

Chile

Working across generations in academia to tackle ageism

One of a series of ten case studies summarised in HelpAge's guide, *Bringing generations together for change* →

The Gerópolis Centre of the University of Valparaíso (Chile) has pioneered the use of intergenerational approaches within a higher education setting. Through its activities led by older people and students, it brings ageing, ageism and older people's rights to the forefront of academia across all faculties.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Centre continued with its intergenerational approach despite the logistical challenges imposed by COVID-related public health measures. It worked with university departments to run a series of intergenerational knowledge exchanges. These led the younger and older participants to change their perceptions of each other through discussing their individual experiences of nationwide lockdown.



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What problem or issue did the project address?

The Gerópolis Centre (originally established in 2015 by the Ministry of Education) was set up in the context of an accelerated ageing demographic. Chile is the third oldest country in Latin America. In 2020, 12 per cent of its population was aged 65 years or over, and is projected to increase to more than 30 per cent by 2065. It has one of the lowest fertility rates in the region, and life expectancy at birth is more than 80 years (ECLAC →, 2018). In 2020, after the onset of the pandemic, the Centre rapidly adapted its activities to reflect the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on older people (in Chile, more than 80 per cent of those who died from COVID-19 were people aged 60 years or older). The Centre aims to promote spaces for intergenerational relations and for older people and younger people to come together to tackle ageism.



The Gerópolis Centre

What did the project aim to do?

The Gerópolis Centre aims to increase knowledge and understanding about ageing and older people. It has promoted academic initiatives led by more than 600 older people and 181 students, exploring ageing and ageism in an innovative, participatory and intergenerational way, rooted in a rights-based approach. It brings together younger and older people to discuss important issues such as how ageism is interlinked with sexism, leading to violence that becomes embedded in social norms and practices.

Its main activities are:

1. building alliances with other organisations and programmes that advocate for the rights of older people;
2. working with older people and public institutions on ageing issues and older people's rights;
3. incorporating ageing issues and older people's rights within curricula and in teacher training within the university; and
4. sharing knowledge through inter-faculty and inter-institutional projects designed and carried out by students and older people.

How did the project work?

In the midst of COVID-related restrictions, the Centre continued its activities by switching to remote delivery of academic modules and degree projects. It took an innovative approach to developing students' understanding of ageing issues, partly by incorporating content on ageing and ageism within the curriculum of all faculties, including those not linked to social and healthcare studies. For example, it supported students from the History, Philosophy and Social Sciences departments to arrange an intergenerational webinar series with older people from different parts of the country. The webinars promoted a connection between students and older people through dialogue and active listening.

The Centre works with a range of people. It supports students to design intergenerational projects but also 'teaches teachers' about why it is so important to incorporate an intergenerational perspective within the curriculum. For every initiative, the Centre ensures that at least two generations are involved at both the design and implementation stages to ensure that it fully reflects older people's lived experiences and perspectives.

For example, History and Social Sciences students reviewed the e-book, *Diario íntimo de Chile: major letters in times of pandemic*, published by the University and the Gerópolis Centre. The book collates daily entries of 387 older people from different regions of Chile. The letters cover various topics, from human rights and democracy to reflecting on memories. Their review was developed in two stages: first, the students read excerpts from the book to learn more about older people's experiences of lockdown during the pandemic; then, they met with the co-authors of the book to discuss it.

Another of the Centre's intergenerational initiatives is *Exclusion within Inclusion: Circle of Older Women*, led by psychologist and master's degree student, Evelyn Díaz. She brought together a group of women aged 60 years and over, who met eight times, to discuss and reflect on their lived experiences of old age and gender. The meetings invited participants to "think of ourselves as women", and discuss themes of vitality, affectivity, creativity, spirituality and sexuality. Alongside this, other students took part in a series of intergenerational discussions with members of the older women's Circle to share and reflect on the biggest issues that affect women's lives today, such as the persistence of gender as a form of structural violence throughout history. One such discussion, timed to commemorate International Women's Day, explored the theme 'Intergenerational sorority: an opportunity to re-signify the experience of ageing?' It highlighted the need to build solidarity and alliances between women of different ages, and to consider the feminisation of ageing.

What changes did the project achieve?

The Centre faced reluctance initially from certain government institutions and civil society organisations to accept older people as experts on ageing and rights. It overcame this by building strong alliances with these organisations over time, such that there is now widespread recognition of the importance of older people's perspectives and knowledge. This change is important, as the alliances ensure the sustainability of the Centre's work even when specific projects finish. Another achievement is changing relationships between the older and younger people who take part in its activities. Older participants who were involved in designing and implementing initiatives such as the older women's Circle and the diary letters reported feeling valued, heard and understood throughout.

Across all its activities, the Centre teaches students to adopt a rights-based perspective, tailored to older people, so that they graduate and become 'future leaders' with greater social awareness. The intergenerational spaces it creates are crucial to these achievements. For example, by reading the diary entries and subsequently meeting with the co-authors of the *Diario íntimo*, students were able to put themselves in older people's shoes – understanding their inner thoughts, experiences and fears.

This helped to break down age-based stereotypes and helped younger people to have a much greater awareness of older people's situation within society. As one student said:

"...a very important element of community life was learnt. In this case, listening to the voice of experience or what could be called 'living history'... Each day everyone can set aside time to understand and learn from the older people around us and thus include their perspective within our society."

Moreover, the intergenerational discussion on International Women's Day was an initial opportunity to create an alliance between younger and older women, whose voices are often less likely to be heard.

What worked well?

The growth of the Gerópolis Centre and its active presence across Valparaíso is testament to its overarching success. The curriculum developed jointly by the University and the Centre promotes greater understanding and respect between younger students and older people.

The Centre's collaborative approach is another success. It believes that to understand and share learning on ageing, ageism and older people's rights, there need to be discussions and exchanges between people of different ages and backgrounds, rather than a one-way teaching-learning process. To achieve this collaboration, it promotes a sense of ownership among the older people who take part in its activities. Its success in doing this is evidenced by the fact that many older people continue to be involved with the Centre's work long after their initial participation.



The Gerópolis Centre



What could have been done differently?

The Centre has grown rapidly, and while this is a clear sign of success, it has also brought certain challenges – not least a great deal more pressure on staff in terms of time and workload. Also, as a public organisation, it has to adhere to various policies and procedures, which can mean that progress is sometimes slow (for example, requesting funds to purchase resources for the initiatives takes time).

It is also important to acknowledge the limitations of the projects described above. For example, the *Diario íntimo de Chile* by nature required a high level of literacy from older participants, as well as access to technological equipment and Wi-Fi.

What can we learn from this project?

- Holding intergenerational discussions within higher education settings allows students to develop different perspectives on ageing, ageism and older people's rights, when they hear directly from older people about their lived experiences.
- The challenges of digital inclusion must be recognised. But for older people who can access the internet, online webinars are a good opportunity to connect with others, irrespective of where they live.
- It is vital to include people of different ages when designing and implementing activities that involve intergenerational exchanges. The more that older people are involved, the more relevant, accurate and successful the intergenerational project is likely to be. Every initiative must be developed side by side with older people. If not, it risks infantilising older people and rendering their realities invisible.
- The best way to reach more people to educate them about ageing, ageism and older people's rights is to work with other institutions and groups and build sustainable alliances with them.

This case study was developed with the support of the Gerópolis Centre of the University of Valparaíso in Chile. It is one in a series of ten case studies, produced in connection with HelpAge's guide, ***Bringing generations together for change*** →, published in collaboration with Restless Development and in support of the Global Campaign to Combat Ageism

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