

Ageism Prevention at Higher Education Institutions: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Ageism is a form of age discrimination (prejudices and unequal behaviour based on age), and it is widely spread in our organizations (also working and educational institutions). Older and younger people are often confronted with stereotypes tied to their experiences, competencies, and productivity. Our paper analyses how institutional politics unintentionally sustains ageism. We search for reforms and practices that encourage inclusive practices for people of different ages. The purpose of this paper is to examine how higher education institutions can prevent systemic ageism through educational interventions, intergenerational learning, and institutional practices that promote age inclusivity. We aim to offer good practice examples of how different educational institutions around the globe prepare their students to be leaders who treat their staff and clients with dignity. The study is based on a narrative review of scientific and professional literature addressing ageism in higher education, age-friendly educational practices, and institutional strategies aimed at fostering intergenerational inclusion. Special attention is given to examples of good practice from higher education institutions. These practices are analysed as potential tools for reducing systemic ageism and preparing students to become future leaders who treat colleagues, staff, and clients of all ages with dignity and respect. The paper contributes to a better understanding of how higher education can function as a key driver in the prevention of ageism through education and institutional change.

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Keywords: ageism, dignity, youth, management, education

1 Introduction

Ageism is recognized as one of the most pervasive and socially accepted forms of discrimination, stereotyping, and prejudice against different generation groups based on their age, often in subtle and context-dependent ways (Voss, Bodner, & Rothermund, 2018). Negative attitudes and discriminatory behaviours based on age are widespread across societies, though estimates may vary due to differences in measurement approaches and tools (Ayalon et al., 2019). As global populations age rapidly, understanding and addressing this pervasive bias becomes increasingly important for promoting inclusive social structures and minimizing its harmful consequences (Wilson, Errasti-Ibarrondo & Low, 2019). However, ageism is a form of discrimination that shapes social attitudes and practices across fields, affecting both older and younger people alike, suggesting that it operates as a multidirectional phenomenon embedded in broader social systems (Hagestad & Uhlenberg, 2005). Unlike other forms of prejudice, ageism affects individuals across the entire lifespan, targeting all age groups of people depending on their social, economic, and cultural contexts (Bratt, Abrams, & Swift, 2020). Age-based stereotypes are present in everyday social interactions, including workplaces, healthcare, and education, with negative impacts on individuals' social cohesion (Fullen, 2018). Ageism is not just an abstract prejudice but a lived, routinized phenomenon affecting health and well-being in later life (Allen et al., 2022). It is also linked with worse psychological well-being among older adults, including increased risk of depression, anxiety, and reduced life satisfaction. (Kang & Kim, 2022). While researches predominantly focus on ageism toward older adults, literature suggests that younger individuals can also be targets of age-based prejudice ("youngism"), which has been associated with negative social judgments and discriminatory behaviours (Francioli & North, 2021). However, this area remains underexplored, particularly in relation to its psychological and social consequences across different contexts. Further sociological research demonstrates that ageism may also appear in subtler form, where seemingly positive or protective attitudes toward older adults still reinforce dependency assumptions and unequal power relations within institutional contexts (Zhang, 2025).

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Bratt et al.'s (2018) sociological work emphasizes how the structural, intentional separation of the older and younger people in social institutions and everyday life can reinforce ageist attitudes and limit meaningful intergenerational contact between different age groups, creating a cycle where stereotypes and exclusion dominate (Bratt et al., 2018). Meanwhile, recent studies documenting anti-ageism programs around the world show a growing recognition of the problem and efforts to counter it, but also highlight a critical gap, and that is that very few studies actually measure how effective these approaches really are (Sánchez-Izquierdo, García-Sánchez, & Fernández-Ballesteros, 2022).

This literature review therefore aims to identify and analyse existing intervention-based approaches within higher education contexts. This is a significant omission given that universities and colleges are important major sites for creating and shaping social attitudes and professional norms for individuals (Gerdes, Naeyegele, Ordemann, & Hess, 2025).

Addressing and researching this gap matters because, higher education institutions have unique capacities through teaching, community engagement, and researching to shape intergenerational inclusion and equip future professionals with the knowledge and attitudes needed to counter age discrimination in broader society in a more ethical way (Scrivano &

McCulloch, 2022). Forster-Holt and Clark (2024) address the lack of interventions aimed at reducing ageism in business education, therefore they designed an intervention to encourage reflection on participants' own stereotypes about aging and to bridge the generational divide. Identifying what educational approaches are proposed or already implemented globally, and understanding their strengths and limitations, can inform institutions and improve good practices in universities and other institutions, seeking to promote respect and equity across age groups (Montepare & Farah, 2020).

