

Uitnodiging

Openbare verdediging tot het behalen van de academische graad van

DOCTOR IN DE ECONOMISCHE WETENSCHAPPEN

door Axana Dalle

“Making grey okay: Explaining the effectiveness of policies in boosting employment among the 50+”

Promotor:
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Samenvatting

In light of the ageing population and the pressure this places on the social security system, the sustainable inclusion of older workers has become a pressing policy priority. However, the persistently low employment rate of this group reveals deep-seated barriers. This dissertation specifically addresses the barriers on the demand side of the labour market, as it is intolerable that older individuals who wish to work are often denied the opportunity by employers, despite being both socially and economically essential.

Therefore, this dissertation builds upon existing literature on age discrimination by exploring two under-examined aspects. On the one hand, we analyse the contextual spread of age discrimination to identify the specific situations in which policy interventions should be prioritised, enhancing their efficiency. On the other hand, we seek to explain the impact of current labour market programmes, with the aim of better aligning policy measures with the underlying mechanisms of discrimination, thereby improving their effectiveness.

Regarding the first topic, we conducted a large-scale correspondence experiment, complemented by administrative data on 26 contextual variables on the demand side (Chapter 2). Our findings indicate that none of these variables is significantly associated with the level of age discrimination. As a result, we argue that broadly applicable interventions – rather than narrowly targeted ones – should be developed to challenge negative age stereotypes, as these seem to be pervasive across different demand-side contexts.

With respect to the second topic, we conducted three vignette experiments to examine the effectiveness of three different labour market programmes. One such programme, which provides subsidies to employers who hire older jobseekers, was analysed as an example of an active and demand-oriented labour market initiative (Chapter 4). Our results suggest that such subsidies may inadvertently reinforce certain age-related stereotypes, which undermines the intended positive impact of the subsidies or even produces paradoxical outcomes. Furthermore, we examined the effect of apprenticeship training later in life, an active and supply-oriented programme that might counter ageist stereotypes about diminished trainability, technological skills, and flexibility (Chapter 5). While our findings indicate that these underlying stereotypes are not effectively challenged, such training does have a positive impact on hiring prospects. Moreover, jobseekers aged 55 years and over appear to benefit even more in terms of hiring prospects compared to those in their thirties, which suggests that such training can offer a way out of discrimination.

Finally, we explored the impact of a passive labour market programme, in which older unemployed workers receive a company supplement in addition to their regular unemployment benefits, given the low reemployment rate of these participants (Chapter 3). Our results show that employers perceive them as at least as attractive as other jobseekers of the same age without the company supplement. Interestingly, long-term unemployed participants even experience some advantages, as the programme helps mitigate the stigma associated with long-term unemployment. This suggests that the low activation rate is not driven by hiring discrimination, but rather points to other factors.

Taken together, this dissertation provides valuable insights for academics, policymakers, employers, and older jobseekers, contributing to the development of a labour market that is better equipped to address the challenges posed by an ageing population.

Curriculum vitae

Axana Dalle (°Brugge, 1995) behaalde tweemaal met grote onderscheiding de graad van Bachelor in het bedrijfsmanagement aan de Hogeschool Gent: in 2017 voor de afstudeerrichting KMO-management en in 2018 voor de afstudeerrichting marketing. In 2020 verwierf ze met de grootste onderscheiding de graad van Master in de communicatiewetenschappen (afstudeerrichting communicatiemanagement) aan de Universiteit Gent.

Na deze studies ging Axana aan de slag als doctoraal onderzoeker aan de Faculteit Economie en Bedrijfskunde van de Universiteit Gent. Sinds 2021 is ze ook verbonden aan het Fonds Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek (FWO) nadat ze via een competitieve procedure een prestigieuze beurs wist te bemachtigen voor haar doctoraatsonderzoek rond discriminatie en stigmatisering van oudere werkzoekenden en de effectiviteit van arbeidsmarktprogramma's die hierop inspelen.

Haar studies werden gepubliceerd in gerenommeerde academische tijdschriften zoals *Socio-Economic Review*, *Journal of Population Economics* en *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*. Daarnaast presenteerde Axana haar onderzoekswerk op verschillende internationale congressen waaronder de *Worldwide Society of Labor Economists Conference* (Canada), de *European Association for Labour Economists Conference* (Italië) en de *European Society for Population Economics Conference* (Servië). Tevens informeerde ze ook andere belangengroepen zoals de OESO, Unia en de Vlaamse Ouderenraad. Haar onderzoeksresultaten trokken brede aandacht in de nationale media en werden bovendien mee in overweging genomen door de huidige Vlaamse minister van Werk, Zuhair Demir, bij de hervorming van de aanwervingssubsidies.