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# "Regardless of Age": Australian University Managers' Attitudes and Practices Towards Older Academics

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## ABSTRACT

As with other industrialized nations Australia's population is aging and older workers are encouraged to work for longer. At the same time, Australia's university sector, which is aging, is being reconfigured through changes that potentially marginalize its older workers as higher education institutions try to become more competitive in a global market. In this context, youthfulness appears to embody competitiveness and academic institutions are increasingly aspiring to a young workforce profile. This qualitative article builds on previous research to explore to what extent ageist assumptions shape attitudes to older workers and human resource management (HRM) practices within Australian universities even when HRM practitioners are well versed in antidiscrimination legislation that (unlike the Age Discrimination in Employment Act in the United States) applies to workers of all ages. Semistructured interviews conducted with 22 HRM practitioners in Australian universities reveal that university HRM practices generally overlook the value of retaining an older workforce by conflating "potential" with "youthfulness," assuming that staff potential and performance share a negative correlation with age. While mostly lower-ranked institutions have attempted to retain older academics to maintain an adequate labor supply, this study finds that university policies targeting the ongoing utilization of older workers generally are underdeveloped. Consequently, the availability of late career employment arrangements is dependent upon institutions' strategic goals, with favorable ad hoc solutions offered to academics with outstanding performance records, while a rhetoric of performance decline threatens to marginalize older academic researchers and teachers more generally.

In view of the increasingly global nature of competition increasing attention has been paid to the effective deployment of human resources in order to maintain a competitive advantage (McWilliams, Wright, & Van Fleet, 2001). Alongside this, the global population is aging but some countries are older and are aging more rapidly than others (United Nations, 2015). High-income countries, including Australia, face population aging as a result of increasing longevity and falling fertility (Burke, Cooper, & Field, 2013; Phillips & Sui, 2012). In these countries, workforce aging presents challenges for governments, employers, and individuals. Its complex backdrop involves a marriage of population aging, coupled with a shifting workforce structure, ongoing concerns about the future funding of social welfare systems, and maintaining an adequate supply of labor. In this context, the attention of public and organizational policy makers has been directed towards older workers—often defined as workers aged over 50—and their potentially significant contribution to the performance and growth of the economy. Consequently, in aging nations, governments are encouraging people to delay retirement. This demonstrates a rapid change in the thrust of public policy from targeting the "early exit" of

older workers to encouraging their extended labor force participation (Phillipson, 2009). This redirection occurs on an assumption that the targeted policy focus on prolonging working lives will be more effective at increasing the labor force participation of older people than alternative policy approaches aimed at reactivating retirees and other inactive older people (Warren, 2015). Moreover, work at older ages is presently framed as an economic and social good that focuses on the potential beneficial outcomes of work in later life (Staudinger et al., 2016).

It has been argued that population aging will necessitate the effective management of aging workforces in order to counter shortfalls in labor supply (Brooke & Taylor, 2005). As argued by Kulik, Perera, and Cregan (2016: 2148) "policy changes impacting the 'working age' will keep mature-age [older] people in the workplace longer" and thus there is a need for a detailed understanding of the ways age is represented in workplaces and how this influences manager attitudes and practices. The notion of later life employment, or retirement that involves working, is not problematic in itself if it is complemented by the availability of quality jobs for older workers (Curtis & McMullin,

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2016; Lain, 2012; Simpson, Richardson, & Zorn, 2012). Furthermore, in aging contexts, retirement has become an issue of employment relations. In the absence of a mandatory retirement age, retirement is a negotiation that enables employers to regain control over when and under what circumstances individuals leave the workforce (Williams & Beck, 2015).

The issue of the demand for older labor is a longstanding topic of scientific inquiry but the need to better understand employer attitudes towards older workers has been given added impetus amid the present efforts of public policy makers to push out the age of final labor market withdrawal. Recent research that considered the utilization of older workers in the context of the European workplace found that strategies of exit through retirement, workplace accommodation measures, and employee development measures were used simultaneously, but that employers used exit policies most intensively (van Dalen, Henkens, & Wang, 2015). The authors concluded that, despite warnings concerning the implications of an aging population, European employers had yet to begin formulating strategies that promoted active aging. However, by contrast, recent Australian research drawing on data collected from a survey of 590 employers in the State of Queensland, found that, facing the twin pressures of an aging workforce and labor shortages was associated with the implementation of measures aimed at the employment of older workers (Taylor et al., 2013). This broad picture notwithstanding, there was evidence of considerable variation in terms of the degree of engagement with issues of older workers' employment both across and within industry sectors. The present study aimed to further investigate this issue of variability in terms of employer behaviors towards older workers, focusing on a specific industry sector that is known to be amongst the most aged in terms of its workforce composition in Australia—higher education. As argued by Taylor and colleagues (2016) in research on older workers quantitative approaches have struggled to attribute meaning to the counter-intuitive and contradictory findings they have sometimes elicited. There has been a lack of attention to older workers situated within particular work, personal/domestic and employment contexts (Loretto & Vickerstaff, 2013). As a consequence, qualitative approaches, including more explicitly comparative research at the firm, sectoral, and occupational levels, are required in order to test, explore, and interpret findings from quantitative research.

While, a discourse of productive aging frames the present public policy agenda towards older workers (Martin et al., 2015; Moulaert & Biggs, 2012; Walker, 2009, 2015; Zacher, 2015) and public policy makers insist on the economic necessity of "working late" and are promoting a business case for employing older workers, the contribution of older workers may be devalued in dynamic areas of economies subject to rapid change (Taylor et al., 2010). Focusing on Australian universities, this article considers this issue. Public universities in Australia illustrate an aging sector undergoing a process of significant renewal that involves changes to the natures of both academic institutions and academic research and teaching careers. Research undertaken by (Brooke et al., 2013) in a small Australian university experiencing significant change against a background of government policies that were rewarding new combinations of teaching and research found that this had raised mental pressure and cognitive demands on older staff members, many of whom were unable to respond. The perceived tension between academics' accustomed duties and new requirements for changed work performance was viewed by managers as creating a

potential future crisis in knowledge management and organizational continuity. This evolution of the university sector may thus be encouraging an employer emphasis on the potential of young scholars (Scott, 2006), at the same time as the aging of the sector's workforce and the implications of this are being highlighted.

