Welcome to the eleventh ERA-AGE Newsletter. ERA-AGE is the European Research Area in Ageing. This is a European ERA-NET or coordination activity that brings together research councils and ministries in twelve countries with dedicated research programmes or initiatives in the field of ageing. As was reported in the last newsletter, ERA-AGE has launched Europe’s first research programme on ageing funded jointly by Member States. The Future Leaders of Ageing (FLARE) Post-doctoral Programme held its first summer school in June and, in this newsletter, we include a full report on proceedings by one of its organisers, Kenneth Abrahamsson. There is also an editorial by ERA-AGE Director, Alan Walker, on why it is essential for Europe to fund ageing research. You will find further details of ERA-AGE activities, including the FLARE Programme and summer school, on the website – www.era-age.group.shef.ac.uk.

Research in Europe (FLARE) Post-doctoral Programme

Project Progress
Why Europe Must Fund Ageing Research

There is no doubt that, over the past decade, population ageing has climbed steadily to the top of the policy agenda. Few in national or European policy making circles retain any lingering doubts that, along with climate change, security and the recent credit crunch, ageing is important enough to be labelled a ‘grand challenge’. It is paradoxical, therefore, that in research terms ageing is far from occupying a status commensurate with its policy priority. Within the Member States the priority given to ageing research is patchy, with only a minority mounting dedicated programmes in this field and, even when the priority has been recognised, as in the case of Germany’s first federal programme of ageing research launched in 2006, there is no guarantee that this will be sustained. At the EU level the last Framework Programme to have a dedicated ageing theme was the 5th one. It is difficult not to interpret the absence of a core theme on ageing in FP6 and FP7 as a comment on its low priority. There are no reliable figures, that I am aware of, concerning spending on ageing research by Member States and it is impossible to discern precisely what is spent on this topic within the Framework Programmes.

This inadequate situation in Europe contrasts directly with the USA which has had a National Institute on Aging since 1974. Its mission is to conduct a broad scientific effort to understand the nature of ageing and to extend healthy and active years of life. The NIA not only funds substantial research resources to support these efforts. Why is funding ageing research so critical? As recognised by the US, more than 30 years ago, if the added years of life resulting from the demographic bonus are to benefit both society and the individuals concerned, there must be a sound evidence-base on which to build policies and practices. In addition there is huge economic potential in the generation and development of new products (and markets) linked to the older population. A major commitment to ageing research is necessary also to attract and retain a new generation of scientists dedicated to this field. At present more generously funded research areas such as cancer attract large numbers of young scientists but, in fact, age is the major risk factor for cancer (and coronary heart disease and stroke) and it is vital to enlarge our understanding quickly of the precise role it plays.

As well as recognising the significance of ageing for both individuals and society through substantial funding it is crucial for Europe to act in a concerted way. First of all coordinated action in this field is essential to prevent, as far as possible, duplication of effort and to maximise added value from funding. Secondly Europe needs to maximise its research resources in this field by cooperation and the cross-national sharing of expertise, data and instruments. Some Member States are relatively new to ageing research or are too small to develop expertise in every aspect of it. Thirdly, in some specialist areas, including newly developing ones such as environmental gerontology and gerontechnology, collaboration across borders is the key to critical mass.

The budget allocated directly by Congress is over $1 billion (2008). In Europe there is no comparable activity in terms of either mission or budget. ERA-AGE is the only coordination body but its resources are meagre in comparison with the US NIA. The fact that we were able to mount Europe’s first joint funded research programme on ageing – the FLARE Post-doctoral Programme – is a tribute to the prioritisation of ageing research in the eight member states that fund it (Austria, Finland, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Romania, Sweden and the UK). There are no resources for sustaining this programme or for creating a European infrastructure to coordinate ageing research.

