



Photograph by Rita Gerrard

The recent Association for Education and Ageing international conference was well timed and appropriately located. It was held at Lancaster University, just a few days after the publication of the DIUS White Paper, *The Learning Revolution*. Lancaster is one of the growing number of higher education institutions responding to the demographic revolution. Its Department of Continuing Education includes a School of Lifelong Learning with specific programmes of courses for seniors.

One of our strengths in AEA is that all members can learn more from one another - whether we're academics, committed in various ways to educational gerontology, other professionals involved with older people, or course older people interested in the issues. The participants were a good AEA-style mix on this occasion from a dozen different countries.

There were three Keynote Addresses - Professor Ron Manheimer, University of Carolina, examined various paradigms on ageing and lifelong learning; Dr Elizabeth Mestheneos, 50+ Hellas, President of AGE (the European Older People's Platform), examined a range of issues relating Later Life Learning to EU strategies, policy, and practice, affecting 148 organisations representing older people in 27 member states; and finally, John Gibson, from DIUS, wound up the conference with a positive message based on *The Learning Revolution* and delivered with great good humour. There were other plenaries: from six local older people, and from Lancaster's own Professor Keith Percy. He gave this year's Frank Glendenning Memorial Lecture, much of it dealing with Glendenning's own pioneering work as a social and educational gerontologist.

Twenty three workshop sessions were also led by the AEA mix. They dealt with original research on such themes as technological innovations, intergenerational learning, drama, lip-reading, dementia, learning styles, and higher education. The

published version of the Lancaster transactions will justify study and could promote improved practice.

AEA has a particular interest in one of the most original forms of higher education represented at the conference - Ransackers, so I must give special mention to that. This development enables older people with no previous experience of higher education to study for a ten week term at a residential college - not on a course, but on a topic of their own choosing, with academic staff advising on research methods. The idea has recently been adapted and practised by universities (non-residential, but with extra weeks to compensate).

Ms Helene Pursey described the Ransackers project at Fircroft College. Professor Brian McKechnie (Senior Studies Institute, Strathclyde University) was speaking on intergenerational work, but is introducing Ransackers in the autumn.

Ransackers was devised by Vi Hughes, former Senior Lecturer at Ruskin College, learning Gaelic in her retirement. *Ransaachadh* obviously means plunder, but it also means explore, discover, or scrutinise. Nearly 300 Ransackers have studied a wide variety of topics at Ruskin, Northern College, as well as Fircroft; and opportunities are or will be available at Strathclyde University, Queen Margaret University (Edinburgh); and Coleg Harlech (North Wales). Ex-Ransackers have formed their own Association; most Ransackers (60%) have enthusiastically stayed on in education, and some have taken degrees.

Despite the positive tone of the whole proceedings, Ransackers' future is a source of concern for AEA. Vi Hughes successfully launched her idea at a conference run by Better Government for Older People. It went into action in 2004, supported for the first four years by the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation. Its future is at present unclear. A recent, highly controversial decision by the Department for Work and Pensions, has led to the abolition of BGOP. It was set up just over ten years ago to engage older people in policy appraisal and development, but now it no longer exists. Existing schemes are not at risk, but Ransackers' future now depends on the outcome of an initiative of former BGOP personnel and supporting organisations - to set up Change AGENTS, a mutual aid organisation. AEA does not take sides over the DWP's action, but it can be expected to support the continuing existence and growth of Ransackers.

I could not persuade John Gibson from DIUS to comment on this issue, but the spirit of his keynote and the White Paper he was extolling give some ground for optimism.

Brian Groombridge, Professor Emeritus of Adult Education, University of London.