

Ageing in Literature: Global South and Global North Perspectives

Project Evaluation

**Ageing in Literature: Global South and Global North Perspectives,
International Online Pilot Course**

Designed and delivered by
Queen's University's Open Learning Programme
and UNESCO Chair in Vulnerability Studies

With funding from: Queen's University, Belfast,
Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) scheme

EVALUATION

By Dr Elena Bergia, Anthropologist and independent evaluator,
With a literature review by Tess Maginess and Pramod Nayar

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1. Context

Purpose of the evaluation

The pilot course, “Ageing in Literature: Global South and Global North perspectives” explored the portrayal of ageing in selected literary texts from the Global South and the Global North. The course had both a theoretical, and a practical/pedagogical goal. From a theoretical point of view, the course aimed to explore the possible impact of material, social, and cultural factors on the experience of ageing in different parts of the world, while also providing the students with a framework for the analysis of literary representations of ageing. From a practical/pedagogical point of view, the course aimed to foster intergenerational and intercultural exchange between the two student cohorts, and to embed a collaborative, intercultural approach into the course, at the levels of planning and organization, teaching and learning, and course evaluation.

The purpose of this evaluation is to assess the effectiveness of the course from a theoretical and a pedagogical perspective using a qualitative approach, and to provide recommendations for future iterations of the course.

Methodology

Qualitative research aims to understand the *meanings* that individuals or social groups attribute to an experience, occurrence, or social phenomenon (Abdullah Kamal 2019: 1387). These meanings are inferred from observable behaviour and from the analysis of how the social agents narrate their own experiences. In qualitative research, the main instrument for data analysis and data collection is the researcher her/himself

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(Ibid.). The data used in qualitative evaluation may derive from semi-structured interviews, direct observations, and written documents. The goal of qualitative evaluation is to answer the question, has this course (or policy initiative, organisational change, political strategy) “achieved its anticipated goals?” (Bryman 2008: 42).

The data on which this evaluation is based were gathered from:

- Semi-structured interviews with stakeholders, Professor Maginess and Professor Nayar (the course instructors), and Dr. Ferrieri (the website designer), and follow-up email exchanges;
- The students’ evaluation forms distributed at the end of the course, the students’ comments on the Teams platform during the sessions, and some email exchanges between students and teachers;
- The observation of two recorded sessions, namely, the first and the final session of the course.

Background to the course

The online pilot course, **Ageing in Literature: Global South and Global North** was developed as a result of an ongoing informal collaboration between Hyderabad University, India and Queen’s University, Belfast. There was a common understanding that ageing was a topic of huge significance in both the Global South and Global North, and both Professor Pramod K. Nayar and Professor Tess Maginess had published on this topic (Falcus, Hartung and Medina, eds. 2023; Maginess, ed. 2018), thus offering a scholarly foundation for developing a short pilot course.

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Professor Anna Kurian, Hyderabad University, joined the teaching team. Funding was sought and obtained from Queen's University Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, through their COIL scheme (Collaborative Online International Learning). Thanks to this welcome funding, Dr. Federica Ferrieri, Queen's University, was engaged as website designer.

It was agreed that the free pilot be offered to Open Learning (adult education) students at Queen's University, Belfast, and Master's literature students at Hyderabad. This allowed the course designers to enact an intergenerational model, enabling knowledge exchange between older Queen's students and younger Hyderabad students. The international dimension was also very important, facilitating knowledge exchange regarding differences and similarities between Global South and Global North.

The course took several months to plan; this involved refining the syllabus, designing assignments, deciding on the teaching format and scheduling. The course was formally approved through the Queen's University's Open Learning Programme protocol. The course merited 5 CATS points at level 1 within the Queen's accreditation system and one credit at Master's level within the Hyderabad system.

The course was publicly advertised in Queen's Open Learning brochure and within Hyderabad University, and ran from January to February 2024, on Tuesdays, for five weeks, allowing for time differences. Twenty-seven students registered for the course, with 12 from Queen's University and 15 from Hyderabad. A Microsoft Teams link was set up and shared with the students by Professor Maginess, together with the link to the website designed by Dr. Ferrieri.

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Aims of the course

The course Director, Professor Tess Maginess, articulated the aims of the course as follows:

For young people, poems, stories and plays about ageing allow a glimpse into an 'otherworld' and will, hopefully, challenge negative stereotypes and foster understanding and compassion in relation to the challenges and liberations of later life. For older people, literature valorises and pays tribute to their experience – so often overlooked. We can see literature on aging as forming a natural strand in interdisciplinary fields like Medical Humanities and Literary Gerontology, where we learn not just about the science of conditions but the *lived experience*. And for this course, we have a chance to exchange knowledge and experience between young and older people, and to explore how ageing is represented – both similarities and contrasts – in literature from Global South and Global North. Hopefully, that will contribute to cultural understanding – as we 'inter-read' each others' cultures and learn, also, how writers have revealed the reality of ageing in such complex and profound words.

2. Literature Review

The project can be situated within intersecting scholarly fields; ageing studies and gerontology, Global South literature, comparative literature (Global South and Global North) and medical humanities, where literature offers a critical prism for analysing constructions of ageing.

The emergence of ageing as a Global topic

There is now a booming public discourse in India and in the Global North on the 'greying' of the population. This is one of the key topics of our time. Scholars from a number of fields have produced reports on such topics as demographic change (going back to the 1970s), ageing in cities with the migration of younger generations, and the representation of old age as a 'problem'.