According to one strand of literature, organizations that value their older workers will be at an advantage. Drawing on the resource-based view of strategic human resource management (HRM) it might be argued that vested in older employees could be a source of sustained competitive advantage, highlighting the potential value of investing in workers over the long-term (Kooij & van de Voorde, 2015). Thus, commentators such as Walker (2005: 691) have pointed to the inevitability of retaining aging workforces: "Future competitiveness in the private sector and efficiency in the public sector will rest increasingly on the performance and productivity of aging workforces". Yet realizations are also emerging from other commentators that the modern "flexible" organization may not necessarily be persuaded of the merits of the older worker (Phillipson, 2009; Sennett, 2008). Here Cappelli and Novelli (2010) report that contemporary adaptations by firms take the form of just-in-time recruitment to bring in new competencies to change the direction of operations, while often downsizing older employees. Thus, there is a tension between the view of older workers as an asset of depreciating value and of a resource that continues to be useful if managed properly (Yeatts, Folts, & Knapp, 2000). According to Yeatts, Folts, and Knapp in the depreciation model of HRM, a worker's value peaks in their early career, plateaus in mid-career, and declines thereafter, and as a consequence investment in older workers is viewed as costly and therefore they receive little help in adapting to change and may, in fact, be encouraged to exit the organization. By contrast, the conservation model specifies that HR practices can help individuals, regardless of their age, maintain an acceptable fit with their jobs.

New technologies, processes of labor and organizational forms are reshaping the nature of work and demanding flexible labor forces (Autor, 2015; Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014; Dropkin et al., 2016; Halford et al., 2015). At broader levels, the world of work is being reconfigured in response to global workforce competition and flexible organizations are restructuring the nature of work to accelerate productivity. Commonly held age stereotypical views play a role in cutting off older workers from continuing engagement in these reshaped workplaces. This can be most clearly seen in the attributes that flexible organizations attempt to project—responsiveness, creativity, innovation and institutionalized impatience—which are at odds with commonly held stereotypes of older workers comprising reliability, resistance to change and difficulty in reskilling (Brooke et al., 2013).

In this context of flexible cutting edge organizations, "ingrown" older workers may become expendable as their well-honed skills and in-depth knowledge are overlooked as desirable employee attributes. As Sennett (2008: 284) comments: "Doing one thing well, understanding it in depth, may be a recipe for a worker or company to be left behind". With a short-term business focus and preference for younger, fresher workers, the older worker potentially becomes dispensable in such organizations. While this does not necessarily apply across the whole economy, what is valued in cutting edge organizations is readily adapting to new tasks rather than progressively mastering one task, so that accumulated experience loses institutional value (Sennett, 2008; Tweedie, 2013). Thus, academic institutions wishing to maintain their

national or global competitiveness may be unwilling to countenance an aging of their workforces if they consider this to be associated with productivity declines. To remain competitive globally, they may argue that in workforce terms they simply cannot afford to get old and these public sector employers, seeking to emulate conditions present in the knowledge-intensive private sector, may decline to invest in their aging workforces (Taylor, 2006).

Tensions between globalization and the purposes of public universities are viewed as potent forces. Australian universities have responded to globalization by introducing quasi-corporate governance and a reorganization of the higher education workforce (Marginson & Considine, 2000; Marginson, 2011). University managers—much like corporate managers—underwent a process of reconfiguring their workforces towards a division of flexible, part-time labor to deliver educational services and a core of specialists responsible for developing intellectual property and carrying out tasks considered essential for the business of the university (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

Efforts to focus on flexibility continue. An Ernst and Young (2012) report on Australian universities concludes that the sector will remain viable if it introduces new business models that "are dynamic, modern and fit for the decades ahead" (p. 4) and builds "a new workforce structure that can support new business models" (p. 24). The challenges the sector faces include the need for a workforce that can be agile and adaptable in very different and rapidly evolving activities that include the production and dissemination of knowledge through research, teaching and learning, commercial consultancy, and partnerships with industry and the community.

According to McVittie, McKinlay, and Widdicombe (2003), a closer focus on staff performance has generated a form of "new ageism" that is directed primarily at older workers, but which might also be understood as directed towards the young who are often employed on a casual basis. An awareness of age in the university sector appears to have developed recently in the 2000s. In one of the first analyses of the Australian academic workforce, Hugo (2005a) described the structure of the workforce as characterized by "age heaping" resulting from its rapid growth during the 1960s and 1970s, followed by a period of slow growth and stability. In contrast to only 15% of the overall

workforce, almost a quarter of university staff are aged over 55 (Hugo & Morriss, 2010). While noting the phenomenon of workforce aging, the Commonwealth of Australia's (2008) *Review of Australian Higher Education* focused on the replacement of older workers, overlooking the possibility of maintaining existing sources of labor supply to prolong working lives. Loomes and McCarthy's (2011) analysis of the aging workforce in Australian universities is optimistic about the sector's capacity to manage that dynamic, arguing that its significant use of casual academic employment gives it considerable experience in flexible HRM, relative to many other industries. Yet Larkin and Neumann (2012) observe that overall the HR approaches adopted by Australian universities have been reactive and ad hoc, in that they are responding to immediate needs with a lack of an overarching strategic framework; HR personnel are well aware that their academic workforces are aging, although the issue "doesn't feature prominently in their workforce planning strategies" (p.16). The older academic workforce has been less able to act multifunctionally and flexibly in resolving conflicting performance expectations in "liquid" and protean career environments (Baruch, 2004; Bauman, 2000). Nevertheless, many older workers in Australian universities are eager to continue working in their current roles as they approach retirement (Strachan et al., 2012). The literature is largely silent on if or how the aging academic workforce may be mobilized in support of the objectives of the modern university.

Overall, Australia's education and training sector is one of its oldest workforces, with 47% of the workforce aged over 45 compared to 39% of all industries and 23% aged over 55 compared to 18% of all industries (Department of Employment, 2016). As can be seen in Figure 1, in Australia in 2011, the Education and Training workforce had the most older workers after Health Care and Social Assistance.

Within this, the university workforce is aging. Drawing on national education data, Larkin and Neumann (2012) show that Australia's internationally unranked universities have the highest proportions of academics aged over 50, with between half and two-thirds of their academic staff in this age group. Moreover, the workforces in Australia's unranked universities are aging at a greater rate than other universities, with an 18%–30% increase in the numbers of academics aged over 50 from 1997 to 2007.
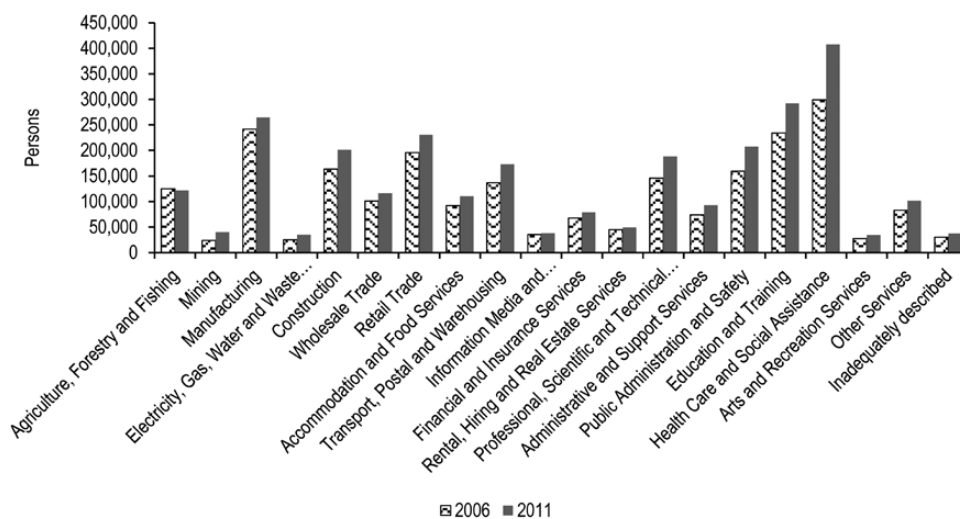


