

Comment

By Brian Martin

Age discrimination in academia

In November 1983, a series of lectureships in The Faculties was advertised. It was clear from the advertisement that the jobs were not intended for people much older than their mid-30s. In March 1984 the Research School of Chemistry advertised the first of a series of posts as 'part of a program designed to attract outstanding young chemists to tenured positions within the School'.

These two examples are cases in which there is an explicit intention to discriminate against older applicants. This is in addition to widespread covert age discrimination. In one case of which I am aware, all candidates over the age of 30 were summarily excluded from consideration, although the advertisement had not specified any such age criterion.

The introduction of age discrimination in academic appointments is a serious step, since it introduces a factor having no connection with academic criteria. Here I present some of the arguments against age discrimination and outline some alternatives to such discrimination. Quite a number of the points arose in discussions with other members of the Action Group on Discrimination, an ANU group which was set up last year over concern about age discrimination.

The basic argument for age blindness is that chronological age itself has no relevance to a person's ability to perform a job and to contribute enthusiasm and new ideas. Therefore age discrimination should be ruled out just as discrimination should be ruled out on the basis of sex, ethnic origin, political affiliation, religion, nationality, sexual preference and other such factors.

The most obvious disadvantage of age discrimination is that the most suitable person for a task is not always obtained. For the ANU posts, outstanding older applicants will be ruled out of contention.

When discrimination occurs and is seen to occur, those discriminated against can become resentful and disillusioned because their hard work and achievement of high levels of academic performance is not fairly recognised. This certainly applies at the ANU. In the Research Schools, for example, there are quite a number of researchers in their 30s or older with outstanding academic records. If

the few tenurable jobs which come up are given preferentially to less outstanding candidates simply because they are younger, a feeling of betrayal is only to be expected.

Age discrimination is de facto discrimination against women. Talented women are more likely than men to have interrupted careers, due to child-bearing and rearing and also to social expectations and pressures. A woman with the same academic performance and promise is thus likely to be older.

In addition, previous sex discrimination may mean that some talented women have had less job experience and fewer publications at a given age. One example is the woman who was initially barred from an ANU post because she was married to a man with a job, and then later discriminated against because of her lack of academic experience for a person her age.

Two problems in academia are staleness of individual academics and inflexibility of staffing. One of the causes of both these problems is having appointed too many young people in the past: the staff become stale after too many years in the same post, and the large single-age cohort prevents changes in staffing. Discriminating in favour of younger candidates can only perpetuate this pattern.

Preferring younger candidates reinforces the pattern of 'narrow-track' careerist academics: those who have not strayed from the academic research path with a narrow specialisation. Those who have taken time off to rear children, to develop a range of interests, to experience other cultures in depth, to work in a range of employments and to practise other talents are discriminated against.

There seem to be only two arguments for age discrimination which have been regularly advanced.

The first says there is a need for 'demographic balance'. This is the justification advanced for the age discrimination lectureships advertised in *The Faculties*.

There are several shortcomings in this argument:

- No substantial justification has yet been produced for preferring a 'demographically balanced' employment profile rather than the profile that results simply from appointing candidates on academic grounds.

- No evidence has been presented on what a 'balanced' profile should be. It is simply assumed that more young academics are needed than might result by using scholarly criteria.

- There is already systematic discrimination in favour of younger academics, especially through preference for narrow-track male academics. Therefore achieving 'balance' should mean appointing more older candidates.

- There are more serious demographic imbalances than age, in particular sex and ethnicity. Indeed, it might seem that redressing these more serious problems is sidestepped by focussing attention on alleged age imbalances. Considering all the fuss about demographic imbalance, it is surprising that special funds have not been provided to hire Australia's first woman vice-chancellor.

The second argument for age discrimination says there is a need for 'new blood' — for younger people to bring in enthusiasm and new ideas. But 'new blood' does not have to be 'young blood': older people, especially those with a range of experiences, can provide just as much enthusiasm and as many new ideas as young people. There is no necessary connection between chronological age and the ability to relate meaningfully with students, many of whom are of mature age anyway.

One of the problems facing universities is how to create more employment possibilities in a situation of restricted finances and limited flexibility. Rather than dealing with this by introducing another form of discrimination, it would be better to look at alternatives.

More fractional appointments could be created or encouraged, with security equal to full-time appointments and benefits equal or proportional to full-time appointments. Doing this would create more total positions, and would provide suitable avenues for people just entering academic careers to gain experience. Fractional posts would be advantageous for people who wished to maintain outside interests or activities — including child-rearing — and thus would encourage more outward-looking attitudes among academics.

More total appointments could be achieved by reducing or flattening academic salaries.

For example, high salaries (such as lecturer or senior lecturer and above) could be frozen or reduced. This would help redress the unfairness inherent in the present distribution of jobs.

Many academics have tenured posts solely due to historical coincidence — namely their obtaining posts in a period of expansion and shortage of qualified academics. Many other talented scholars are left without a share of the benefits, or even much of a chance of obtaining them. Lowering salaries and increasing the number of jobs would place these talented nomads in positions where their skills could be used effectively.

Another alternative would be to change the tenure system so that security is greatest for those in the lowest positions rather than those in the highest positions. For example, research assistants and tutors might be given continuing appointments, lecturers ten-year appointments and professors two-year appointments. Those in higher appointments would return to a lower position unless reappointment were made on the basis of current performance.

More weight could be placed on experience in non-academic areas and on interdisciplinary and critical research and teaching, in order to reduce the current over-rewarding of narrow specialisation. Such a change in emphasis would help overcome staleness which often results from inward-looking specialisation and would open job possibilities for more people with less conventional backgrounds, such as people in industry, government, the professions, community service and the like.

A combination of these alternatives would do much to overcome the staleness and inflexibility presently afflicting universities. It would also create many openings for both young and old people to enter academic life at a level and intensity which they would find suitable personally and stimulating intellectually. This would allow society to benefit from the enthusiasm and commitment to scholarly goals of many whose capabilities are now being neglected or wasted.

** Dr Martin is Research Associate in the Department of Mathematics, Faculty of Science.*