

FUTURAGE: A Road Map for European Ageing Research

Directed by: Alan Walker (University of Sheffield)

Main partners: Universities of Heidelberg (Germany), Lund (Sweden), Newcastle, Italian Research Centre on Ageing, Age UK and the AGE Platform Europe.

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Background

FUTURAGE was a two year project designed to create the definitive road map for ageing research in Europe. It ran from September 2009 to November 2011. Europe is already the oldest region in the world and has prioritised research in this field in order to inform policy and practice on the most effective responses to it.

Europe is currently the oldest region in the world, and the upward trajectory of European ageing has been linear for more than 150 years. The share of the population aged 65 and over will rise from 17% in 2010 to 30% in 2060, with those aged 80 and over being the fastest growing age group, increasing from 5% to 12% over the same period. The current average of healthy life years (years of life in full health without disability) at 65 in the EU is eight years for both men and women. However, this varies among Member States from three years in Estonia to 13 years for women and 14 years for men in Denmark.

Aims

The project aims were focussed on the creation of a definitive road map to guide ageing research over the next 10-15 years. This process had to include scientists from a wide range of disciplines and stakeholders representing the fields of policy, practice and product development.

The study

A carefully designed iterative process ensured that this project undertook the most extensive consultation ever attempted in this field. It started with national consultations with stakeholders on eleven countries: then there were disciplinary based workshops; the results of these were fed into a stakeholder forum and then the workshops were repeated. As a matter of principle the views of current generations of older people were integrated into the iterative process.

Over 2 years FUTURAGE brought together 24 partners, 14 European countries, eight stages of consultation and over 700 individual contributors and organisations, representing many thousands of people in Europe.

Key Findings:

The main output from the project is "Road Map for European Ageing Research" This substantial document sets out the key priorities for ageing research in seven major themes:

- Healthy Ageing for More Life in Years.
- Maintaining and Regaining Mental Capacity.
- Inclusion and Participation in the Community and the Labour Market.
- Guaranteeing the Quality and Sustainability of Social Protection Systems.
- Ageing Well at Home and in Community Environments.
- Unequal Ageing and Age-related Inequalities.
- Biogerontology: From Mechanisms to Interventions.

Under each there is an evidence base to demonstrate the importance of the priority themes and specific research topics. The Road Map also establishes a core theme which inter-links all of the others: active ageing across the life course, as shown in the diagram below.



Finally there is some general guidance for the implementation of the Road Map. This includes the need for:

- European coordination and infrastructure;
- Investment in capacity building, for young scientists and the New Member States
- The importance of the principle of user involvement, including the involvement of older people
- The critical role of knowledge exchange activities.

The Road Map, and a wide range of supporting material can be downloaded from

<http://futurage.group.shef.ac.uk/>

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Findings

The FUTURAGE Road Map is the product of the most extensive consultation ever undertaken in this field, involving all of the major stakeholder groups and end users of ageing research, and spanning a 2 year period.

The Road Map creation process began from the perspective that health and well-being in later life will be best understood and, therefore, extended (via policy, practice and product development) if research is carried out in four interconnected fields: biogerontology; social and economic resources; environments of ageing, and; healthy ageing and well being. A fifth core theme of end-user involvement was also embedded in the Road Map process.

A unique set of partnerships were formed to support the research priority consultation process and to shape the final Road Map. All the major Coordination Actions in ageing over the last 15 years were represented through a Council of Scientists which provided high-level scientific oversight over the process and the Road Map itself. The membership of the FUTURAGE consortium included: 11 members of the European Research Area on Ageing (ERA-AGE 2); the Coordinator of the WhyWeAge Road Map for Biogerontology at the University of Namur; the Universities of Lund, Heidelberg, Leicester, Newcastle, Sheffield, Tampere; Age UK (formerly Age Concern and Help The Aged); Age Platform Europe, and; the Italian National Institute on Aging. Additional partners worked to support the dissemination of FUTURAGE activities across Europe and in their own countries.

A specially designed iterative process ensured that the specific research priorities were not identified by scientists alone and were subjected to a high degree of reflection and cross-examination from a wide range of stakeholder perspectives, including policy makers, practitioners, business people, older people and their NGOs as well as scientists. This process led to an extraordinary broad and deep consensus on the major future priorities. A total of nine distinct stages of consultation were undertaken which involved the participation of 1000 people and organisations, the latter representing many thousands more people.

The final Road Map contains the research agenda that will enable Europe to respond successfully to the unprecedented demographic challenges it faces. Its twin starting points are the high priority allocated to population ageing, by Member States and the European Union as a whole, and the fundamental importance of scientific research as the driver of innovations in public policy, in a wide range of clinical and other professional practices, and in the development of products and services. In addition it advances the case for a new comprehensive approach to 'active ageing' which includes all activities, physical or mental, and all age groups. The seven major priority research themes of the Road Map are linked to the active ageing core theme on the assumption that this should be a central aim of ageing research. These major priority themes are: Healthy Ageing for More Life in Years; Maintaining and Regaining

Further information

Copies of the Road Map and project newsletters can be downloaded from:

<http://futurage.group.shef.ac.uk/>

<http://futurage.group.shef.ac.uk/road-map.html>

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http://ec.europa.eu/research/fp7/index_en.cfm

Written by Alan Walker. Edited by Natalie Hammond, Department of Sociological Studies, University of Sheffield www.sheffield.ac.uk/socstudies

Research Impact

- The Ageing Research Road Map was launched on 18 November 2011 at a major conference in the European Parliament, Brussels, attending by over 300 people and webcast online.
- Already the novel iterative method invented by the project has been replicated by a parallel one to develop a mental health research road map.
- The Road Map has been used as a reference point by the Joint Programme Initiative 'More Years Better Lives' in deciding its research priorities.
- At national level the Canadian National Institutes for Health Research has used the Road Map to refresh its own research priorities and the UK National Institute for Health Research Comprehensive Clinical Research Network has adapted the Road Map into its statement of scope.

Mental Capacity; Inclusion and Participation in the Community and in the Labour Market; Guaranteeing the Quality and Sustainability of Social Protection Systems; Ageing Well at Home and in Community Environments; Unequal Ageing and Age-Related Inequalities; Biogerontology: from Mechanisms to Interventions. The Road Map also identified eight basic assumptions that should figure significantly in all priority topics and four critical implementation issues.

Thus the FUTURAGE project has created a Road Map that sets out the major research priorities for European ageing research over the next 10 or so years. It also calls for new approaches to ageing research which are more multi-disciplinary, life course focussed, user engaged and have a big emphasis on knowledge exchange. Furthermore it calls for a new vision of ageing which promotes its positive possibilities rather than deficits, inclusion and full citizenship rather than exclusion. Therefore the Road Map challenges all stakeholders in ageing research – policy makers and research funders; NGOs, practitioners, business people; scientists; and older people – to work in unison to ensure that research maximises its impact on the well-being of all Europeans as they age.

Contact Details

Project Secretary - FUTURAGE

Department of Sociological Studies, Elmfield,

Sheffield University

Northumberland Road.

Sheffield S10 2TU

+44 (0)114 222 6458/6418

Email: futurage@shef.ac.uk