reasons (similarly 33% of those aged 60 to 64, and 14% of those aged 65 to 75 gave the same reason) (EHRC 2010).

Whilst it is acknowledged that money is a key driver, an increasing number of older workers are continuing to work purely through choice. Dinah Worman from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) states that, 'The improved health of the older population is having a significant impact and there is an appetite amongst these individuals

to continue working for reasons of status and identity...' (Worman cited in Little, 2011). Indeed, personal fulfillment, job satisfaction and social interaction are obviously valid reasons for deferring retirement. Whilst some people need to continue working because their pensions need a boost, for others, '...they still want social interaction, stimulus and interest of life at work' (Altman 2011). DIY retailer B&Q are acknowledged as a pioneer in this area; in 2011 their oldest employee retired at the the age of 97. Upon retiring Syd Prior stated that 'Working with people of all ages gives youngsters the chance to learn a little from an old timer like myself, and they help to keep me young at heart' (*The Daily Mail*, 2011). Furthermore, many workers remain ambitious: actively seeking jobs but also promotion; entrepreneurial opportunities; career changes and self-owned business creation. 10% of respondents to a recent survey of older workers were actually dissatisfied because they want promotion and greater responsibility, many undertaking training to improve their job prospects. In the same survey 10% of men and 7% of women stated that they would like to start their own business when they reach state retirement age (EHRC 2010).

### Youth Unemployment

Although demographics suggest a shrinking of young people in the population, at present youth unemployment is a global issue. According to figures from the International Labour Office (ILO) global youth unemployment was 12.6% in 2011, equating to around 75 million young people (ILO 2012). Across the OECD youth unemployment is growing at an alarming rate. In March 2012 17.1% of 15-24 year olds were unemployed; almost double the unemployment rate of the general population (OECD, 2012). Within the OECD, European countries appear to be worst affected; in the UK youth unemployment has risen from 13.6%

in 2007 to 21.9% in March 2012 (OECD, 2012). Young people are finding it increasingly difficult to gain employment in a highly competitive market. Within this market the demands placed on young people are intensifying; epitomised by frequent calls for young people to improve their employability skills, real-work experience and more. So ironically, although some older workers say they want to share their skills with younger workers, they may be partly responsible for the lack of labour market opportunities for young people.

### Graduates and the Workforce

Interestingly, despite youth unemployment figures the Government are actively encouraging more graduates into the labour market; 50,000 graduates will be leaving university in the summer of 2012 (High Fliers, 2011). Although employer demand for graduates is increasing, with recent research highlighting that leading employers in the UK are expecting graduate recruitment to rise by 6.4% in 2012 this is still not sufficient to regain the pre-recession levels of graduate employment. To complicate matters further, defining what constitutes a graduate is far from straightforward. A standard dictionary definition focuses on the gaining of a degree, however, graduate-ness historically implies much more than this – with the majority of people presuming a graduate is in their early twenties with no or little job experience but a developed academic knowledge base, having attended university full-time and dedicated several years of their life to uninterrupted study. On the contrary graduates do not all come from the same age range (in 2010/11 40% of all HE students were aged over 25, [HESA, 2010/11]), they have differing skills and aspirations, some undertake placements or internships as part of their university course and many, if not the majority, work part-time. The diversity of graduates obviously needs to be taken into account when analysing research such as that quoted above (High Fliers, 2011);



furthermore the subject studied may also have a significant impact upon employment opportunities and a graduate's progression into the workplace.

Evolving graduate profiles combined with an ageing workforce radically alter the make-up of the working population. This cannot help but effect society, and the effects will be especially felt within the workplace and job seeker's market. In the past it was more generally accepted that older workers were replaced by the young in an ever evolving natural order. However, this 'natural' order has been upset and questioned and what seems apparent is that more and more mixed groups of older and younger workers will be working side by side. More important is acknowledging that these are not just two neat categories but instead rather more fluid and overlapping groups of individuals. Education, training and employment providers will need to respond to this by investigating the attributes of all parties as well as their development and life needs, together with the needs of potential employers and what these employers have to offer.

