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Generations researching together: how age diversity drives (and challenges) science in universities



A study by UAB researchers examines how intergenerational coexistence is reshaping university research through the COIIN project. Based on a large survey, the study shows that age diversity enriches scientific work and improves the work experience, but also highlights organizational and inclusion shortcomings. The findings point to the need to strengthen intergenerational environments to foster innovation and professional development.

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Today's universities increasingly bring together researchers of different ages and career stages. This intergenerational coexistence is not just a demographic matter, but a fundamental organizational challenge. The combination of accumulated experience and fresh perspectives can enrich scientific production, but it also generates tensions related to work styles, career expectations, and hierarchical structures.

The COIIN project (Intergenerational Organizational Culture in Research Centers and Teams), funded by the Ministry of Science, Innovation, and Universities (ref. PID2023-148993NB-I00), analyzes the relationship established between intergenerational organizational culture and the performance and professional development of university

research staff. A recently published report in the UAB Digital Documents Repository (https://ddd.uab.cat/record/328678) presents preliminary results from an extensive survey conducted among 1,473 researchers, offering a detailed overview of how research teams function and the key role that generational diversity plays within them.

The analyzed sample accurately reflects the diversity of the university system. The average age is 48, with an average of over 18 years of experience, indicating a mature yet heterogeneous population that includes both established researchers and younger profiles. The gender distribution is relatively balanced, with a slight male majority.

The preliminary results of this first phase of COIIN depict a solid research system in scientific terms, with productive teams, recognized leadership, and a clear orientation toward learning. However, it also reveals significant challenges: improving internal organization, increasing internationalization, and strengthening intergenerational inclusion at the institutional level.

The analysis of intergenerational relations reveals very positive outcomes. Researchers enjoy working with colleagues from different generations and believe that these interactions enhance their work experience. Nevertheless, these personal attitudes toward generational diversity are more positive than the perception of the organizational context, indicating that there is still room for improvement in creating truly inclusive environments.

Coexistence between generations emerges as a key resource for the future of university research. Leveraging this diversity involves not only managing conflicts or differences, but also enhancing the exchange of knowledge, experiences, and perspectives.

In short, university science is increasingly built as an intergenerational space, where dialogue between ages is not only inevitable but essential for innovation, progress, and responding to the social and scientific challenges of the present.

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