Why Europe Must Fund Ageing Research

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

The idea of a summer school was launched parallel to the discussion of the FLARE initiative. The purpose was to strengthen the network and community feeling among the FLARE post-docs, to promote multidisciplinary interests and to focus on career planning and development. The summer school was organised and funded jointly by ERA-AGE, the Swedish Research Council for Working Life and Social Research and the Swedish Foundation for Health Care Science and Allergy Research (Vårdal Foundation) and the Vårdal Institute. The domestic planning group consisted of Kerstin Carlsson, Research Secretary, FAS, Kenneth Abrahamsson, Programme Director, FAS, and Professor Ingallf Rahm Hallberg, Vårdal Institute. It was held between Sunday June 22nd and Friday June 27th, 2008 and the venue was Örenäs castle in the southern most part of Sweden. Örenäs is less than ten miles from the city of Landskrona and a half hour drive from Lund, the nearest university city.

The number of course participants was 29. In addition to the FLARE post-docs, a few post-docs from the ERA-AGE partners who did not participate in FLARE also joined in the course as well as a few post-docs from the Vårdal Institute. All participants, however, were active in the area of ageing research and had interest and/or experience in multi/cross-disciplinary research. Leading European experts were invited, covering academic fields such as demography, biogerontology, social gerontology, geriatrics, epidemiology/public health and psychology. Attention was also paid to career planning and European research funding strategies.

Alan Walker
Director, ERA-AGE

FLARE Summer School 2008 – A Learning Experience

The budget allocated directly by Congress is over $1 billion (2008). In Europe there is no comparable activity in terms of either mission or budget. ERA-AGE is the only coordination body but its resources are meagre in comparison with the US NIA. The fact that we were able to mount Europe’s first joint funded research programme on ageing – the FLARE Post-doctoral Programme – is a tribute to the prioritisation of ageing research in the eight member states that fund it (Austria, Finland, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Romania, Sweden and the UK). There are no resources for sustaining this programme or for creating a European infrastructure to coordinate ageing research.

Why is funding ageing research so critical? As recognised by the US, more than 30 years ago, if the added years of life resulting from the demographic bonus are to benefit both society and the individuals concerned, there must be a sound evidence-base on which to build policies and practices. In addition there is huge economic potential in the generation and development of new products (and markets) linked to the older population. A major commitment to ageing research is necessary also to attract and retain a new generation of scientists dedicated to this field. At present more generously funded research areas such as cancer attract large numbers of young scientists but, in fact, age is the major risk factor for cancer (and coronary heart disease and stroke) and it is vital to enlarge our understanding quickly of the precise role it plays.

As well as recognising the significance of ageing for both individuals and society through substantial funding it is crucial for Europe to act in a concerted way. First of all coordinated action in this field is essential to prevent, as far as possible, duplication of effort and to maximise added value from funding. Secondly Europe needs to maximise its research resources in this field by cooperation and the cross-national sharing of expertise, data and instruments. Some Member States are relatively new to ageing research or are too small to develop expertise in every aspect of it. Thirdly, in some specialist areas, including newly developing ones such as environmental gerontology and gerontechnology, collaboration across borders is the key to critical mass.

The case for ageing research and for European coordination will form part of a major conference on the future of ageing research to be held in Brussels in February 2009 (details on the ERA-AGE website).

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

The idea of a summer school was launched parallel to the discussion of the FLARE initiative. The purpose was to strengthen the network and community feeling among the FLARE post-docs, to promote multidisciplinary interests and to focus on career planning and development.