This viewpoint is often stridently expressed in tropes of ageing as a pandemic, a tsunami and of older people as a burden (Zeilig, 2014). Older people are, thus 'constructed' as negative consumers of scarce resources (Foucault, 1977).

This negative and cruel view is not new; see for instance how the Anglo-Irish writer, Jonathan Swift (1726; 2008, pp. 226-228), depicts old people who cannot die, and will "engross the civil power. . . [which] must end in the ruin of the public".

Many States and countries have not prepared well and there is a tendency to throw the 'problem' back on to private individuals and families. Advertisements abound for assisted living homes and residential care homes. Contributing to this view of older people as a burden, is the lack of public policy response to the related issue of the changing nature of families. Now women, in both the Global South and Global North, are working outside the home, children are going away to school and university and the traditional model of families as intergenerational and interdependent is no longer tenable.

Allied to this very negative and prejudicial view of older people as always in need of care is the association of the state of ageing with decline. This deficit model is linked to a medical model perspective where fixing or remediating the effects of age is tantamount. And, because many States see older people as a drain on resources,

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there is an increasing trend towards the privatization of care – older people are often made to feel that they are somehow responsible for their own ageing. Linked to this is the rise of the anti-ageing industry, in which a thousand claims for a thousand creams urge older people to spend lavishly on cosmetic ‘solutions’ which mask the ‘appearance’ of wrinkles.

While populist discourse and policy augur a poor future for older people, challenges to the crass and myopic ‘othering’ of older people are being articulated. The emergence of gerontology, ageing studies and interdisciplinary scholarship evinces a welcome debate on how we regard older people. Influential thinkers like Segal (2013) have advocated intergenerational solidarity and a recognition of interdependency. Van Gennip et al (2016), argue that caregiving should not confine attention to health- related issues but should pay attention to the ‘personhood’ of the older person.

There is also a rise in caregiver narratives – a perspective not before much thought of. We now know more about the once silent voices of caregivers and the challenges they face (Varela et al, 2011, Vernooij-Dassen and Moniz Cook, 2016). And there is more literature now too about the gifts as well as deficits of ageing (Spahr; Maginess, 2012).

We also have seen the emergence of ‘patient narratives’ and a more rights-based approach. Brannelly (2016) and Lanoix (2007) argue that being a citizen, being part of your neighbourhood or community, is based on being relational and human to others, rather than conditional on independence and ‘productivity’.

We hear more now about “ageing with dignity’, the rights of the aged. In this more social model orientation, there is also the public discourse on spaces for the

aged – whether safe homes or pedestrian-friendly spaces in communities. Stories of elder abuse are now more common in public discourse (Mander, 2015). And a lot more data is now available about the topic in the Global South as well as the Global North. See, for example, Bin Basheer and Raj *Kaur*, *undated*, <https://ucvulnerabilitystudies.uohyd.ac.in/resources-for-ageing-in-india-an-annotated-bibliography>.

The emergence of ageing as a literary topic

There has been, in the past twenty years, a great expansion of literary representations of ageing from memoir and autobiography to poetry and fiction. Such representations have revealed the lived experience of ageing. Contingently, we have seen the rise of literary gerontology, or gerontological narratives. The critical commentary on such texts may contain references to medication, tests and other aspects, the narratives shy away from medicalizing ageing, following, rather, a social model which draws attention to how society can marginalize, stigmatise and ‘other’ older people.

Within creative literature, it is possible to identify four basic models or theoretical substructures (Maginess, 2023):

- The decline narrative (most common in popular culture and political discourse, an internalised anxiety among older people and in poets like Eavan Boland).
- The successful ageing narrative (Swinnen, 2018; Gullette, 2017) in poets like Maya Angelou).
- The geotranscendent perspective (Tornstam, 2005; McMullan and Smiles, 2016). This often focuses on how the ageing artist/writer reflects upon his own predicament and addresses, sometimes, late creativity and changes in style and content.

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- A complex view of age which recognises decline but also growth (this is seen very clearly in Yeats and Heaney and in poets like Billy Collins).

Creative literature also situates perspectives on ageing within sociological, political, and economic contexts. The experiences of age represented by literary texts are, therefore, often intersectoral. Thus, the experience of ageing is often inflected or even governed by factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, and poverty. And changing family attitudes sometimes involving a conflict between duty and individual freedom, the cost of looking after an elder as opposed to the gifts that an older person may bring to a family.

The older persons are, in some texts, represented as necessary for the grandchildren, for instance, wise, participatory (in the everyday life of the family). Family is sometimes represented as a recuperative space, but at other times, as a site for contention. Literary texts like Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters* (2002) study the impact of ageing on the entire family, from caregiving to behaviour (the cantankerous behaviour of the older person, for example) and the dynamics within the family. In India, for example, as well as in some other cultures, the belief that grown-up children should care for their older parents just as their parents cared for them when they were children is implicit in both public discourse and literature – the use of the term 'sewa', meaning service, in this context, highlights this connotation of duty, responsibility and service. Some of the literature also focuses on family expectations from the ageing persons/persons with 'chronic forgetting' (Stephen Post's term for dementia), where these expectations often exclude them from the family. Personhood and its breakdown with ageing is a not uncommon theme, as viewed from a range of perspectives within the network of family relationships.