## **The Generations**

### Defining Features

There are now four generations in the labour market Veterans/Traditionalists (1939-1947), Baby Boomers (1948-1963), Generation X (1964-1978) and Generation Y (1979-1991) and whilst it is difficult to precisely define generations they are widely viewed as a collective set of attributes, behaviours, core values and experiences (Delcampo 2011, Underwood 2007). Within the wider generational debate perhaps the biggest discussion point is around older workers, predominantly Baby Boomers (there is only a small percentage of Traditionalists now in the workforce) and Generation Y (the new generation in the workforce). Older

Workers (Baby Boomers) are often described as: more loyal; committed; competent; friendly and reliable; with a strong work ethic. As well as having specialised skills older workers are also recognised as the ‘... most likely to be valued for their interpersonal skills in areas such as communication, empathy and patience and also their attitude towards work which may be demonstrated in the commitment, stability and reliability’. Resulting from life and experience these skills can lead to a resilience and adaptability that some young people do not have (Bown-Wilson, 2012).

On the other hand younger workers (Gen Y) are said to have generally identifiable characteristics including, ‘Tech-Savvy, Family-Centric, Achievement-Oriented, Team-Oriented, and Attention-Craving’ (Kane, 2011). It is often stated that they are more willing to change jobs if they are not fulfilled or satisfied with the balance between personal and professional life or employment benefits (such as gym membership, flexible working, holidays and so on), they have high expectations and are also more willing to challenge colleagues and have less respect for the hierarchy of the workplace.

Two very different sets of attributes are outlined above and partially explain why these two groups supposedly clash; Baby Boomers’ obsession with work versus Generation Y’s flexibility, Baby Boomers’ preference for autonomy and Generation Y’s for collaboration and working in teams, Baby Boomers’ respect for workplace hierarchy against Generation Y’s preparedness to challenge management and so on. Within this classic stereotyping much is made of the conflict between the two generations and Generation Y and their attributes are often perceived in a negative way. Tuglan (2009) suggests that when young people ‘... move into the adult world with the energy and enthusiasm – and lack of experience – that is

natural at that stage, they are bound to clash with more mature generations'. Along with these characteristics outlined above there is some acknowledgement that the categories are not watertight and there can, in fact, be considerable overlap. The idea of generational characteristics is an approximate one, and people do not always fit neatly into such defined categories. 'People may have core values throughout their working life but complex life experiences overlap and mean that people will have different work appetites at different times' (Penna 2008).

### Similarities

The generational differences tend to be the focus of much academic literature in this debate. Yet many differences, it seems, are based on perception. In reality there are also similarities between the generations; to a certain extent they all value rewards (Twenge et al 2010), they look for the same job characteristics, which are a job that is interesting, where there are opportunities to grow, and furthermore where the salary and management of the organisation is good (Giancola 2010 in Hannay & Fretwell 2010), it is also claimed that, 'all generations acknowledge the need for the application for technology to increase efficiency, effectiveness and productivity' - the difference is in the application (Hannay & Fretwell 2010).

Generational categories do not consider individual, personality-driven characteristics, preferences and circumstances or life/career stage, all of which can be important key determinants of values and expectations in the workplace (Delcampo 2011, Wong 2011, and Fenton & Dermott 2006). Furthermore many individuals develop profiles which better fit a different generational category than the one their date of birth suggests. For example,

whilst not born in the stated timeframe for a Generation Y individual, 'Honorary' Generation Y members display the recognised attributes – learned from, perhaps, studying, working and socialising with genuine Generation Y members, along with the massive impact of mediated images and technological consumer culture.