The summer school was organised and funded jointly by ERA-AGE, the Swedish Research Council for Working Life and Social Research and the Swedish Foundation for Health Care Science and Allergy Research (Vårdal Foundation) and the Vårdal Institute. The domestic planning group consisted of Kerstin Carlsson, Research Secretary, FAS, Kenneth Abrahamsson, Programme Director, FAS, and Professor Ingallf Rahm Hallberg, Vårdal Institute. It was held between Sunday June 22nd and Friday June 27th, 2008 and the venue was Örenäs castle in the southern most part of Sweden. Örenäs is less than ten miles from the city of Landskrona and a half hour drive from Lund, the nearest university city.
A Learning Experience

FLARE Summer School 2008 – A Learning Experience

GETTING TOGETHER AND STARTING UP

On Sunday evening all participants arrived, although not without problems and barriers such as lost luggage, a lost computer, delayed flights and cancelled train connections from Copenhagen Airport, Kastrup. The last person to arrive, having experienced several delays, was Professor Alan Walker, the coordinator of ERA-AGE and other major initiatives concerning ageing research in Europe during the last decades. Örenäs castle greeted the FLARE participants on early Monday morning with splendid weather – a blue sky and a blue waterfront provided a nice and creative context for blue-sky research. The organisation team – Kenneth Abrahamsson, Kerstin Čanić and Ingalli Rahn Halberg gave words of welcome followed by Alan Walker, who presented an overview of the ERA-AGE mission and the FLARE initiative to support future leaders of ageing research. We also shared ideas on the development of ageing research in the UK, the programme labelled The New Dynamics of Ageing, which is a joint investment by five British research councils (www.newdynamics.group.shet.ac.uk).

All participants had written abstracts, produced a poster and also gave a short introduction of their research projects after lunch on the first day. There was ample opportunity for individual presentations was, however, a bit short, just a few minutes. The presentations covered memory research, ethical issues concerning life quality in ageing societies, basic medical research on the pool of T-cells and how they develop over time. One theory mentioned was the selection effect and survival rates also need to be analysed. Another illuminating example was the annual death rate – how can we analyse differences in causes of death – how can we analyse differences between different age-cohorts with regard to life course and death. Is it possible to make semi-experiments or get close to natural experiments, e.g., during disasters and war? One example was from the Second World War in Holland where one part of the country was deprived of food. Issues of selection effect and survival rates also need to be analysed. Another illuminating example was the annual death rate – how can we analyse differences between different age-cohorts with regard to life course and death. Is it possible to make semi-experiments or get close to natural experiments, e.g., during disasters and war? One example was from the Second World War in Holland where one part of the country was deprived of food. Issues of selection effect and survival rates also need to be analysed.

The second working day also included a comparative outlook over research funding strategies with special focus on the Marie Curie Mobility Programme. Attention was also paid to career planning and career development in research, experiences from the European Science Foundation’s network on research careers as well as discussions on work life balance policies for scholars.

The third day of the Summer School started with a lecture and discussion together with Kaare Christensen, Professor in Epidemiology at University of Southern Denmark, Odense. His lecture focussed on three issues: why do we age so differently, which are the determinants of longevity and which are the possibilities of interventions due to the plasticity of human beings. How can you do research on how differences are being developed? Which are the natural experiments with human beings? What do we know about the causes of death – how can we analyse differences between different age-cohorts with regard to life course and death. Is it possible to make semi-experiments or get close to natural experiments, e.g., during disasters and war? One example was from the Second World War in Holland where one part of the country was deprived of food. Issues of selection effect and survival rates also need to be analysed. Another illuminating example was the annual death rate – how can we analyse differences between different age-cohorts with regard to life course and death. Is it possible to make semi-experiments or get close to natural experiments, e.g., during disasters and war? One example was from the Second World War in Holland where one part of the country was deprived of food.

Continued Discussion on How and Why We Age

Professor Mats Thorslund, Ageing Research Centre, Stockholm gave an overview of life expectancy in Sweden and other countries. Furthermore, he discussed the changes with regard to the relative proportion of gainfully employed persons and older citizens in need of costly social and medical support. Another part of Professor Thorslund’s lecture was various methods to assess ADL functions (activities of daily living), such as mobility issues; can you walk 100 metres, can you walk up stairs, rise from a chair, stand without support or are you bedridden? Similar tests were also made in the SVEOLD study, by defining various physical activities. Mats Thorslund also presented a conceptual model to study the support – in family or by the public sector – with regard to age and functional ability. A main part of the lecture reflected on value and quality of various methods to study and assess life quality and living conditions of very old citizens.