And, in relation to older people themselves, contemporary public discourse has considerable advice on insurance and health services costs for aging persons, building on the assumption and fear that there will never be enough financial stability for the later years. Debates and accounts of institutionalization of the greying population have also appeared in the last two decades. And, if they become unwell in the Global North, older people are increasingly 'warehoused' in residential homes, ironically, staffed increasingly by young women from the Global South.

3. Findings

The perspectives of the facilitators

The interviews with the course directors, Professor Nayar and Professor Maginess, explored an ample range of topics, ranging from the course relevance in relation to the SDGs, the European Social Charter, and the concept of civic responsibility, to organisational and technical aspects, challenges and successes in terms of teaching experience and partnership, and pedagogical and theoretical effectiveness of the course. The interview with the website designer, Dr. Federica Ferrieri, focussed more specifically on technical aspects, while also touching upon some of the above-mentioned theoretical and pedagogical issues.

All the interviewees felt that the topic of the course is consciously aligned with the **Sustainable Development Goals and the European Social Charter**, and more broadly, with concepts within the literature on the roles and purposes of universities which valorise civic responsibility and social engagement and the Public Humanities.

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Professor Nayar argued that the course topic is 'at the heart of what the SDGs aim to do' in terms of the overall ageing of the population across the world. Professor Maginess pointed out that one of the impulses behind the creation of the course is her own and Professor Nayar's 'strong commitment' to the European Social Charter, the SDGs, and concepts of the engaged university and public humanities, not just on an 'intellectual' level, but also in terms of reflecting these end goals in the curriculum. These concepts and values are crucial to the work of Professor Nayar as UNESCO Chair of Precarity and Sustainability, and to Queen's University, Belfast's *Strategy 2030*, which places a strong emphasis on the social purposes of academia. This strategy is at the core of the Social Engagement Projects that Queen's Open Learning organises.

A crucial topic discussed in the interviews was the **pedagogical aspect** of the course. Professors Nayar and Maginess, who designed and delivered the course, and Dr. Ferrieri, who was involved since the early stages of the course elaboration, engaged in very thoughtful conversations with the evaluator on the learning outcomes, the teaching experience and teaching methods, the materials and organisation of the course, the website and its functions, and student engagement. The interviews made it evident that the pedagogical element of the course had been carefully examined, discussed, and negotiated among the course teachers, Professors Nayar, Maginess and Kurian. The most experimental element of the course, from a pedagogical perspective, was the decision to combine two quite different student cohorts: Open Learning (adult education) students at Queen's University, Belfast, and Master's literature students at Hyderabad University. These two cohorts differ in terms of age, educational background, geographical origin, lived experiences, and academic expectations. The decision to offer the course to such different student

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cohorts is very interesting from a pedagogical point of view, as it subverts the commonly accepted 'rule' prescribing a (relatively) homogeneous student cohort. This decision presented specific challenges.

Both Professor Nayar and Professor Maginess argued that the course was very successful in terms of **student learning and engagement** with the subject matter. Professor Nayar argued that, for the young Master's students from the University of Hyderabad University, the course was in fact 'revelatory', in that it opened a whole 'domain', particularly on an experiential level. The interaction with the Open Learning students in class was, in his view, effective in that it allowed the younger students in Hyderabad to hear the direct experiences of the older students in Belfast. Professor Nayar also pointed out that the students in Hyderabad University are used, and expect, theoretically rigorous teaching, which provides them with the tools to interpret literary texts from different theoretical perspectives. He appreciated, however, that this approach could not be adopted in this course, where the two student cohorts have different expectations and expertise.

Overall, Professor Nayar thought that the course 'took care' of the teaching component of the UNESCO chair 'very effectively'. The engagement of the students in Hyderabad with the subject was high, as indicated by their participation in class and by ongoing reflection and conversation with the teachers via emails and comments. Dr. Ferrieri was particularly impressed by the fact that some of the students in Hyderabad chose to communicate via email with Professor Maginess, which she viewed as an indicator of a high level of engagement and of a respectful and engaged teacher/learner relationship.

The **teaching method** adopted in this course resulted from extensive conversations and negotiations among the three teachers involved. The approach on which the teachers eventually agreed was, in Professor Maginess' words, 'the opposite of flipped classroom': the material for each session (the Power Point presentations, the set of questions, and the supplementary material) were uploaded on the website *after* each session, as opposed to before. This approach was promoted particularly by Professor Nayar, based on the consideration that knowing the specific content of the presentations and the questions that would be asked, may trigger what he called 'Death by Power Point', meaning lesser engagement and participation on the part of the students.

This teaching method required greater effort by **website** designer, Dr. Ferrieri, who uploaded the teaching material at the end of each session. As website designer, Dr. Ferrieri was involved in every stage of the course elaboration, delivery, and evaluation. After regaining familiarity with QUB Web Content Management System, which she had not used since designing the "Images of Incoming – Photovoice" website, Dr. Ferrieri started to plan the design of the website. Through email exchanges with the course teachers, she made sure to be aware of the students' needs: what they would need to find on the website, what would be discussed week by week (Course Contents), what would be required in terms of assessment (Assessment Details), what else the students might read to expand their knowledge (Reading List and Extras), and how the student feedback would be included in the website (Comments). This **needs-based approach** informed all her choices as website designer. Dr. Ferrieri also had extensive conversations with Professors Maginess and Nayar to make sure to grasp the course goals and content (Course Description) and

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how the course would be evaluated by all those involved (Evaluation). Her ongoing involvement in the course included completing the Comments section based on the feedback received by the teachers via email, and on the conversations that took place during the sessions.