**Figure 1. Older workers' employment by industry, Australia (Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics Table Builder).**

Conversely, the workforces at Australia's so-called Group of Eight research-intensive universities have a younger age profile and have remained younger for the past two decades. These universities are large, metropolitan and ranked in the top 150 universities internationally in 2016–2017 (Times Higher Education, 2016). Only about a third of Group of Eight university academics are reported to be aged over 50—an increase of only 4%–6% between 1997 and 2007. The other universities making up the remainder of the national Top 20 rankings have approximately 40% of academics aged over 50 (Larkin & Neumann, 2012). On top of this, and belying a broad Australian public policy push towards the promotion of longer working lives (Taylor, Earl, & McLoughlin, 2016), Australian universities continue to offer formally approved voluntary early retirement schemes that target university staff aged from 55 to the age pension eligibility age of 65. This move arguably illustrates a growing awareness of the "problem" of workforce aging in the higher education market.

The strong match between an institution's international ranking and its age profile poses an interesting set of questions about age management within the university sector workforce. HRM practices in many European and Anglophone universities are subordinate to corporate university management strategies and missions (Ward, 2012). Underpinning these is a goal to maximize public funding from national governments, which is conceptualized as a scarce resource (Marginson & Considine, 2000; Ward, 2012). In the Australian context, a Research Quantum is used to calculate the distribution of block grants, while individual research grant proposals, subject to external peer review, are assessed to determine the distribution of funds through the Australian Research Council (ARC) and the National Health and Medical Research Council (NMHRC), among other bodies (Lewis, 2013). Education is funded through a combination of full-fee paying students and Commonwealth support for citizen students in the form of subsidized courses and a Higher Education Loan Program (HELP).

The implementation of the Research Quantum and uncapped support for domestic students in Australia has had a number of effects. Coupled with a focus upon international rankings, one of these effects is an increasing demand for the audit of academic activities, with research outputs, research income, and student loads taking priority over activities not rendered valuable in the audit process (Burrows, 2012). Amidst the redefinition of "performance" towards quality assessment and the maximization of institution-wide "outputs", how do Australia's university HR managers shape and respond to the changing demographic profile of the Australian higher education sector? What HRM strategies—if any—do the universities implement to manage their changing demographics? Furthermore, are there differences between the practices occurring at Australia's more "youthful" internationally ranked universities and the comparatively older unranked institutions?

## MANAGEMENT OF OLDER ACADEMICS IN AUSTRALIA'S UNIVERSITIES

The management of older academics in public universities must be located within broader labor patterns. Australia's university workforce is undergoing several other significant transformations, such as the emergence of a "core-periphery" model (Kimber, 2003). Recent research has confirmed an explosion in numbers of casualized teaching staff, a steady expansion of fixed-term contract staff, and a relative decline in tenured staff across universities. The Work and Careers in Australian Universities (WCAU) survey, found a growth of fixed-term contract research staff, the persistence of gender segregation, as well as the increasing casualization of academic teaching, with the vast majority of casuals (92%) being employed via informal recruitment (Strachan et al., 2012). The number of academics in continuing employment (i.e., the core) is relatively small and the majority—comprising 84% of the WCAU sample—are employed insecurely on fixed-term contracts (i.e., the periphery) (Broadbent, Troup, & Strachan, 2013). Casualizing teaching positions has become a mainstream HRM strategy adopted by university managers in part to deal with workforce planning issues. Between 1990 and 2008, casual academic staff numbers grew by 180%, in comparison with a 41% growth in noncasual academic staff numbers (May et al., 2011: 191–2). Moreover, older women are becoming sidelined into the junior teaching positions which dominate casual employment patterns in Australian universities: two-thirds of casual staff are women employed at Level A (assistant lecturer) and more than half are aged over 40 (Andrews et al., 2016; Bexley, James, & Arkoudis, 2013). A perceived need to produce a labor force which is more flexible and responsive to the changing demands of funding bodies, government priorities and clients (including students) has extended the age profile of this peripheral labor reserve.

HRM policy and planning has a central role to play in the development and retention of a competitive academic workforce (Gordon & Whitchurch, 2007). However, many Australian institutions are yet to implement HRM strategies that aim to deal with the aging of their workforces. Larkin and Neumann (2012) note that, while in Australia's university sector HRM practitioners are well aware of their aging academic workforces, the HRM strategies universities adopt are reactive and ad hoc. They found that performance appraisal systems were the only career management strategy covered by all universities and the need for succession planning was lacking in 6 of the 10 universities they examined.

Moreover, HRM policy and planning in Australian universities has focused on attracting and ideally retaining a small core workforce of high performing younger academics, with an increasing number being sourced internationally (Hugo, 2008). This perhaps aims to redress a deficit in younger academic staff, described by Hugo (2005b) as a "lost generation" and by May and colleagues (2011) not as lost but as consigned to casual and insecure teaching jobs. It does, however, contribute little to developing an HRM strategy for older academics which is, arguably, vital to achieve their effective retention and utilization. For example, experienced academics in Australia were found to play an important role in mentoring and sharing experiences with younger academic staff members (Bexley, James, & Arkoudis, 2011). Furthermore, effective management of age diversity within innovative knowledge organizations, it is argued, allows for greater problem solving capacity, creates more appealing incentive structures, and encourages intergenerational skills transfer (Backes-Gellner & Veen, 2013). Recent research among Australian academics points to concerns among those in mid- to late-career in terms of the changing expectations of students, falling academic standards and the role of IT in teaching (Bexley et al., 2011). Also, the career pipeline for Australian researchers and academics appears to be blocked. Almost half of peripheral research academics are unhappy with their career opportunities in the university sector, with one in five believing that they will have to leave the university sector for career advancement (Broadbent et al., 2013). The confluence

of the present expansion of the sector, the need for a new kind of academic role and workforce aging means that universities will need to be prepared to recast their workforces accordingly. However, available Australian evidence suggests that despite widespread concern in the sector about the issue of workforce aging, action has been limited (Hugo & Morriss, 2010).