After the lunch break the FLARE Summer School continued its scientific journey into the brain and cognitive science or neuropsychology with the guidance of Professor Kristine E. Wahlöv, Centre for the Study of Human Cognition, University of Oslo. Her field covered cognitive development and cognitive change in a life-span perspective looking at individuals from seven years of age to 95. Two central concepts were cognition and plasticity.

Wahlöv gave strong empirical evidence on the falling cognitive capacity over the lifespan as tested by the Californian Verbal Learning Test. Age related differences could also be related to the difference between recall and recognition, which was illustrated by strong empirical evidence; semantic encoding as an exemplar psychological response is also a response increasing over time. One theory mentioned was speed of processing theory – older people become somewhat slower. On the other hand, the frontal lobe theories say that speed is not the whole explanation. There is a lot of complex and competing evidence in this sense. The final day of the FLARE Summer School included an expert lecture from Professor Janet Lord, Professor of Immune Cell Biology, at University of Birmingham, UK on ‘Immune senescence: an exemplar of physiological decline and why do people age differently?’ Janet Lord gave an inspiring introduction to theories and results from bio-medical studies on ageing and the interaction between genetic determinants, environment, nutrition, life style and social gradients of public health. She also discussed more fundamental scientific questions such as how the ageing process is reflected over the life-course, and why do people age differently?

CONTINUOUS DISCUSSIONS, GROUP WORK AND THEMATIC LECTURES

Tommy Bengtsson, Professor of Economic History, Centre for Economic Demography, Lund University held the first lecture. He discussed three major demographic challenges. The first challenge was population growth – a development that was described as a major threat to humanity during the 20th century, but that did not have the foreseen implications. The second threat – or challenge – was the development towards ageing societies and the lower fertility rates and increasing longevity. Thirdly, Tommy Bengtsson raised the issue of population decline in certain countries and the role of international migration.

The second working day also included a comparative outlook over research funding strategies with special focus on the Marie Curie Mobility Programme. Attention was also paid to career planning and career development in research, experiences from the European Science Foundation’s network on research careers as well as discussions on work life balance policies for scholars.

The third day of the Summer School started with a lecture and discussion together with Kaare Christensen, Professor in Epidemiology at University of Southern Denmark, Odense. His lecture focussed on three issues: why do we age so differently, which are the determinants of longevity and which are the possibilities of interventions due to the plasticity of human beings. How can you do research on how differences are being developed? Which are the natural experiments with human beings? What do we know about the causes of death – how can we analyse differences between different age-cohorts with regard to life course and death. Is it possible to make semi-experiments or get close to natural experiments, e.g., during disasters and war? One example was from the Second World War in Holland where one part of the country was deprived of food. Issues of selection effect and survival rates also need to be analysed. Another illuminating example was the annual death rate – how can we analyse differences between different age-cohorts with regard to life course and death. Is it possible to make semi-experiments or get close to natural experiments, e.g., during disasters and war? One example was from the Second World War in Holland where one part of the country was deprived of food.

The second working day also included a comparative outlook over research funding strategies with special focus on the Marie Curie Mobility Programme. Attention was also paid to career planning and career development in research, experiences from the European Science Foundation’s network on research careers as well as discussions on work life balance policies for scholars.