Existing literature on educational and interventional approaches to reduce ageism highlights intergenerational contact, experiential learning, and structured education as promising approaches for reducing age-based stereotypes (Bayyar, Daşbaşı, & Fang, 2025). Additionally, lifespan aging education has been identified as essential for promoting accurate knowledge about aging, fostering positive attitudes across generations, and challenging ageist stereotypes before they become internalized. Such education should continue throughout the life course to support more realistic and optimistic understandings of aging (McGuire, 2017). Carefully designed collaborative learning models, that will also be mentioned later, demonstrate potential in fostering reciprocal relationships between younger and older participants and guiding future ageism education and intervention efforts, while reshaping how ageing is commonly perceived (Fernandes et al., 2022).

2 Educational Approaches to Prevent Ageism at Higher Education Institutions

Higher education institutions play a key role in preventing ageism, as they influence attitudes of future professionals and enable contact between different age groups. Since ageism is a socially learned phenomenon that develops across the lifespan it can be addressed through structured educational interventions (Hagestad & Uhlenberg, 2005). However, it can be reduced through structured educational interventions that challenge stereotypes and promote reflective thinking (McGuire, 2017; Burnes et al., 2019). Universities are particularly suitable environments for prevention because they combine formal learning, critical reflection, and social interaction (Burnes et al., 2019).

Literature on educational approaches to reducing ageism suggests that some interventions are implemented within university courses or curricula. Courses that include content on ageing and age diversity are shown to reduce ageist attitudes, particularly when ageing is presented as a heterogeneous and socially embedded process rather than decline (Bartlett, Solomon, & Gellis, 2021). However, research suggests that knowledge based teaching alone has limited impact if not combined with reflective or experiential elements (Güzel, 2025). Participatory educational workshops that combine information about ageism with discussion and creative engagement activities have been shown to significantly improve familiarity with the concept of ageism and promote more positive age-related perceptions among students (Suberry et al., 2025).

Intergenerational learning is recognized as a promising strategy for addressing ageism in higher education. Research shows that meaningful contact between younger and older adults can reduce age-based stereotypes and improve attitudes towards people (Rowe et al., 2020). Intergenerational initiatives also enhance cross-generational understanding, empathy, and confidence in interacting, while offering mutual social and educational benefits for both groups (Gonçalves, Hatton-Yeo, & Farcas, 2016). Such experiences are particularly effective when they involve direct interaction and

collaboration, allowing participants to exchange perspectives, challenge misconceptions, and build more realistic understandings of later life (Hand et al., 2025). These studies also state that ageism prevention should not be limited to individual courses but embedded at the institutional level. Age-inclusive policies, learning opportunities, and visible age diversity within institutions are therefore identified as important structural components of prevention (Araujo, Cid, & Sousa, 2025).

2.1 Literature Review Methodology

A review of literature was conducted in March and April 2026 discovering what is known about educational approaches to preventing ageism in higher education. The aim was to identify existing interventions, their characteristics, and reported outcomes. Included studies were published within the past 10 years, peer-reviewed publications, and research written in English. A systematic search was carried out in the databases ERIC, ProQuest, and Web of Science using combinations of keywords: *ageism*, *age discrimination*, *higher education*, *intergenerational learning*, and/or *educational interventions*.

Both quantitative and qualitative empirical studies were included in order to capture a broader range of methodological approaches. A total of 72 studies (n=72) were initially identified across selected databases. After removal of duplicates and initial screening based on titles and abstracts, 41 studies (n=41) were excluded due to lack of relevance to educational interventions on ageism, leaving 31 full-text articles (n=31) for further assessment. Following full-text screening, 26 studies (n=26) were excluded as they did not meet the inclusion criteria (e.g., theoretical focus, or lack of relevance to higher education settings). Ultimately, 5 studies (n=5) were included in the final analysis.

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3 Findings

To provide an overview of the selected studies, three core components were identified and analysed for each: the study purpose, the sample and methodological approach, and finally the contribution of each study conducted. This approach allows for a clearer comparison of how different studies address ageism within educational contexts and highlights the key strategies and interventions identified across the literature.

Table 1: Findings from studies related to ageism prevention at higher education institutions

Author, year	Study purpose	Sample	Method	Educational intervention approaches
Mihevc, Grušovnik Mušič, & Rotar Pavlič (2024)	To understand educators' role and impact in preventing ageism and raising awareness.	146 educators from nursing and health science faculties (Slovenia); data collected through an online questionnaire.	Cross-sectional questionnaire study.	Educators agreed that teaching about ageing could reduce age discrimination. However, many lacked awareness of their preventive role and saw opportunities to update curricula.