Past research into the role that HRM plays more broadly in age management suggests that the implementation of antidiscrimination policies are not enough to ensure the enactment of equitable staff management practices and that diversity management policies are not necessarily implemented by line management (Loretto & White, 2006; Lyon, Hallier, & Glover, 1998; Schröder, Muller-Camen, & Flynn, 2014). Concerning a disconnection between policies and practices of HR managers towards older workers, Loretto and White (2006) found that, although managers claimed to be operating within equal opportunity frameworks, a range of positive and negative stereotypes pervaded focus group discussions concerning the employability of older workers. These included, on the one hand, perceptions of patience, commitment to work and that older workers are "cheaper" to employ due to an absence of care labor and low likelihood of requesting parental leave, an assumption that it should be noted overlooks grandparenting and elder care responsibilities. On the other hand are the negative attributes of an assumed decrease in work role performance and poor health. Nevertheless, as Blackham (2015) reports, Australia's National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) point out there is little need for workforce planning in a sector where there are estimated to be up to 20,000 qualified academics seeking work.

Within Australian universities, the absence of effective HRM planning can contribute to a negative perception that older workers are problematic and costly employees—if, for example, age is conflated with experience and seniority to imply that they draw the highest salaries—and, as Koopman-Boyden and MacDonald (2003) suggest, exhibit poor job performance. The changing nature of academic work is often not reflected in performance management processes. While the young have the virtue of time to develop a portfolio of valued experience and competences, older academics do not have this when they are expected or compelled to change roles between teaching and research, or a mix of the two, late in their careers. Consequently, older workers' performance may be considered unsatisfactory when judged against a new set of performance criteria. Stein, Rocco, and Goldnetz (2000) note the encouragement of early retirement amongst older academic staff may reflect age-based biases. Kooij and colleagues (2013) suggest that HRM has an important role to play in mitigating demotivating feedback loops between HRM practices and older workers' motivations. They argue that "HR practices affect employees by supporting them or by functioning as 'signals' of the organisation's intentions towards them" (Kooij et al., 2013: 19). This implies that the perception of a lack of commitment on the part of the organization through their HRM policies could be a generator of dissatisfaction and uncertainty amongst older workers. Moreover, as Griffin, Bayl-Smith, and Hesketh (2016) found, perceived age discrimination directed at older workers may be linked to actual job withdrawal. In contrast, Blackham (2015) suggests that universities in Australia with international rankings for research and technology appear to value the skills and experience of older academics, that older academics wish to remain in work, and that there is a widely held acceptance that they will not readily retire as older workers in other industries might.

Within an internationalizing, corporatizing higher education sector, there is still a large gap within the present literature about how university managers, HRM departments and larger strategic initiatives conceptualize the management of workforce aging and if this differs between more highly internationally ranked public institutions and those of lower rankings. The remainder of this article explores this gap and the implications of our findings for future research and the development of effective age management policies for academic workforces. Our analysis is sensitive to the impact which cultural norms, stereotypes and prejudices may bear upon the realization of effective age management.

## METHODS

This research is part of a larger mixed methods study that aimed to explore, first, transitions into, within and out of the labor market from the perspectives of older women workers aged 50–70 years, their employers and industry stakeholders; and, second, the development of policy related to the recruitment and retention of older women workers in the Australian workforce. The study *Retiring women: Understanding older female work-life transitions* was funded by the Australian Research Council (LP0990703).

The research set out to be provocative in utilizing a woman-centered approach that aimed to focus on their experiences to directly help with their real lives, not a gender analysis offering a comparison of women's and men's experiences (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004). Nevertheless, interview respondents discussed older workers including older women and men as well as women workers including older and younger women. The exploratory qualitative component of the larger study was designed to gain insights into the factors that shaped older women's retirement transitions from the organization's perspective. Large survey data provides information about generalized trends and widespread patterns across industry workforces but does not enable us to understand in depth the experiences within a particular sector. While the larger project focused broadly on older women's work and retirement across industry sectors (Earl & Taylor, 2015; Taylor et al., 2015), this article focuses on a narrower qualitative data set to explore the efficacy of age management strategies utilized by employers in Australian universities to retain older (women) workers for longer. The value of the university employer qualitative data set is that it enables the perspectives of individual respondents to be captured and retained (Chowdhury, 2015).

### Data Collection Approach

The employer qualitative data set involved undertaking telephone interviews in 2011 and 2012 with 58 HR directors and managers, including equity and diversity managers, in the financial services sector (19 interviews); public sector (17 interviews); and the university sector (22 interviews). Participants were recruited as follows: Individuals representing the selected industry sectors were invited to participate by the researchers and a standard snowballing technique was used to broaden participation. The only inclusion criteria for HRM practitioners was to be a current employee of an organization in one of the three industries. The telephone interviews were conducted by the research team and ranged in length from 10–60 min, with most lasting between 30 and 40 min.

The scope of the semistructured interviews covered the effectiveness of existing policy and practice in a range of organizations with

a particular focus on flexible working options and work/life balance; the management of aging workforces; and transitions to retirement (see Appendix). Interview questions were developed based on earlier interviews with industry key informants and grounded in the literature review. While the focus of the project was on older women workers and their retirement transitions, the interviewees' responses to the interview schedule were broader. For example, in outlining institutional policies and practices for encouraging older women workers to return to the workforce, HRM practitioners also routinely covered prime-age women returning to the workforce after childbearing or childrearing (indicating a focus on sex without considering age). Also, in responses to questioning about specific policies and practices for retaining older women workers, HRM practitioners also covered older men workers (indicating a focus on age without considering sex). An explanation for this stems from the awareness among HRM practitioners in Australia of antidiscrimination legislation and consequentially the use of performance management systems that apply equally (bluntly) to all.

### Participant Characteristics

This article draws on 22 data items from the university subset of the employer qualitative data set. This subset comprises 22 interviews carried out with HRM practitioners in the university sector, one of the three sectors studied. In Australia, the university sector comprises 40 public mass universities that vary in size from a few hundred staff to many thousands of staff and which are located in both metropolitan and regional contexts. The HRM practitioners interviewed represent half the total number of universities in Australia. They held senior portfolios, with 18 being HR Directors and four being Equity and Diversity Managers. The qualitative analysis revealed that their respective views differed somewhat as the HR Directors focused on the needs and interests of the organization while the Equity and Diversity Managers focused on the needs and interests of the individual workers. The interviewees represented their institutions and reported on their institutions' approaches to policy and practice about older (women) workers. A few also offered personal reflections about changes within the higher education sector. Thirteen of the 22 interviewees are women, including the four Equity and Diversity Managers. While the interviewees did not disclose their ages, the majority referred to a long career working in their universities. Overall, the sample included four Group of Eight research-intensive universities (5 interviews); ten universities with international rankings (10 interviews); and six universities without international rankings (7 interviews). These characteristics are useful in contextualizing the data extracts and conclusions and recommendations reached later.