The third day of the Summer School started with a lecture and discussion together with Kaare Christensen, Professor in Epidemiology at University of Southern Denmark, Odense. His lecture focussed on three issues: why do we age so differently, which are the determinants of longevity and which are the possibilities of interventions due to the plasticity of human beings. How can you do research on how differences are being developed? Which are the natural experiments with human beings? What do we know about the causes of death – how can we analyse differences between different age-cohorts with regard to life course and death. Is it possible to make semi-experiments or get close to natural experiments, e.g., during disasters and war? One example was from the Second World War in Holland where one part of the country was deprived of food. Issues of selection effect and survival rates also need to be analysed. Another illuminating example was the annual death rate – how can we analyse differences between different age-cohorts with regard to life course and death. Is it possible to make semi-experiments or get close to natural experiments, e.g., during disasters and war? One example was from the Second World War in Holland where one part of the country was deprived of food.

The second working day also included a comparative outlook over research funding strategies with special focus on the Marie Curie Mobility Programme. Attention was also paid to career planning and career development in research, experiences from the European Science Foundation’s network on research careers as well as discussions on work life balance policies for scholars.

The third day of the Summer School started with a lecture and discussion together with Kaare Christensen, Professor in Epidemiology at University of Southern Denmark, Odense. His lecture focussed on three issues: why do we age so differently, which are the determinants of longevity and which are the possibilities of interventions due to the plasticity of human beings. How can you do research on how differences are being developed? Which are the natural experiments with human beings? What do we know about the causes of death – how can we analyse differences between different age-cohorts with regard to life course and death. Is it possible to make semi-experiments or get close to natural experiments, e.g., during disasters and war? One example was from the Second World War in Holland where one part of the country was deprived of food. Issues of selection effect and survival rates also need to be analysed. Another illuminating example was the annual death rate – how can we analyse differences between different age-cohorts with regard to life course and death. Is it possible to make semi-experiments or get close to natural experiments, e.g., during disasters and war? One example was from the Second World War in Holland where one part of the country was deprived of food.
A Learning Experience

HOW TO CREATE A FLARE COMMUNITY? IDEAS FROM THE GROUP PRESENTATIONS

The group presentations covered a number of interesting multi-disciplinary and cross-disciplinary fields. All groups were given the same point of departure, to identify research problems on ageing in Europe, focus on theoretical aspects in a multi-disciplinary context, propose a research design to analyse the problems, illuminate barriers to multidisciplinary research (MDR) and ways to overcome them, present a preliminary research plan (3-4 pages) and to describe a time budget. The project ideas suggested included new vulnerable groups and the interplay between formal and informal care, diabetes mellitus in older people, dementia prevention, quality of life in old age.

The second task was to analyse and discuss how conditions for individual research careers can be improved. Issues covered in the challenge were the role of research training and supervision and support, the work life balance issues, the post-doc identity, the role of international contacts, the impact of bibliometric stress, the need to connect to a team and the balance between scientific excellence and social relevance.

The final mission was to discuss ways and methods of future FLARE cooperation. How could a network be organised, do we need an internal FLARE website, role of future FLARE cooperation. How could a network be connect to a team and the balance between scientific competence and social relevance.

PREPARING THE NEXT GENERATION OF SCHOLARS – THE ROLE OF CAREER DEVELOPMENT

The FLARE post-doc initiative is a challenging experiment and a constructive method to foster international collaboration within the European Research Area. International collaboration, not only in Europe, but also in a global context is a field of development in most nations. The European Commission and the European Science Foundation support a lot of activities in this field. The European Research Council is one of the major instruments. Within the EU-programme PEOPLE, the Marie Curie Programme is another bridge building activity with the aim of supporting young scholars. In a Swedish context, the Vårdal Institute under the leadership of Professor Ingall Rham Hallberg, has developed a generic model for career development on the post-doc level, being applied among young scholars in the caring sciences. The Swedish Council for Working Life and Social Research, is now negotiating with the European Commission on a new initiative of international post-docs labeled Marie Curie Cotinul. It is our hope that this initiative can start from 2009. It would be open to all fields of research under FAS areas of responsibility, namely working life, public health, social security and welfare.

The strength of the FLARE initiative, however, is the aim to strengthen the professional identity (to take the step from being a post-doc to a senior scholar).