Cheung et al. (2024)	To test whether a theory-based intergenerational participatory co-design intervention reduces ageist attitudes among students.	19 students and 6 older adults aged 60–74 (China - Hong Kong); data collected through an intergenerational intervention with focus group discussions and pre-post questionnaires.	Mixed-method intergenerational intervention study.	Significant improvement in students' attitudes toward older adults after the intervention. Qualitative results identified three mechanisms of change: stereotype reduction, perception shift, and cross-age relational adjustment. Findings support structured intergenerational collaboration as an effective anti-ageism strategy in education.
Carmen, S.M. (2012).	To explore whether intergenerational practices can reduce social marginalization of older adults.	200 young adults aged 20–35 and 30 older adults aged 65–80 (Romania); data collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews.	Mixed-method study using questionnaires and interviews.	Younger people with lower education levels and less intergenerational contact expressed more negative attitudes. Older adults reported stigmatization in healthcare, public spaces, transport, and family contexts. Intergenerational practices were identified as a key strategy for reducing ageism.
Fukase et al. (2021)	To examine whether ageism among allied health students influences stereotypical evaluations of elderly and non-elderly individuals.	123 allied health students (Japan); data collected through a standardized ageism questionnaire.	Quantitative group comparison study.	Students with higher ageism (high FSA-J) showed more negative personality evaluations overall, not only toward elderly individuals. No significant difference in ageism scores between display conditions. Findings suggest ageism may reflect broader personality-linked prejudice, indicating education should address general evaluative tendencies, not only attitudes toward older adults.
Lytle, Nowacek & Levy (2020)	To test an educational intervention reducing ageism via intergenerational contact.	132 undergraduate students (United States); students participated in structured online interactions with older adults aged 65+.	Experimental intergenerational intervention study.	Students participating in Instapals showed significant reductions in ageism compared to control group. Positive intergenerational contact and education about aging contributed to improved attitudes toward older adults.

				*The Instapals program used in Lytle et al. (2020) is an online intergenerational intervention where students and older adults engage in structured digital conversations over several weeks. The program combines guided interaction with educational content about ageing, which has been shown to significantly reduce ageist attitudes.
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Across the reviewed studies, interventions included structured intergenerational contact (e.g., collaborative co-design sessions between students and older adults), online interaction programs such as Instapals, participatory workshops combining education and reflection, and curriculum-based teaching on ageing. These approaches varied in format but shared the goal of reducing stereotypes through direct engagement, reflection, and increased knowledge. The reviewed literature highlights curriculum-based teaching, participatory workshops, and structured interaction with older adults as key educational approaches supporting more positive perceptions of ageing.

4 Discussion

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Across the analysed studies, educational intervention approaches were associated with improvements in students' attitudes toward older adults, particularly when learning extended beyond theoretical content and included interaction with older participants. These findings are consistent with previous research highlighting the importance of combining knowledge-based education with experiential and reflective learning approaches in order to effectively reduce ageist attitudes among students (Güzel, 2025; Burnes et al., 2019). Similarly, earlier literature emphasises that ageing-related education is most effective when it presents ageing as a socially embedded process (Bartlett et al., 2021).

The results of this review further support the role of intergenerational learning as one of the promising strategies for addressing ageism in higher education. Studies included in the analysis demonstrated that structured opportunities for interaction between younger and older adults contributed to improved perceptions and reduced stereotypes. These findings correspond with previous research showing that meaningful intergenerational contact can strengthen empathy, mutual understanding, and confidence in cross-generational interaction (Rowe et al., 2020; Gonçalves et al., 2016; Hand et al., 2025).

Examples of interventions identified in the reviewed studies include intergenerational co-design projects (Cheung et al., 2024), online intergenerational dialogue programs such as Instapals (Lytle et al., 2020), reflective workshops for students (Suberry et al., 2025), and curriculum updates aimed at increasing educators' awareness of their role in preventing ageism (Mihevc et al., 2024). These examples illustrate diverse but complementary approaches that can be adapted by higher education institutions.

Despite these encouraging findings, the literature reveals several important limitations. Most identified studies relied on short-term evaluations and self-reported attitude measures, which is consistent with broader observations that many ageism-reduction interventions are evaluated primarily through immediate attitudinal change rather than long-term behavioural outcomes (Burnes et al., 2019). This highlights the need for future research examining the sustainability of intervention effects over time.

Finally, another important observation relates to the populations targeted by the interventions. The reviewed studies focused primarily on reducing ageism toward older adults, while intervention-based research addressing ageism toward younger people in higher education settings was not identified within the scope of this review. This finding is particularly relevant considering that ageism operates as a multidirectional phenomenon across the life course and may affect individuals of different age groups in different institutional contexts (Bratt et al., 2020).

5 Conclusion

This literature review examined educational intervention approaches used to address ageism in higher education and identified five empirical studies meeting the inclusion criteria. Across the analysed studies, intergenerational learning activities and structured educational content about ageing were the most frequently used approaches and were associated with improved attitudes toward older adults. Beyond individual-level interventions, the findings highlight the importance of institutional change. Higher education institutions can reduce systemic ageism by integrating ageing education into curricula, supporting intergenerational programs, promoting age-diverse teaching staff, and adopting age-inclusive policies. Such structural changes reinforce the long-term sustainability of anti-ageism efforts. At the same time, the review showed that intervention-based research in this field remains limited. All identified studies focused on reducing ageism toward older adults, while no intervention-based studies addressing ageism toward younger people in higher education settings were identified within the selected sample.

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