### Data Analysis

The process for data analysis of the employer qualitative data set involved inductive thematic analysis. Data analysis was carried out by three researchers in the research team. This form of analysis is data-driven and involves coding without trying to fit themes into a pre-existing framework or into the researcher's analytic preconceptions. The process of carrying out inductive thematic analysis involves six stages: first, the researchers familiarized themselves with the data by reading, rereading and noting interesting ideas; second, initial codes were generated by coding interesting features in a systematic fashion and collating data relevant to each code; third, we searched for themes by collating codes into potential themes and gathering all relevant data

for each potential theme; fourth, themes were reviewed by checking if the themes worked in relation to the level of the data extract as well as the level of the data set; fifth, we defined and named themes through ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme and the overall story the analysis tells, and then we generated clear definitions and names for each theme; finally, we produced the final analysis by selecting vivid and compelling extract examples and linking these back to the research questions and literature review (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim into text form, deidentified and NVivo software was used to sort the data in the inductive thematic analysis process.

The following sections report data extracts from the university employer qualitative data set on the efficacy of age management strategies utilized in Australian universities to retain older workers for longer. The inductive data analysis process revealed that variations in the workforce age and gender profiles of some university faculties and campuses may have shaped the perspectives and experiences reported by the interview respondents and it also appears that academics and administration staff may be treated differentially by some HRM practitioners on a basis of organizational status, education level, age, and gender. The university workforce may resemble other organizations or industry sectors in terms of its age profile as well as increasing levels of casualization and opportunities for quality late career jobs, although as noted above there are perceptions that university academics are more reluctant to retire than older workers in other industries. Lastly, it is worth reiterating that the strategies HR managers identified applied not only to older women but to all older workers indicating their awareness of antidiscrimination legislation (concerning sex discrimination at least).

### RESULTS

The core themes that emerged from the analysis include: (a) the problematization of aging workers in terms of performance, despite assertions that staff are treated equally, coupled with an unwillingness to invest in their performance; and (b) a lack of formal programs or proactive age management strategies besides retirement, with any barriers facing older workers over-ridden in cases of labor shortages, and ambiguity in terms of management motives signaling the need for wariness on the part of workers. The section is organized into two subsections on performance evaluation and age management that provide in-depth explanations and interpretations of the themes. Table 1 summarizes results of the data analysis.

### "Performance" Evaluation: Framing the Aging Academic Workforce

In Australian mass universities, including those with aging workforces, there is a strong focus on youthfulness as an indicator of a dynamic workforce. Responses of HRM practitioners indicate that there is emerging awareness of workforce aging in mass universities but that this does not necessarily equate with a perceived need for action. Instead, older workers are often problematized, considered as a barrier to the career progression of younger workers, or as having deficiencies that could impede organizational performance. Seldom, it seems, are they viewed as making a contribution or having potential. At the same time, HRM practitioners emphasize equal treatment for all academic staff regardless of age. Rather "performance" is the criterion used to

**Table 1. Summary of Results of Data Analysis**

| Core themes | Findings |
| --- | --- |
| "Performance" evaluation: Framing the aging academic workforce | Older workers problematized in terms of their organizational contribution, with staff differentiated according to their job performance rather than their age |
| | Perceived under-performance of older workers generally viewed as grounds for divestment rather than the basis for remedial support |
| | Performance in terms of older academics' research, where the careers of many such staff have hitherto not emphasized this aspect of the academic role, singled out by HRM practitioners as problematical in an era where a university's status is judged by its research performance |
| | Improving job performance not considered to be in the purview of HR departments, this instead viewed as reflecting the moral character of older workers |
| Age management strategies in universities | A lack of formal programs or proactive strategies in response to workforce aging, with the exception of retirement arrangements which are leveraged in order to retain or remove older workers |
| | An unevenness in the application of preretirement arrangements, accessible to some but not to others, and used to retain some but to ease others out, with such ambiguity in terms of organizational motives identified by staff, leading to a wariness regarding engaging in discussion of such options |
| | In unranked mass universities in regional Australia, concerns about the availability of labor may be an over-riding factor in determining employment decisions, with the consequence that there are fewer barriers to older workers' recruitment and retention |
| | Despite differences in orientations towards the retention or retirement of older academic staff across the Australian higher education sector universities share an economic orientation towards engaging in the management of older academic workers |

*Note.* HRM = human resource management.

differentiate between staff, for example, at the following metropolitan mass university.

> There's no adverse reaction to older people here providing they are still performing [ … ] Along with everybody else they have to go through the performance management systems every year [ … ] They're treated exactly the same as everybody else and if they start to show lack of performance then often we'll reduce their fraction or offer them a pre-retirement contract or one of those things. In the last three or four years that type of treatment has certainly increased. I think in the past [...] They'd often be just left in their office and left to sit and do nothing because people didn't know how to deal with them. These days it's more – they're treated the same as everybody else. They have performance management like everybody else. If they don't perform then they use the same steps as anybody else. (Interview 13)

This HRM practitioner indicates that a common recourse to "under-performance" of an older worker is a switch to a part-time contract or the complete departure from the organization of the staff member in question. Performance management strategies, such as skills development, are not countenanced. While the respondent states that older workers are "treated exactly the same as everybody else" this organization's use of a preretirement contract indicates that they are treated differently to their younger coworkers. The assumption within the practitioner's evaluation is that the older workers who are worthy of HRM's attention are those who would "sit and do nothing"—that is, the older worker here is equated with an employee whose performance is in sharp decline. As this HRM practitioner explains, the implementation of "performance" measures can be a de-facto age management strategy that is applied to older staff who may have been "just left in

their office" in the past. The supposed reinvigoration provided by having a more youthful organization has potency among HR managers describing the workforces at mass universities.

> We had, probably, one of the oldest academic workforces and aging more quickly than other universities. So we actually thought we had a big issue that we needed to get some re-invigoration at the earlier career levels [ … ] So, for us, it was about university performance. We've got people who are over 70 working for us. It's not that it's an issue for us. We're much more interested in performance than age. (Interview 12)

HRM practitioners identify research as a key component in academic performance across mass universities, especially those at internationally ranked research-intensive institutions. In an era where research performance is judged as being critical to the viability of "world class" institutions (Coaldrake & Stedman, 2013), the problem identified by HRM practitioners is that of managing academics for whom research has not been a significant part of their work histories but who continue to be employed by mass universities.