Dr. Ferrieri's goals as website designer were to create a 'simple, linear, self-evident' website, and to ensure that the website would reflect the collaborative and intercultural nature of the course in every aspect. To make the website user-friendly, she made sure to include links whenever possible, to use accessible language, and to avoid subpages, which can create a 'Russian doll' effect. The collage that she created as a header picture, with photos from Hyderabad University and Queen's University, aimed to 'give justice to both academic institutions through a balanced presence'.

A challenging aspect of the website design was making sure that the uploaded information would be suitable to both Professor Maginess and Professor Nayar, without being able to share a draft website with them: as Dr. Ferrieri clarified, no one other than the designer can be granted access to the website during the design stage. The solution that she devised was to send screenshots of the website to the teachers, who were always 'very responsive' in giving her feedback. Equally, the IT Team at Queen's University were 'wonderful' in assisting Dr. Ferrieri with any technical challenge.

Dr. Ferrieri pointed out that she greatly enjoyed creating the website, and that this course was particularly dear to her heart as it had given her the opportunity to go back to 'reflecting on literature', as she used to do during her literary/linguistic training. She also felt that there were lessons to be learned from the process of designing this website. The main lessons were the importance of internal

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communication and of keeping the website designer 'in the loop' in all phases of the project. In Dr. Ferrieri's view, her experience also indicates that a course website is a very beneficial tool for all the stakeholders – the students, who can easily access the material, and the tutors, who can easily share it – as well as for other teachers/facilitators, who may use it as a learning tool.

Professors Nayar and Maginess agreed that the website was a crucial element of the course and described it as very clear and effective. Professor Maginess pointed out that Dr. Ferrieri provided great impetus to get the course up and running on the website, and highlighted the importance of providing the students from Hyderabad and Queen's Open Learning with a course website that was secure and accessible to all and respected academic standards. She also highlighted the importance of the website to ensure the learning legacy of the course.

Both Professor Nayar and Professor Maginess agreed that the course **material**, which resulted from extensive conversations and intercultural reflections, provided a good balance in terms of 'geographical origin' – Global South and Global North – and literary genres. Both teachers also agreed that *other* reading materials may have been equally relevant, and that a longer-running course would allow for the exploration of other, longer literary texts and for an incursion into other art forms, such as cinema. A supplementary materials section is indeed included on the website (see Reading List and Extras), offering an analysis of additional texts.

The course was **structured** as follows: a first, introductory session providing the general theoretical framework was followed by 4 sessions, each dedicated to the analysis of one or two texts. In each session, Professor Maginess delivered the presentation, which had been co-edited by Professors Nayar and Kurian, and

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Professors Nayar and Kurian asked a set of questions. Professor Nayar, however, highlighted that the classroom discussions went beyond the predetermined questions, in line with the dynamic teaching style that the course aimed to implement. Professor Maginess explained that the structure of the course and of the single sessions was designed to ensure that 'every teacher had a say' and that the presentations and questions reflected the 'inter-reading' process that had generated them. The timeframe of the course inevitably placed some constraints on the classroom discussion and on the choice of reading materials. The teachers' decision to select short stories and poems, rather than for instance novels or novellas, took into consideration the time limitations.

The **teaching experience** was described as positive and informative by both Professor Maginess and Professor Nayar. Both emphasised the *efforts* that went into the negotiation of every aspect of the course and the *fruitfulness* of such efforts, also in terms of their own learning. According to Professor Nayar, the course demonstrated that the Global South and the Global North share common concerns over 'neoliberalism's erosion of welfare and social safety measures', which in turn confirms the relevance of the topic across the globe. Professor Maginess confirmed that ageing, and ageing in literature, has gone up the social agenda.

The final pedagogical aspect discussed in the interviews was the course effectiveness in promoting **student participation** in class and **intergenerational/intercultural exchange** and solidarity. These pedagogical goals appear to have been the most challenging.

The literature on online teaching/learning, which has gained great impetus since the Covid-19 pandemic, is not homogenous when it comes to assessing the

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effectiveness of this learning/teaching method. Among the debated aspects, is whether online teaching/learning fosters student participation and active engagement in the learning process. Professor Maginess points out that online teaching/learning “tends to promote an informal, active pedagogy”, with both learners and instructors contributing to the learning experience (Maginess, 2017 cited in Maginess, Wilbur, and Bergia, 2023: 309). Some of the existing studies, however, indicate that online teaching/learning may lead to a *lesser* “engagement in collaborative learning,” limitations to student-faculty and peer-to-peer communication, difficulties fostering “core professional qualities” such as interpersonal and communication skills (Perimani and Kamalipour 2021: 2), and an overall disengaged attitude from the students. Looking at the issue from the viewpoint of critical pedagogy as outlined primarily by Brazilian philosopher and pedagogists, Paule Freire, Kuhn et al. (2023) highlight that online teaching/learning does not *necessarily* promote the active engagement of the learners in the learning process. Like any other teaching/learning technique, online teaching/learning has an empowering, and even a liberatory potential, only insofar as all the the structural inequalities that may influence the learning process are tackled. Discussing ease of access, which is often mentioned as one of the pros of online teaching/learning, Kuhn et al. emphasise that we need to ensure that all those involved have access to, not only the necessary technology, but also “the academic and cultural capital that allows educators and students to use the digital for research, study, voice, and liberation” (Kuhn et al, 2023: 350). Online teaching/learning may in fact be used as a tool to *foster* the acquisition of such capital if it is used critically.

