# THE AGENDA: ELEVEN RESEARCH TOPICS

Previous chapters have described how the research agenda was developed, through dialogue between the five scientific Working Groups, the Scientific Advisory Board, the Societal Advisory Board and the General Assembly (which represents all the states participating in the JPI), and how the many research ideas discussed were prioritised.

Chapter 4 identified the range of important research issues raised by demographic change. All are important, but we believe that some require particularly urgent attention. This chapter identifies the eleven issues to which we give priority in the short and medium term. The rationale for each can be found in the previous chapters, and in the reports of the five Scientific Working Groups[47].

We do not suggest that any one of these is more important than the others. All are relevant, and there is no particular reason to argue for addressing one sooner than another, although at any given time, individual countries and funders will choose which to engage with.

47. The five Working Group reports can be found on the JPI website, at http://www.jp-demographic.eu/
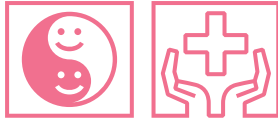
1. Quality of life, wellbeing and health

To develop agreed measures; to explore how they vary between individuals and groups over the life course; and evaluate how best to use them to evaluate the impact of policies and practices.

The JPI research aims to inform policies and practices which will ensure the best possible quality of life for all the citizens of Europe, in the context of demographic change. However, although there has been a growing amount of research into quality of life and wellbeing in recent years, there is still little agreement about how to define these, and how best to measure them. There is also an ethical debate about how far Government and others should actively seek to promote wellbeing, rather than to simply reduce the factors which damage it. Physical and mental health are vital contributors and preconditions for wellbeing, whose impact changes across the lifecourse, and changes in biomedical sciences and technology are altering that impact. However, they are not the only, or necessarily the most important, components.

Particularly critical issues are to understand how wellbeing is affected by the changing shape of the lifespan; how far notions of wellbeing change with age; the effects of contextual factors like location, employment, and physical environment; and of personal characteristics like disability, gender, ethnicity, occupation, family contexts and life stage. There are particular issues about understanding wellbeing among the very old and those with terminal conditions or limiting disabilities.
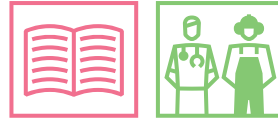
2. Learning for later life

To understand the ways in which learning can contribute to quality of life across the extended lifespan, and how opportunities for such learning can best be made available, by public, private and third sector means.

Despite public endorsement for lifelong learning in European and national policy papers, education, (and often learning of any kind), is often seen as a matter for young people, and participation in formal learning declines rapidly with age in most European countries. Demographic change makes this even less appropriate than in the past. Those in paid work need to update and maintain skills; especially if they wish to change occupation or role in mid life. Learning is critical for those who become unemployed after the age of 50, who face a higher risk of long term, or permanent, unemployment unless they can refresh their workability. Careers education and advice can help people to make better informed decisions about the timing and management of retirement. Learning can help people to prepare for the new challenges of later life, for successful retirement, for new voluntary roles (including caring), for new civic responsibilities. "Adult education" is known to contribute to health and wellbeing, partly because it provides a means for people, especially older people, to overcome isolation and loneliness, and to rebuild their lives and social networks after retirement, separation or bereavement. For those in residential care institutions, learning programmes can improve health and wellbeing by providing structure and purpose to lives which can be lacking in both.

This does not imply simply that the state should provide more "courses". Even in countries with a strong tradition of publicly funded adult education older people were not always a priority, and we are unlikely to see the widespread restoration of such public services. In any case, much – perhaps most – learning by older people happens in voluntary and informal settings, some of it organised by older people themselves, who may discover new talents and purpose as teachers and organisers. The research question is therefore how to ensure that an appropriate range of opportunities is available to all older people, in consultation with older people themselves: what kinds of partnership (between public, private and third sector agencies) can ensure that the needs are being understood and met in sustainable ways, and that appropriate infrastructure exists to mobilise voluntary effort.

3. Social and economic production

To explore the nature, scale and value of the contribution of older and economically inactive people to society, in both paid and unpaid roles, and the relationships between the two.