Inextricably linked to this generational debate is the question of experience versus qualifications. Young workers, and those young people attempting to gain employment, are more highly qualified than ever before (DBIS 2011), as well as being more likely to be aware of, and welcoming to, opportunities to keep developing themselves (and therefore willing to become lifelong learners). By contrast many older workers have traditionally undertaken formal training earlier in their careers and/or learned their skills 'on the job'. However, the question still remains 'Do employers value 'experience' or 'qualifications', or do they need both?' or perhaps more precisely, which candidate is more useful in the workplace? The one with a degree? or the one with years of experience?

### **Experience versus Qualifications**

#### Experience

A significant number of employers consider relevant work experience and employability skills as important factors when recruiting. Research undertaken by CBI highlighted that 82% of employers surveyed felt that employability skills were the most important factor when recruiting new graduates, and 67% stated that work-experience was the most important (CBI 2011). This is confirmed by research undertaken with employers in the Tees

Valley<sup>1</sup> (Helyer & Lee 2010) where the majority of respondents wanted to recruit graduates who already had workplace-related skills in place. The need for these attributes is continually stressed and HEIs are increasingly trying to find ways of embedding employability skills and real work experience into their courses. *The Graduate Market in 2012* (2011) emphasises the importance of work experience, one third of entry-level positions in 2012 are expected to be filled by graduates who have already worked for the organisation (through industrial placements, holiday work, internships or sponsorships). In addition more than 50% of recruiters involved in the research warned that graduates with no work experience would be unlikely to be successful in their selection process.

Alongside the continual emphasis on experience, certificated qualifications (often used as a measure of skills) are not always reliable:

On the one hand, qualifications levels are likely to underestimate the capacity of those who continue to work (...) and deploy the skills and knowledge. On the other hand, qualifications will overestimate the capability of those who have never deployed the skills, or who moved into other kinds of employment (UKCES, 2011: 15).

The argument that qualifications are a poor proxy for skills is frequently repeated as employers lambast the standards of new graduates (despite their qualifications) claiming that they are unprepared for work. In the Tees Valley research (Helyer & Lee 2010) most companies surveyed said that in addition to subject-specific skills graduates need transferable/ generic/employability skills, 'Somewhere between a graduate's academic

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<sup>1</sup> *Higher Level Skills in Tees Valley*, research commissioned by Tees Valley Unlimited, focussed on key economic sectors in Tees Valley. The purpose of the research was to analyse availability and future demand of higher level skills in the sub-region and considered how best to move the higher level skills agenda forward. The research was based on an extensive literature review contextualised by a widely circulated employer survey and interviews with a diverse range of companies, providers and agencies.

The main areas for consideration which arose from the resultant data were:

- The ageing workforce, alongside multi-generation recruitment
- Maximise on expert practitioners for in-house training and more
- The ongoing development of existing and new skills
  - with a focus on transferability and flexibility (to cope with change)

experience and being fully useful in a company something other than academia has to happen to make them get up to speed with what companies want, need and expect' (Helyer & Lee 2010 research respondent).

Looking at what employers say they want and their prevalent attitudes towards differing groups of potential employees seems to suggest that experience is the more valuable commodity in employees/recruits, when compared to qualifications. That is not to say that this is solely an age issue (or that employers value older workers over younger workers) but the experience element is crucial and it seems obvious that in the experience stakes just being alive longer can present you with an advantage, simply by giving you more time and opportunity to develop, through life experience, the skills employers say they value the most: common sense; communication skills; people skills and so on. It also needs to be noted however that specific sectors have their own priorities and some sectors, like digital media, which is a largely graduate market, are dominated by younger workers. For this sector developing postgraduate opportunities is a priority (Helyer & Lee 2010)

### Qualifications

Whilst employers may value experience, qualifications remain key. In society there is a general assumption that having a degree will improve an individual's job prospects and this is shown to be true. In the second quarter of 2009 the employment rate for those with level 3 qualifications was 75% compared with 85% for those with level 4-6 qualifications (DBIS, 2009). What is more:

There is a rapidly expanding global market of highly skilled labour for which the minimum entry ticket will be a degree. While traditional low skilled manufacturing

jobs are disappearing, the raw material of the knowledge economy will be graduates (Easton, 2011).