> Everyone at the university, as you know, has a strong emphasis on research output. If you've got people of that [older] demographic who might have reached the level of say an academic level C [senior lecturer], but their research output is not strong, then it becomes a real issue because you've got the up-and-coming academics who perhaps are blocked. So the issue for us is making sure that we get the right output across all levels and ages, because we don't want to be faced with an attrition rate which is higher than it should be at Levels A and B because the Level Cs are just sitting around and not having research output [ … ] That is the challenge for us. So it's

*really a case of managing performance and making sure that at age 53 you've still got ten, twelve good years of research output. In fact, as an argument, I would say they should potentially be peaking at that age. (Interview 21)*

Attitudes expressed by respondents are suggestive of an ambivalent passivity regarding older workers. The responsibility for the disposition of HRM practitioners towards older academic staff is strategically shifted in the above quotation, from the discretion of HRM and on to the moral character of older staff members who might be "just sitting around". As long as "performance" is maintained then the staff member can be accommodated. An ability to maintain standards of performance is cited by university HRM practitioners as the reason older academics—referred to in the following quotation as "elderly staff"—might be encouraged to continue working, or simply tolerated if they wished to work on in a mass university.

*We've done a lot of planning in HR for the fact that we have an aging workforce [ … ] I've been at [this university] now for 14 years and I would say it's changed, not dramatically, but it's changed [...] There seems to be much more of an engagement with some of the elderly staff with the fact that they want to continue working. When that happens, as long as they're still performing well and there's no issues, then we're very happy for them to stay and work for us. (Interview 7)*

Among university HRM practitioners, underperformance is not considered to be a management issue to be remedied. Rather, it is viewed as a reflection of an individual staff member's character, demonstrating their willingness and ability to "perform", potentially laying the ground for dismissal. Notably, difficulties of confronting supposed underperformance of older academics in permanent positions make HRM practitioners, such as the following HR Director from a highly ranked research-intensive mass university, sensitive to handling such situations where a staff member might respond by making an accusation of discrimination. Notably, however, staff may have grounds for questioning the motives of management.

*We want to make it quite clear that there is no pressure. People are entitled to stay at work as long as they wish, subject to them performing, which we don't make a big deal of [ … ] We have to be a bit sensitive about it. We've certainly had staff who have outright then accused us of discriminating against them and they're very upset about it, so we profusely apologize and simply withdraw and give them written assurances that there is no pressure and that we won't raise the matter again, but, if they wish to, we're happy at any time to engage in a discussion with them [...] But there is still a sensitivity for some people. They think it's a plan to get rid of them. In some cases, it is, but generally not. (Interview 1)*

In our analysis, we began to suspect that, despite HR managers' assertions to the contrary, "performance" issues were in fact age-related. Given that managers across Australia are well versed in antidiscrimination law and discourses of equality, it is not surprising that we heard responses which clearly articulated that no age discrimination occurs. It has been recognized that in organizations working within established anti-age discrimination policy frameworks, a less apparent and more insidious form of ageism may become culturally established. For example, McVittie and colleagues (2003: 597) claim that "the use of the language of equal opportunities cannot be accepted simply as evidence of a consistent commitment on the part of organizations to implement fair employment practices". They found that rhetorical strategies by which employers attempted to avoid an attribution of ageism to their conduct included referring to the existence of policies when questioned about potentially discriminating practices within their organization (making nondiscriminatory practices visible), giving reasons why age discrimination is not an important issue for their organization (making potentially discriminatory practices less visible), and attributing the causes of imbalances in employee age profiles to forces out of their control (making potentially discriminatory practices invisible) (McVittie et al., 2003). These discursive strategies mirror the explanations of HRM practitioners for their institutions' approaches to the management of older academics. Although a formal language of equality and fairness is used to frame decisions around whether to attempt to retain or retire older staff members, the use of "performance" evaluation in these above statements suggests that assumptions about the relationship between staff age and work role performance pervade HRM practices towards older academics.

The dominance of the lexicon of "performance" within discussions of HRM strategy targeting older workers reflects a shift within broader management regimes within universities across Australia and other OECD countries (Ward, 2012). Although the research literature distinguishes between the age of academics and their career expectations (e.g., Larkin & Neumann, 2009), the pervasive discourse of performance is embedded with assumptions about the relationship between an academic's age and expectations about their potential. An appeal to performance evaluation is embedded in a sectoral shift that is changing the profile of what it means to be a successful academic (Burrows, 2012; Ward, 2012). This means that some older workers are considered out of place in an environment where academic roles are conceptualized as homogenous and evaluated primarily in terms of research outputs (Coates & Goedegebuure, 2012). However, what is not described by these economic-structural factors are the assumptions built into HRM practitioners' descriptions of older academic staff as workers who should be under surveillance because of the inevitability of performance decline; who are at risk of aging into underperformers; and who can be treated with a special category of responses (i.e., reduced working hours or early retirement) in the event of actual performance decline. Treating descriptions such as these as issues of performance management can be viewed as the manifestation of ageism. Their appeal to a strong antidiscrimination discourse liberates HRM practitioners to deploy discretionary practices that produce unequal outcomes for older academic staff. Drawing upon notions of older workers' declining performance deflects attention from a potential accusation of ageism on the part of employers.

## Age Management Strategies in Universities

Despite a general awareness of issues relating to the aging of the workforce, respondents report a lack of formal programs or proactive strategies in response to workforce aging in their institutions, with the notable exception of retirement arrangements. This lack of recognition of the potential vulnerability of older workers in the university sector is an important factor leading to their marginalization. Not recognizing the vulnerability of marginalized workers on the basis that to do so

might be discriminatory may generate discrimination unconsciously. Added to this older workers are not considered a group that would benefit from specific policy interventions, as the following HRM practitioner from a mass university identifies.

*Universities are fantastic on this stuff. If anything they're all too old. We haven't got enough youth [ … ] This university is incredibly respectful of age. I don't think there is a program you need to implement [ … ] We do age profiling and [ … ] people literally are still working in their seventies. I don't think it's a problem. (Interview 16)*

Two assumptions are worth noting here. First, this HRM practitioner conflates having an aging workforce with developing strategies in response to workforce aging and assumes that because staff work when aged into their seventies, there are no issues related to workforce aging that would benefit from management attention. The perception of respect for age is equated with successful age diversity. Second, a perceived absence of youth in the workforce is disconnected from the requirements of academic work, including the years of training it takes to reach varying levels of expertise in an academic field, and—importantly for age management—it overlooks the possible value of older workers and the potential benefits they may bring to a workplace (Irvine, Moerman, & Rudkin, 2010).

It is notable that in higher education, as a human capital intensive industry, there is an overall lack of attention to strategies aimed at the utilization of older workers who are a growing segment of the workforce. Few HRM practitioners acknowledged such a lack of attention. Rather it was Equity and Diversity Managers in mass universities who raised the issue.

*We know that there is a ticking time bomb. Are we putting proactive strategies in place? I'm not convinced we do. (Interview 2)*

*We don't have a strategy around staged retirement or aging workforce. We don't do anything in that space. (Interview 20)*

More generally, where policy exists it appears to be primarily manifest as a reward to a "select few" highly performing staff in the years immediately prior to retirement, as the comments of an HR Director in the following case of an internationally ranked research-intensive mass university illustrate.