While average healthy lifespan is growing steadily throughout Europe, formal and actual retirement ages are not keeping pace, while a growing cohort of young people are experiencing long periods outside the labour market, or in unpaid employment, and patterns of life-work balance are changing across the whole lifecourse. The result is a growing body of people in relatively good health who are – or could be – contributing skills, knowledge and experience to society, but doing so outside the conventional paid labour force. This is a particular feature of social care for the young and old, where in many countries the majority of such "work" is unpaid. Because the groups involved are growing rapidly, it is important to understand the changing relationship between paid and unpaid production, how these are measured, valued and recognised in policy, their impact on tax and benefit systems, and on the lives of those who undertake unpaid work. It is also important to understand the role of third sector organisations, and municipalities which often play a key role in facilitating "voluntary" activity. There is considerable scope for comparative work since services, especially in social care, are delivered in very different ways in different countries.

4. Participation

To explore what kinds of systems, structures and interventions are most effective at engaging and empowering older people, and especially groups which are traditionally excluded.

One objective of public policy is to enable older people to take greater control of their own lives, and increase their engagement in economic, civic, and social activity across the extending lifespan. However, demographic change increases the size of some groups who have traditionally participated less in society and the economy, notably – but not only – the old and some migrant groups. We need a better understanding of what factors promote or inhibit engagement by these groups in the full range of activity and decision making, including paid and unpaid work and wider civic roles, at all levels from the neighbourhood to national. Research should explore what kinds of systems, structures and interventions are most effective at engaging and empowering people, both as individuals and in groups, and especially people from traditionally excluded groups, including the very old.

5. Ageing and place

To understand what kinds of housing, transport and urban design policies are most effective at enabling people to remain independent and socially engaged throughout the lifespan.

Quality of life is critically affected by the physical environment, which is shaped by a very complex mix of factors, historical and contemporary. These include planning systems and policies at local and regional levels, the design and modification of housing and transport systems, and assistive technologies, in the home and more widely. We need to understand better how these interact to affect the quality of life of older people, especially in very old age; and how they can be developed in a coherent and economical way. Some of these factors are amenable to relatively quick modification, but others, like urban planning, develop over decades. In some cases standards and regulations can influence new design and future opportunities, in other cases change must be encouraged through the education of professionals, and the creation of appropriate consultative processes. Regional, municipal and local government are key partners here, since they are usually responsible for these services on the ground.

6. A new labour market

To identify effective ways of redistributing employment across the extending healthy lifecourse, including extending working life, through regulation, governance and management.

All developed countries are seeking to extend working life in response to rising life expectancy, but demographic change also provides an opportunity to rethink the distribution of work across the lifespan, perhaps reducing pressure in the middle years, in return for working later in life. However, change will not be achieved simply by formal regulation, although outlawing age discrimination and mandatory retirement ages are important both as regulators and in setting public expectations. Change requires incentives for both employees and employers. For employees, work has to be more attractive than the alternatives, and for employers the benefits of a more age diverse workforce need to be evident. Furthermore, there are important issues of equity, given the ways in which the experience and nature of work influence life expectancy. For older people, the quality of work and its benefits vary by sector and occupation, and their impact is affected by gender, ethnicity, migrant status and disability. Across Europe there is a growing body of experience of age management strategies and practices (including modifications to recruitment, work flexibility, career management and performance assessment); in workplace governance; and in access to lifelong learning and career guidance. Research is needed to distil the lessons of this practice, and to explore effective ways of progressing further.

7. Integrating policy

To explore ways of integrating policy and practice across traditional institutional and professional boundaries, and evaluating the costs and benefits of such approaches.

Demographic change presents a challenge to traditional models of policymaking. Institutional and policy frameworks evolved in different circumstances can sometimes stand in the way of rational and economic solutions to new problems. For example, better integration of health and social care services may both improve the quality of life of older people and reduce costs to the public purse. Improvements in the design of housing or transport systems may enable people to remain longer in their own homes, with major savings to social care costs. Research should explore ways of promoting integration, and evaluate the costs and benefits of such approaches. A critical dimension here is the role of regions, municipalities and local government, which is usually the level at which complex, and sometimes conflicting, policies have to be made coherent for the individual and for the local community.

8. Inclusion and equity

To identify who benefits and who loses, and in what ways, from demographic change; how inequities can be avoided, and solidarity supported.