and whilst, 'at the beginning of the last century, the power of nations might have been measured in battleships and coal. In this century it's as likely to be graduates' (Coughlan, 2011). Furthermore, employers say that as well as subject-specific knowledge and skills, they expect graduates to have generic, transferable skills, '...the basic skills to analyse numeric data, produce clear structured written work and...be able to analyse problems and come up with solutions' (CBI, 2009:11). Both of these requirements can be fulfilled through qualifications; certain skills can be obtained by *what* a student studies (subject knowledge) and other more generic skills from *how* a student studies, '...a degree reflects an ability to use tacit knowledge to assimilate, interpret and use a range of specialist information' (Levy, Sissons & Holloway, 2011). What is more whilst there is a proliferation of press releases suggesting that companies value work experience, some practice suggests otherwise. Many businesses who are significant graduate employers specifically target the 'best' universities (in terms of reputation and league tables) in the country with the aim of securing the high achieving students for their graduate schemes. With these larger employers receiving 1000s of applicants for each place it seems obvious that multiple filtering methods will be used to differentiate between students. However it seems that the university attended, degree studied and class obtained are the initial criteria applied, relevant work experience and other factors are also taken into consideration, but probably later in the process. Some recent research from Adecco discusses this process, and also points out that employers need to form meaningful relationships with education providers, it is not enough to simply expect the graduates to turn out as they would like:

The focus of university teaching remains steadfastly in the narrow academic subject and far too few employers involve themselves in changing this dynamic, until the last

year of study when they sweep down from on high to Hoover up the best and brightest talent from a very select group of universities (Adecco, 2012).

Interestingly, despite the number of potential recruits across the UK graduate recruiters specifically target only a small number of institutions. In the 2011/12 recruitment round only 5% of top graduate recruiters targeted more than 40 institutions, 7% targeted 5 or less, 14% targeted between 6 and 10 institutions and 23% targeted between 11 and 15 institutions. The universities that attracted the largest number of graduate employers (for careers fairs, presentations and other promotions) were Manchester, London (Imperial College, LSE and University of London), Cambridge, Nottingham and Oxford. (High Fliers, 2011).

#### The Future – Cross Generational Working

As alluded to above the UK has, in recent years, seen a significant growth in knowledge-intensive industries, 'the successful formula for developed nations like Britain will be a combination of innovation and highly skilled workers in the knowledge economy' (Easton, 2011). In the 1970s around one fifth of the UK workforce was 'knowledge workers' (those employed in the top 3 job categories – Associate, Professional and Technical), currently it is around two fifths and by 2020 it is expected to be over half (Wright, Brinkley & Clayton, 2010). Not only has there been a shift toward intangible assets, such as creation and exploitation of knowledge, but also rapid technological developments. Economies across the world, including the UK, are placing increasing importance on higher level skills (both the acquisition and deployment), which are a pre-requisite for a knowledge economy (Wright Brinkley & Clayton, 2010).



Within this knowledge economy jobs and workplace requirements can and will change rapidly and there is a need to build on the existing skills of the current workforce, especially if individuals are now to be required to remain in the workforce for longer than anticipated. Many of the employers involved in the research around higher level skills in Tees Valley (Helyer & Lee 2010) acknowledged that they needed to diversify and grow in order to survive:

Over the next several years the company needs to move into other areas of business in order to expand and grow. We will only be able to do this by investing in the right training for our existing employees and new recruits (Helyer & Lee 2010, research respondent).