*If you're an academic and you're on a continuing contract [ … ] you have certain performance standards that you would need to meet, in terms of research, teaching and engagement. However, for your last year or two, you might not want to be doing all of that, so we can change you to a fixed-term contract and we can rewrite the nature of your job. We do that for a few people. (Interview 4)*

While preretirement negotiations may be regarded as something that is earned in an internationally ranked research-intensive institution, the approach in unranked mass universities appears to be somewhat broader and aimed at encouraging certain staff to leave not on the basis of research performance but on the changing needs of the institution and a desire for more flexibility in workforce shaping.

*We have a pre-retirement policy in the university. It's probably more a practice than a hard-and-fast policy. That's a strategic look at areas where we actually are interested in either keeping people or indeed moving them on in order to restructure the workforce. We offer some financial inducements to cohorts of people to move on [ … ] Then we use their vacant positions for funding of new positions within the university. (Interview 17)*

Thus, there is an unevenness in the application of preretirement arrangements, accessible to some but not to others, and used to retain some but to leverage out others. According to HRM practitioners, such as the following HR Directors in unranked mass universities, this potential ambiguity in terms of organizational motives had been recognized by staff, leading to a wariness regarding taking up such options. The wariness of staff towards HRM practices lends credibility to Kooij and colleagues' (2013) claim that workers perceive HRM practices as "signals" of an organization's intentions towards its staff.

*I think that most of our pre-retiree people are highly valued to the organization and we've been trying to lock them in for as long as they possibly want to give us. But [ … ] I get the impression a lot that there is a great reluctance in our academic staff to enter [ … ] transition to retirement pathways – still with a level of distrust towards the employer. [ … ] I think that they see that they're on a more tenuous employment track, or that I'll say that I'll reduce to part-time but, because I am a performer, I'm just going to be given the same workload and it really won't work for me [ … ] [Others] would sing its praises because sometimes, if somebody really is valuable to the organization, we also facilitate something that would be out of the norm. (Interview 3)*

Most of Australia's universities are mass universities located in metropolitan areas and regional cities. In unranked mass universities, issues of labor supply can be an over-riding factor in determining employment decisions, with the consequence that barriers to recruitment and retention of older workers are minimized. As HRM practitioners explain, staff shortages in regional areas mean some universities employ the staff they can attract rather than selecting from a large pool of candidates. Consequently, HRM practitioners in unranked mass universities may have an interest in facilitating the recruitment of older workers or discouraging their retirement.

*Given that we're in regional settings we're non-discriminatory. We'll take anyone, as long as they've got the skills and the desire and the right attitude. (Interview 19)*

*We're not located in a place like Melbourne or Sydney where you get 30 people applying for the one job. We might get two. So the fact that someone was born in 1948 is irrelevant to us. It's all around can you do the job [ … ] We do have a transition to retirement scheme but we're pretty selective about who we offer it to. Because mostly we don't want people to leave us [ … ] so anyone who applies for a transition to retirement scheme has to get it approved by our Vice-Chancellor [ … ] and the Vice-Chancellor is under no obligation to accept it [ … ] People reduce their workload and then get a bit of a sweetener at the end, a bit like a voluntary early retirement but it's called a transition to retirement. (Interview 6)*

Despite their differences in orientation towards the retention or retirement of older academic staff, across the Australian higher education sector the internationally ranked research-intensive institutions and unranked universities share an economic orientation towards engaging in the management of older academic workers. Riach (2009) argues that the framing of age diversity as an economic-rational process (such as a business case) does not inherently lead to organizations responding to age diversity in a fair and equitable way. Attempting to ground a case for age diversity in terms of the "benefits" that older workers may offer "may limit the impact of the diversity message by legitimizing the use of stereotypes, be it positive or negative" and reduce the justification for equitable HRM policies to an economic logic (Riach, 2009: 322). The responses provided by the HRM practitioners interviewed in this study suggest that, even within current age diversity management policies, HRM in Australian universities is grounded in an economic-rational logic in practice. By appealing to performance evaluation to disengage potential attributions of ageist practices, HRM practitioners are also able to justify the preferential treatment of "high performing" older academic staff while rationalizing the unfavorable treatment of others as a result of their perceived poor performance. However, the attribution of stereotypes to older workers assumed in the comments made by HRM practitioners suggests that older academics are not on a level playing field, as they are assumed to be in a potential state of decline and conceptualized as a problem to be transitioned into retirement rather than as potential to be developed and maximized.

## DISCUSSION

A key finding of this study is that, on the whole, older workers in mass universities in Australia tend to be problematized and HRM practitioners report a lack of formal programs or proactive strategies for age management. Echoing the findings of van Dalen et al. (2015) outlined earlier, where these institutions have developed arrangements is in the area of retirement. However, retirement policies and their practice are not consistently applied to all staff members. Subject to standards of performance being maintained, mass universities seem willing to retain some older academics. HRM practitioners exercise discretion over who is retained and on what terms. However, while this displays a willingness to retain the human capital that public universities consider valuable, which is at least in part due to the economic-rational conceptualization of age diversity as a profitable resource (see Riach, 2009), HRM practitioners appear to hold generally negative attitudes towards retaining older academics. On the contrary, it seems to be accepted that older workers have deficits that are not amenable to remedial action and therefore worthy of investment. Here, it is notable that research indicates that it is in the area of training and career development activity that age stereotypes appear to have some foundation (Ng & Feldman, 2012). It is perhaps unsurprising then that among Australian employers generally research indicates that, by contrast with other areas of managing older workers, there is little willingness to invest in developing their aging human capital (Taylor et al., 2013). Moreover, analysis drawing on data collected from older women working in higher education carried out as part of another element of this study suggested that age prejudice may influence employer willingness to offer training, whereas a woman nearing her expected age of retirement may rationally decide not to invest in her human capital (Taylor & McLoughlin, 2015). Such evidence suggests that here each party—workers and managers—may be in broad agreement.

This is a finding of significance, not only for the university sector but perhaps more widely as it suggests that even in a knowledge-intensive industry human capital investment at older ages is devalued. In overlooking older workers as a source of sustained competitive advantage over the long term (Kooij & van de Voorde, 2015), economic-rational conceptions about age diversity play a role in perpetuating the HRM rationale behind such ageism. So long as age diversity is conceptualized as an issue of utilizing human capital, rather than ensuring human rights (Duncan, 2008; Riach, 2009), ageist assumptions may continue to be transformed into practices that systematically disadvantage older workers.