If we are to secure the welfare of all citizens, it is important to understand how demographic change impacts on particular groups of people, by factors including: age, class, occupation, gender, disability, ethnicity and migrant status. A particular issue is how full advantage may be taken of the complementary capabilities of different groups, especially across generations, where there is sometimes concern that policies which encourage older people to stay longer in the workforce have the effect of excluding young people from the labour market, and by doing so perhaps undermining the long term economic base on which the welfare of the old depends. Policies which focus exclusively on older people risk failing to understand the dynamics and potential of intergenerational relationships. A further issue is to understand the long term sustainability of economic models. For example, pension systems represent a long term intergenerational contract, with implications for the distribution of wealth and income which extend far into the future. Research here should explore who benefits and who loses, and in what ways, from demographic change; how inequities can be avoided; and solidarity supported.
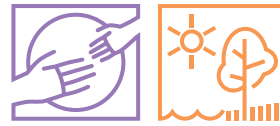
9. Welfare models

To understand the relative strengths and weaknesses of different welfare models, how sustainable they are in the longer term; and how countries might learn from each other.

Countries within Europe vary greatly in how they secure the welfare of their citizens. Some have high levels of public sector support while others have much less. The degree of centralisation and devolution of responsibility varies greatly, but in most countries regions and municipalities play a key role, especially in integrating the work of multiple agencies at local level. What is provided, and who is supported, varies greatly, as does the mix of public, private and third sector support, and all these are changing over time, under pressure from changing demography as well as current budget constraints. While it is important to avoid simplistic attempts to transfer models from one context to another, there is considerable scope to learn from comparative studies of which needs and demands are best met by which systems and models; how sustainable they are in the longer term; and what elements might be transferable to other countries or contexts.

10. Technology for living

To explore how existing and emerging technologies can better contribute to the quality of life, contribution, and social engagement of older people.

Technological and social change are intimately linked, and the former is happening at an accelerating pace, often in unexpected forms. Some technologies are designed to address issues specifically related to an ageing population or to those facing health and disability issues which are commoner among older people, while others provide unexpected benefits or risks. For example, mobility scooters are designed to address a specific problem, of particular relevance to older people, while online shopping – which enables older people to remain independent in their own homes – was not. Social networking can help older people to overcome isolation and improve their mental health. Older people already use internet forums to share ideas on many issues, including ways of adapting to their changing circumstances, or managing health conditions. Workplace technologies which overcome the physical effort involved in many manual tasks make extended working life possible for some, and may reduce the likelihood of people arriving at retirement with work related health conditions.

However, not all who might benefit have opportunities to acquire appropriate skills and confidence, and relevant learning opportunities are needed. Research needs to explore how existing and emerging technologies contribute to quality of life for older people, and how standards and incentives to designers and commercial organisations can support positive developments.

It also needs to explore how technologies can enhance older peoples' ability to contribute to society, and how they can facilitate social engagement of older people, especially those from socially excluded groups, who may be particularly reliant on public services which are being converted to online forms. Above all, it needs to explore how older people can be active agents in developing technologies and their uses.

11. Research infrastructure

To support researchers and institutions in developing interdisciplinary methodologies and expertise; to undertake systematic reviews on demographic issues; and to improve the quality and accessibility of data to support demographic research.

The infrastructure issues raised by this agenda have been outlined in chapter 5. The key priorities are to provide appropriate support for the development of closer working relationships between researchers, policymakers and practitioners; for improving the quality and accessibility of cross-disciplinary data; for the training and development of researchers (including the direct engagement of clients in research); and in building institutional research capacity.

The maintenance and expansion of the work begun by the JPI Fast Track project on Data is a particular priority, to keep the existing database up to date, and to extend its coverage to other Member States.

Figure 4 on the right indicates the relationship between the research topics and the four domains.

Figure 4:
The research priorities
and the domains

demographic change

society

sustainable welfare
& intergenerational equity
9

institutions
& ethics
8

social inclusion &
inequalities

markets &
innovation **6**

governance

competitive
management

public **7** **4** people of
all ages

private

public
services

economic
production

social cohesion &
living environment
5

social
production
3

participation

2

1

quality of life
health & learning

individual

10 **11**

technological & environmental change