The employers acknowledged that they would need to adapt to the changing economy and therefore need the future graduates they employed to be, 'adaptable, flexible, multi-skilled and able to hit the upturn 'running'' (Helyer & Lee, 2010). Successive governments have pointed out in their policies that in the not too distant future the UK workforce will be rising to the challenge of jobs and industries which do not even exist yet (DBIS 2009B) and employers back this up, 'employers tell us that they cannot predict the skills that they will need in five, let alone, ten years time...' (Crossick, 2010:7). However, existing industries will also continue to play a significant part in the UK economy and it is therefore essential that the future workforce is continuously developed, both in terms of the skills that new recruits have upon graduating, and the re-training, up-dating and multi-skilling of the existing workforce:

A graduate today can fully expect to still be in the world of work in 2058. The one thing that we can be certain of is that we will be applying skills that we haven't even thought of today. We will have to relearn and relearn and relearn (Gilleard, 2009).

If the UK economy is to prosper and grow then education, training and employment providers need to work together. Experience and high-level skills (developed by HE) are both important; work experience might demonstrate and differentiate that an individual possesses higher level skills, whilst qualifications might demonstrate a different but equally important and, in some ways overlapping, skills set. However these two options are not mutually exclusive but should be used together to create rounded individuals. It is no longer viable to assume that a graduate will not have relevant work experience, any more than it is possible to make assumptions about their age group, many HE students have part-time jobs and even when these jobs do not directly relate to their degree subject the activities they undertake in the workforce still assist them in developing life skills, together with the experience of being employed. Similarly individuals who have no qualifications but have worked in a sector for many years will have learnt a huge amount, often at levels comparable to HE awards: undergraduate, postgraduate even doctoral ( Helyer & Lee 2010 surveyed 29 companies and 1170 employees were estimated to be operating at this higher level, but without formal qualifications). Having the mixed generations discussed earlier working side by side raises challenges but also brings opportunities that can be effectively utilised to address the changing and uncertain skills needs of the knowledge economy, 'having a range of ages in the workplace brings diversity, mutual learning between colleagues of difference ages and a balance of experience and fresh ideas' (UKCES, 2012:9). As already pointed out, individuals can display characteristics not necessarily akin to their 'appropriate' generation category and it is this ability to develop behaviours from other people, training and multi-media that can be exploited to reinforce the development of skills which support a knowledge economy.

### Real-world case studies

Some companies are already embracing the multi-generation workforce and taking advantage of the benefits that this cross generational working brings. Mentoring schemes are an established way in which businesses harness the skills of their older workers to develop the skills of their younger generations. Coca-cola maintain that, 'older employees are valuable for their mix of skills and as mentors to younger staff', (Little, 2011). Aware of an ageing workforce, a North East engineering company employ some of their specialist/more experienced workers (who have retired) on a part-time basis to mentor newer/less experienced staff, 'these specialists are some of our most valuable staff and we will do our utmost to retain them and utilize their skills' (Helyer & Lee 2010, research respondent). However as another case study shows the older/more experienced generations can also learn from the younger generations. Cisco recently introduced a reverse mentoring scheme where a group of 10 'Generation Y' employees mentored senior executives in the company. This proved extremely successful, 'Our leaders have an increased awareness of how Gen Y thinks ... equally, our Gen Yers are learning food business habits, and what it takes to be a leader within a major organisation' (Adecco 2012). Working side by side the generations can impart much wisdom to each other and provide an equilibrium whereby employers can benefit from both significant work experience *and* the skills and abilities developed through gaining a qualification.

### **Evolving HE**

HE's reputation for developing the whole person means that HEIs now attract students of all ages and background, wishing to undertake HE level qualifications, the 'traditional pattern

of three year, campus-based honours degrees is not the only route to higher skills, not the only way to prepare successfully for modern economic life' (DBIS, 2009:26). As the numbers of older; work-based; and other non-traditional, students entering HE have increased (65% of students now fall into these categories - 40% of students were over 25, with 5% aged over 50, HESA, 2010/11) so too has the need for HEIs to be innovative about the ways in which they acknowledge and build upon the learning which can be gleaned from various non-traditional educational experience. A good example of students working and studying simultaneously is the Foundation Degree in Leadership and Management offered by Teesside University, and developed in conjunction with the North East Chamber of Commerce (winner of a *Times Higher Education* award for Outstanding Employer Engagement initiative) Teesside University devised a curriculum based on market intelligence to develop leadership capability in the region's businesses and to place business needs within the context of appropriate pedagogical material and assessment.