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Professor Maginess highlighted that the course offered important opportunities for student engagement and active participation. Enabling the chat function during the sessions and engaging in email exchanges with the students was a way to 'give power back to the students'. Furthermore, teachers and students were able to augment each other's intercultural understanding through the different 'readings' offered by each teacher, sometimes as an insider, sometimes as an outsider.

Professor Nayar commented that, as a teacher, he would have preferred 'a lot more conversation' during the sessions. One possible strategy to achieve a more dialogical dynamic in the classroom is, in Professor Nayar's view, to open each session with a basic question, such as, "Do you *like* this poem/text? If not, why?" This, he argued, is a great starting point for a more 'fluid' classroom dynamic, as is implemented at Hyderabad University. Pedagogically, it is very important to Professor Nayar to build on the student input – observations and objections – rather than giving them a predetermined set of notes. He felt that the interactions that occurred in the sessions were interesting and stimulating because the teachers collectively decided to adopt the strategy of uploading the material after the sessions. Overall, Professor Nayar felt that longer time slots, a more solid theoretical background, and a more fluid teaching style, would have allowed for greater student participation.

Professor Maginess stated that, on reflection, discussing only one text each week, rather than two, as they did on occasion, may have left more room for discussion. She was not sure, however, that leaving more time for discussion would indeed have fostered greater student participation. She pointed out that younger students tend to be more shy and not as keen on interacting as mature students, and that trust built over time is essential to student participation. She also agreed that the

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online medium presents its own set of challenges, among which the fact that the interactions among the participants tend to be less spontaneous during online sessions. She would be interested in experimenting with chatrooms and task-based classroom assignments, although she is not sure that they would work. A longer-running course may help to overcome some of the difficulties mentioned by Professors Maginess and Nayar, and to facilitate the students' acquisition of the capital required to engage more actively with the learning process.

Both Professor Maginess and Professor Nayar felt that the course had an important element of **intercultural and intergenerational exchange**, within the limitations created by time and physical distance. Professor Maginess noticed that the two student cohorts interacted with perfect politeness and courtesy, and Professor Nayar indicated that hearing about the lived experiences of the Open Learning students was educational for his students.

The **partnership** between the two universities was described as very positive and educational. For Dr. Ferrieri, the course was 'inspirational', in that it embedded the principles of diversity and intersectionality into the actual course dynamics. She felt that the partnership was very successful thanks to the enthusiasm, collaborative spirit, and commitment, of all those involved.

With regards to final point discussed in the interviews, i.e. the **scope for developing the pilot** into a longer course, the views of Professor Maginess and Professor Nayar diverged. Professor Maginess would be open to the possibility of developing the pilot continuing to expand on the SDGs. Among the possible topic for a longer course, she mentioned global warming, attitudes towards disabilities, and the representation of women. Professor Nayar would not consider developing the pilot

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with such different student cohorts, as he thought that the expectations and learning goals of the two student cohorts were too different. He also mentioned the practical difficulties linked with online teaching across the globe, such as the different time zones.

As previously mentioned, the most experimental aspect of this course, that is, the combination of two very different student cohorts, was also the most challenging. The evaluator feels that the challenges presented by the course, and the pedagogical and theoretical reflection that such challenges triggered, constitute fertile ground for developing the pilot.

The perspectives of the students

The quality of the student experience and the student evaluation of the course were measured through direct and indirect indicators. As a direct indicator, this report discusses the **students' evaluation forms** distributed at the end of the course; as indirect indicators, the report examines the **student comments and email exchanges** with the teachers.

Students' evaluation forms

The evaluation forms asked the students to evaluate, and at times comment on, three aspects: the **teaching and learning**, the **website**, and the **international partnership**. A final section was dedicated to '**Additional comments / recommendations for the future**'. In total, 9 evaluations were returned.

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Teaching and Learning

The evaluation of the Teaching and Learning experience was broken down into **12 questions** and one **comment section** concerning such aspects as academic rigour, the mix of genres and origin of the readings, the course organisation, material, and assignment, the teaching style and the helpfulness and approachability of the teachers, and the intercultural learning. The students could choose their response among 5 options: ‘Yes, very much’; ‘Yes, to some extent’; ‘Neutral’; ‘No, not really’; ‘No, not at all’. Overall, the students evaluated the course positively. To the overarching question, ‘Did you enjoy course?’, 4 out of 9 respondents answered, ‘Yes, very much’, and 5 answered, ‘Yes, to some extent’ (see **chart 1**).

Did you enjoy the course?
9 responses

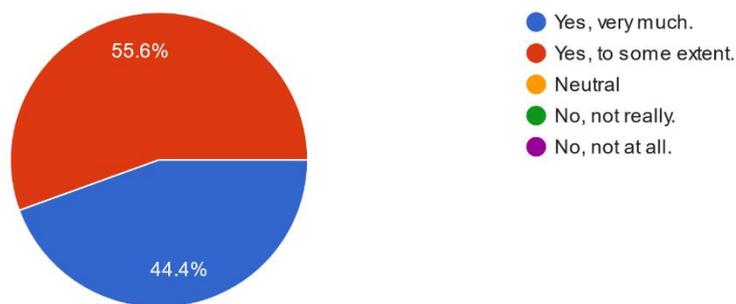


Chart 1

In the other 11 questions constituting the section on Teaching and Learning, the students selected the ‘Yes, very much’ answer to 6 questions. The most positive evaluations concerned the intercultural element of the course, the course organisation, and the tutors. The two questions on the intercultural element of the

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course were, 'Did you enjoy studying texts from the Global South and Global North?', and 'Did you feel you gained an appreciation of both Global South and Global North cultures?' In the first question, 8 out of 9 respondents selected the 'Yes, very much' option, and 1 the 'Yes, to some extent' option (see **chart 2**). In the second question, 4 out of 9 respondents selected the 'Yes, very much' option, 4 the 'Yes, to some extent' option, and 1, the 'Neutral' option (see **chart 3**).