This suggests that not only is the business case approach, commonly used by governments and advocacy groups in Australia and internationally to encouraging industry to invest in older workers (for instance, see AARP & Aon Hewitt, 2015; Ryan 2016), likely to be ineffective, it may actually be harmful to their prospects. Here, encouraging consideration of workplace age diversity more broadly, rather than trying to define a business case for older workers (Duncan, 2003), may offer an alternative way forward that appears to have some grounding in empirical evidence. For instance, Backes-Gellner and Veen (2013) explored the costs and benefits of age diversity on company productivity and also considering the type of task performed as a moderator. They concluded that age diversity has a positive effect on company productivity if a company engaged in creative, as opposed to routine, tasks. Similarly, Gobel and Zwick (2013) found that in companies that utilized mixed-age work teams, the relative productivity contributions of both older and younger workers were higher than in companies without this measure. Wegge and colleagues (2008) also found that age diversity in a team was positively related to performance for groups performing complex decision-making tasks. However, some caution is warranted in considering the implication of this study. The mechanisms by which age diversity influences organization productivity are left unclear. Wegge and colleagues hypothesized based on past studies that age diversity within a team or group might negatively impact performance but they also hypothesized that this would not be true for teams performing complex decision-making tasks. This is because, they argued, for complex tasks, having a diverse team helps the team to make good decisions because older workers, with their increased accumulated knowledge, can help younger workers. Thus, their argument is based on a contestable and ageist claim that older workers are necessarily more experienced than their younger counterparts. By contrast, Böhm, Kunze, and Bruck (2014: 671) define an age diversity climate more broadly as "organizational members' shared perceptions of the fair and nondiscriminatory treatment of employees of all age groups with regard to all relevant organizational practices, policies, procedures, and rewards". They hypothesized a relationship between age-inclusive HR practices and the development of age-diversity climate in an organization, which in turn would be related to perceptions of social exchange and indirectly to a firm's performance and worker turnover intentions, finding evidence for the existence of these relationships. Thus, deploying an age diversity approach may have some utility in knowledge-intensive sectors such as higher education but its implementation requires careful consideration in a sector where, as yet, understanding of age management practices appears to be rudimentary.

An apparent difference between Australia's leading research-intensive universities and the remainder is in the more or less narrow ways

that they conceptualize an ability to draw on human capital. The former are more narrow as they can afford to invest in new (international, mobile) staff more readily, whereas the others seem to be more willing to take up a broader range of measures in attempts to retain valuable older staff. Across the sector, older workers are faced with two forms of marginalization. First, they face narrow performance measures focused on research achievements, internationalization, and global competitiveness. The successful older worker in global higher education is productive regardless of age. Their performance is judged against internationally benchmarked standards of excellence and outstanding performance rather than productivity and competence. Alternatively, older workers may enjoy more secure employment but may also face few or no career development opportunities. The successful older worker in local higher education is a productive, competent and reliable staff member who is not expected to be (although they may demonstrate they are) excellent or outstanding.

Although preretirement arrangements and early retirement schemes are broadly utilized across the university sector in Australia, these initiatives are corporate experiments in managing labor supply, rather than equitable employee-oriented practices. Where there is an absence of formal, well communicated preretirement programs, or eligibility to an early retirement scheme, ad hoc strategies which are premised on ageist assumptions have become widely normalized. This resembles McVittie and colleagues' (2003) description of the pervasive indirect forms of new ageism that emerge within institutions operating within anti-discrimination legislation. The assumptions of HRM practitioners that the productivity of late career academic staff will decline and they will nominate themselves for (unpaid) adjunct appointments or seek a pathway to retirement perpetuates the peripheralization of older academics (Broadbent et al., 2013; Brooke et al., 2013). Although being recognized as a high-performing staff member may enable some individuals to access favorable individual retirement planning opportunities, most older staff risk both marginalization and perceptions of performance decline in the eyes of HRM practitioners. The findings presented here suggest that, while it has been argued that there is a need to engage in further preretirement planning in consultation with academic staff (Backes-Gellner & Veen, 2013), by itself this risks perpetuating ageist perceptions concerning their employment as primarily being about managing ongoing and inevitable decline and disengagement.

Rather than encouraging age-based biases contained within economic-rational strategies to retire older staff (see Larkin & Neumann, 2009), alternative career profiles may be developed which both normalize differentiated academic roles that resist conflating academic career progress with advancement through the "pipeline" towards full-time professorship (Coates & Goedegebuure, 2012). The negotiation of normalized alternative careers is one means of shifting employment contracts away from the unilateral "management" of older workers off the career "ladder".

## FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Qualitative approaches to understanding workplace attitudes to older workers are potentially fruitful in allowing researchers to delve deeper into issues than is possible in undertaking quantitative surveys of employers. Future research directions may include replicating this study in universities in other countries and across other industry sectors subject to similar conditions to those facing higher education

in order to provide comparisons. Another potentially fruitful line of inquiry would be to study line management in order to obtain a wider perspective on managing older workers and potentially reveal what attitudes and biases might influence behaviors towards older workers in the day to day management of organizations. Another potential line of research could be testing what, how and if organizational interventions could be useful in achieving attitudinal and behavioral change among managers. It is conceivable, for instance, that the competitive forces universities are subject to may make managers unreceptive to antidiscrimination training.

## POTENTIAL LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH

This study refers to the Australian context so it may not have wider applicability. However, in a situation where universities internationally are competing to deploy the best available human resources in order to build and maintain an advantage divestment strategies targeting older workers may be deployed. Therefore, there would be value in testing the applicability of this study's findings to other national contexts.

It is also worth noting that although the study ostensibly aimed to examine older women workers the responses of the HR managers were more general and thus gender was not a particular confound. Nevertheless, the treatment of older workers by gender may be quite different in different university departments or faculties and this is not captured in this study.

The study focused on corporate university HR managers rather than at the level of faculties or schools, which generated a specific, particular perspective that may not reflect wider views within universities concerning the day to day management of staff.

## CONCLUSIONS

The dominance of corporate objectives within the pervasive discourse of "performance" in HRM practices has allowed for ad hoc and individualized approaches to preretirement planning to become the norm. This has added a degree of precarity to preretirement planning and perpetuated stereotypes about the intentions and future performance of older academics, placing the onus on the academic to avoid experiencing discrimination through ensuring acceptable "performances." Finding an equitable solution for both staff and institutions must begin by recognizing and attending to the vulnerabilities and needs of both older academics and universities.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## APPENDIX – INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. At the points at which women leave organizations, for example, childbirth and retirement, what does the university do to hold on to them?
   Prompts: job redesign, knowledge retention/transfer, formal and/or informal mentoring programs
2. What does the university do to help women manage work/life balance?
3. What are the pros and cons of flexible working policies from an organizational perspective? How does the university manage these?
4. What does the university do to support women returning to the workplace in terms of skills development?
5. How much progress has been made at managing the culture of age diversity at the university?
6. Do you have any formal or informal policies on age of retirement?
7. Are older women's retirement transitions managed effectively by workers and managers?
   Prompts: transition to retirement plans, incentives to retire earlier or later than planned
8. Is there any gap or conflict between human resources policy and what really happens on an operational level?