The changes in the HE student population have led to a marked increase in both the use of articulation of this achievement and the accreditation of company in-house training. Sometimes this prior learning is dealt with as an admissions process, where the candidate receives some form of advanced standing but increasingly it is dealt with via a work-based study route and many UK HEIs now offer work-based degree programmes which welcome claims for credit via the accreditation of prior learning process (APL). 31% of employers responding to the Tees Valley research (Helyer & Lee 2010) indicated that individuals from their company had participated in higher level training in the preceding 12 months, 41% of which was provided by an HEI. Furthermore, many of the HE programmes now include 'Employment Skills' modules, options to enjoy placement and internship opportunities and

assessments that involve group/teamwork, real-life briefs, giving presentations, networking, researching and so on – all requiring skills sets which are also crucial in the workplace.

HE has an impressive reputation and it is claimed that, 'HE qualifications hold a parity of esteem across the learning sector and beyond' (Helyer 2010), regardless of mode of study. Higher Education is still very much focused on academic learning for the purpose of developing an in-depth knowledge about specific subjects, it also encompasses a good deal more. HE demands critical thinking and intellectual curiosity and it challenges its candidates in a way that develops the 'whole person'. This reputation and ability to develop the whole person will persist as HE continues to change and evolve; within this context universities need to communicate and , 'explain coherently what higher level skills actually are and what they can do for an employee's potential and therefore ultimately for that employer's success' (Helyer & Lee, 2010:17); making employers much more aware of the benefits of balancing qualifications and experience and building on cross generational working and learning.

## **Conclusions**

Today's multi-generational workforce embodies a wide variety of different attitudes, values, motivations and beliefs; there is a significant body of academic literature cataloguing these varying characteristics and experiences. However, diversity is a key defining feature of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and naturally this diversity is reflected in the workplace, 'there is a general school of thought that organisations must recognise the influence and work preferences of different generations to be effective in the future' (Shaw & Fairhurst 2008). A cross-generational workforce thrives on, cross-fertilisation; both employers and academia must

acknowledge this, embracing diversity, whilst building on similarities and maximising from the resultant synergy.

Examining the profiles of both older and younger workers, within the context of the education versus qualification debate, debunks a number of misconceptions about HE; however, it also highlights that HE needs to be much more explicit about its 'offer', with relation to the content, cost and relevance of its programmes. As a Tees Valley employer pointed out, 'the higher level skills landscape is confusing – clarity and communication is needed' (Helyer & Lee 2010). Working with a diversity of students who have widely differing profiles, and often also with their employers, means that HEIs are behaving more commercially and taking more risks; this challenges a culture formerly accustomed to behaving in established, and somewhat risk-averse, ways, but it assists with the continuous development of HE as a stretching environment. Working with employers and employees makes HE more responsive and therefore more likely to develop and deliver learning opportunities which are relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; programmes of a bespoke, negotiated, adaptable and often multi-disciplinary nature (based on Helyer 2010).

It is not necessary to choose between experience and qualifications, as, through innovatively designed HE opportunities, it is possible to benefit from both. Many universities now see business engagement as a key strand of their mission rather than something marginalised or peculiar; having established, and built, relationships with employers they are now developing a broad range of collaborative activities. Rising to the challenges and opportunities of a hybrid, fragmented future will not always be easy, '...Generation Y will be more difficult to recruit, retain, motivate and manage than any other new generation to

enter the workforce. But this will also be the most high –performing workforce in history for those who know how to manage them properly’ (Tuglan 2009). Stereotyping and rigid categories are not useful; gains and achievements will be made by innovating and collaborating in the areas of overlap and blurred boundaries. Successful companies and institutions will be those that are forward thinking and accept that this multi-faceted approach, where differing profiles and skills sets are blended to offer a range of continuing skills and expertise which is capable of creating exceptional results.

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