Did you enjoy studying texts from Global south and Global north?
9 responses

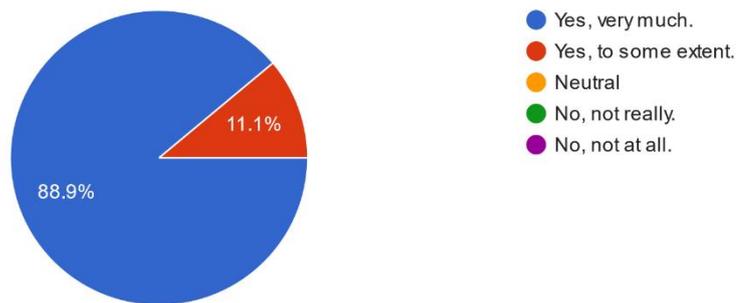


Chart 2

Did you feel you gained an appreciation of both Global south and Global north cultures?
9 responses

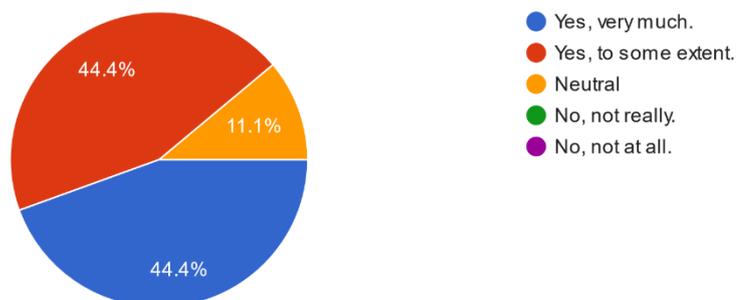


Chart 3

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The most critical, albeit overall positive, evaluation concerned the course's academic rigour. The question, 'Do you consider the course was academically rigorous?', scored 2 'Yes, very much' answers, 4 'Yes, to some extent' answers, and 1 'No, not really' answer (see **chart 4**). This reminds us of Professor Nayar's indication that his students would have preferred a more rigorous theoretical approach.

Did you consider the course was academically rigorous?
9 responses

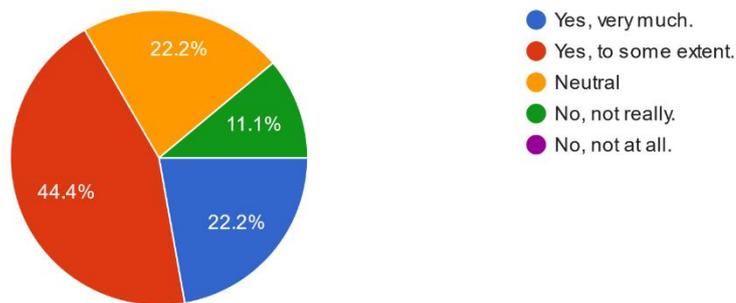


Chart 4

The **comments** section concerned the advantages and disadvantages of online learning. Among the advantages, the respondents mentioned ease of access from any location and, from a more intellectual perspective, the intercultural and intergenerational aspect of the course. One respondent expressed this as the opportunity to 'connect with people from a different time zone and geographical location'; another student appreciated the fact that the online format 'allowed the coming together of a diverse group of people who brought with them different perspectives, which was woven into the course'. These comments are in line with the positive aspects of online teaching/learning often mentioned in the literature, i.e., the

possibility of bringing together large and diverse cohorts from across the globe, and ease of access and convenience, with the learners being able to attend the sessions from any location, without having to physically go to campus (see Versteijlen et al 2017, and Fedynich, 2013).

Among the disadvantages, the respondents mentioned connectivity issues, concentration issues and the availability of distractions in one's own home, and the lack of human connection. As one respondent put it: 'In a physical classroom, we can talk to our peers before and after the classes'. Another respondent pointed out that the time limitations made it difficult to 'maintain a sense of continuous dialogue with other international students'. One commentator mentioned that it would have been important to them to be able to see all their peers during the sessions. The literature has highlighted that eye contact is often mentioned by the students as an important component of the learning process (Perimani and Kamalipour 2021: 1).

No student made reference to another challenge, of online teaching/learning, which emerged powerfully at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic: namely, the generational gap between learners and teachers, with University students often being "digital natives," and lecturers and Professors often being "digital immigrants" (Pelmani and Kamalipour, 2012: 2), i.e., individuals who learned to use digital media in their adult age. The fact that no comment touched on this suggests that this problem did not emerge in the course.

Website

The evaluation of the website was broken down into **3 questions**, concerning the content, ease of navigation, and visual attractiveness of the website, and one

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comments section. The student evaluation was extremely positive, with a clear prevalence of the 'Yes, very much' answer. The questions, 'Did you think the content of the website was appropriate?' and 'Did you find the site easy to navigate?' each scored 7 'Yes, very much' answers and 2 'To some extent' answers (see **charts 5 and 6**). In the question, 'Did you find the website attractive?', 7 out of 9 respondents selected the 'Yes, very much' option, 1 selected the 'Yes, to some extent' option, and 1 selected the 'Neutral' option (see **chart 7**).

Did you think the content of the website was appropriate?

9 responses

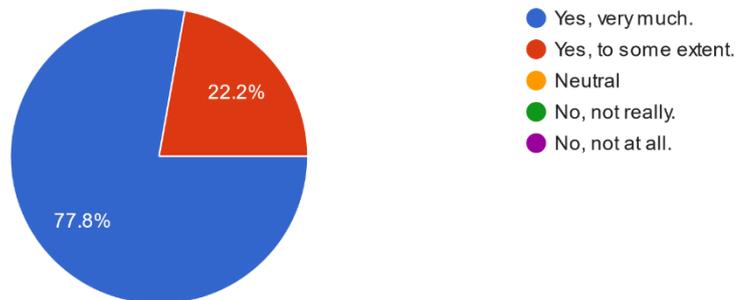


Chart 5

Did you find the site easy to navigate?

9 responses

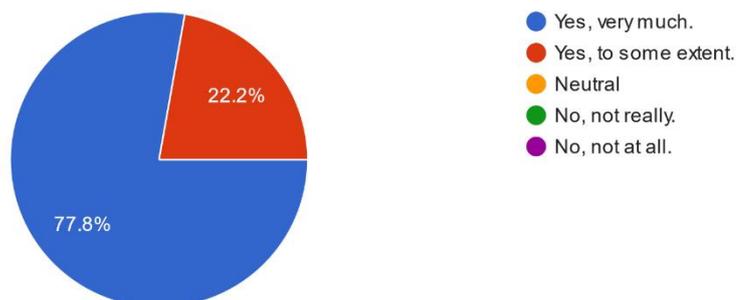


Chart 6

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Did you find the site attractive?

9 responses

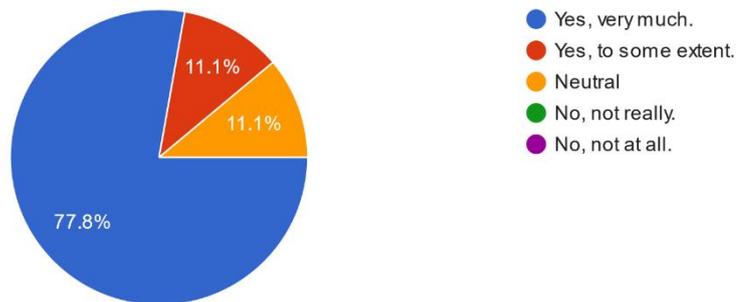


Chart 7

In the **comments** section regarding possible improvements to the website, 3 out of 5 respondents indicated that they would have preferred for the study material to be uploaded in advance of the sessions. One respondent wrote that they would have liked for the website to include a photo gallery with some screenshots of the class. However, permissions for this would need to have been sought, in advance.

International partnership

The evaluation of the international partnership was broken down into **4 questions**, concerning the effectiveness of the partnership, the knowledge exchange between the two cohorts, the intergenerational cohorts, and the intergenerational solidarity. The overarching question, 'Do you consider that the two universities worked well in this international partnership?', scored 6 'Yes', very much' answers, 1 'Yes, to some extent' answer, and 1 'Neutral' answer (see **chart 8**).

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Do you consider that the two universities worked well in this international partnership?

9 responses

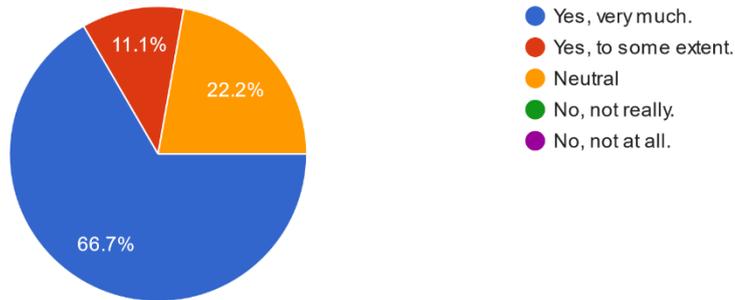


Chart 8

The question, ‘Did you consider that there was knowledge exchange between Global South and Global North?’, scored 4 ‘Yes, very much’ answers, and 5 ‘Yes, to some extent answers’ (see chart 9).

Did you consider that there was knowledge exchange between Global south and Global north?

9 responses

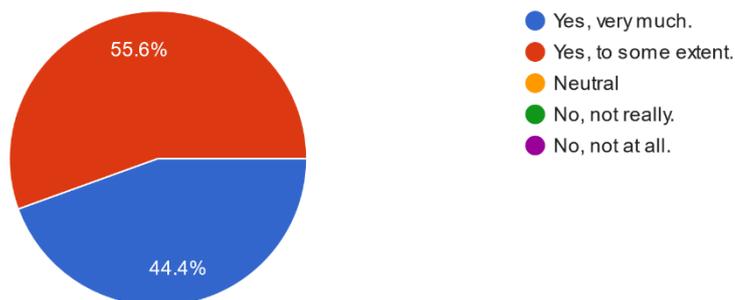


Chart 9

The questions on the intergenerational element of the course were, ‘Did you enjoy working with an age group different from your own?’, and ‘Did you find that the

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course helped build intergenerational solidarity?'. The first question scored 7 'Yes, very much' answers and 2 'Yes, to some extent' answers (see **chart 10**). The second question received a less positive evaluation, with 2 'Yes, very much' answers, 4 'Yes, to some extent' answers, and 2 'Neutral answers' (see **chart 11**).

Did you enjoy working with an age group different from your own?

9 responses

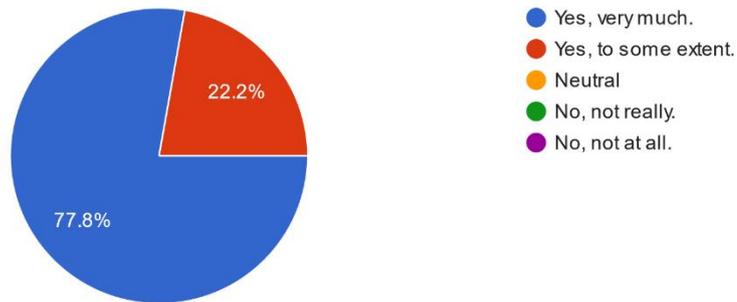


Chart 10

Did you find that the course helped build intergenerational solidarity?

9 responses

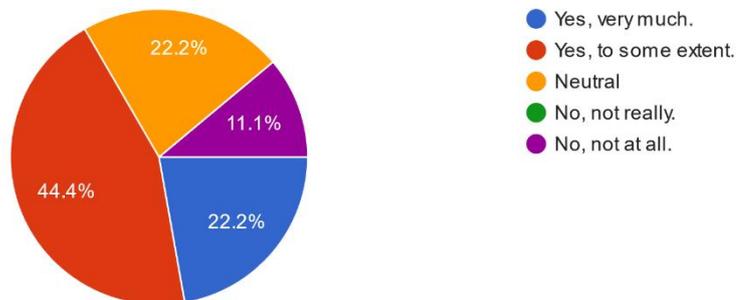


Chart 11

Additional comments/recommendations for the future

In the final section of the student evaluation form, the respondents had the opportunity to offer additional views on the course and suggestions on how to improve it. One respondent expressed great appreciation for the course overall, and for some specific sessions. Another respondent expressed a critical view of a pedagogical element: they felt that 'alternative views' were not always accepted, and that some comments were 'offered almost as fact', which may have hindered the conversation. Professor Maginess found this surprising and argued that student views were respected, and that the class encouraged challenge and critical thinking. Overall, it seems fair to argue that the student views, as expressed in the evaluation form, largely match the teachers' perception of the student experience.

Student comments and email exchanges

The students' comments and the email exchanges that occurred between some of the students and the teachers show a great deal of student engagement and appreciation. A student from Queen's University commented that exploring 'ageing in different cultures through looking at poetry' was 'a great approach'. A student from Hyderabad University expressed great appreciation for 'the insightful classes and lively discussions', and a desire to be 'part of more collaborations like this in the near future'. Three students from the Hyderabad University engaged in insightful and lively email exchanges with Professors Maginess and Nayar. The conversations explored cultural views on, and literary representations of, ageing in the Global South and the Global North. These conversations indicate great engagement from students and teachers alike.

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4. Conclusions and recommendations

The international online pilot course, **Ageing in Literature: Global South and Global North** had two interlinked dimensions. On an academic/theoretical level, the course aimed to introduce the students to the topic of ageing as portrayed in literary texts from the Global South and the Global North, and to use the literary analysis to explore different cultural attitudes towards ageing. On a broader pedagogical level, the course aimed to foster intercultural and intergenerational communication between the two student cohorts. This more experiential dimension of the course cannot be separated from the academic dimension, given that the *learning* that the course intended to facilitate would emerge from the literary analysis, the social analysis of the factors impacting ageing, *and* the intercultural and intergenerational communication among the participants.

The decision to offer the course to such different student cohorts was ambitious and challenging, as the teachers themselves realised from the onset. This pedagogical decision offers much food for thought.

The data examined in this report suggest that the course was very effective in introducing the students to a whole theoretical and experiential 'domain,' as indicated by Professor Nayar. The intergenerational and intercultural exchange between the two student cohorts was crucial to the pedagogical success of the course: coming in contact with their faraway colleagues, each student cohort became aware of different experiences of ageing, as well of the similarities in the societal depictions of ageing in the Global South and Global North.

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The student evaluations, comments and email exchanges with the teachers indicate a high level of engagement with the subject matter, and great appreciation for the teaching staff. The students commented very positively on the course organisation, the intercultural element, and the course website, which they found attractive and easy to navigate. Overall, the students appreciated the ease of access and the possibility of intercultural exchange provided by the online format, although some mentioned connectivity issues and the lack of direct human connection and communication.

The most challenging aspects of the course seem to have been related to the **different expectations** of the two student cohorts, and the level of **interactivity** of the sessions. Professor Nayar indicated that the literature students at Hyderabad University are used to sophisticated theoretical analyses, which may not be appropriate to the other student cohort. In his view, this makes the idea of expanding the pilot under the same circumstances, unviable.

Both Professors Maginess and Nayar felt, to some extent, that the level of interaction between students and teachers, and among the students, was limited, although they each attributed this to different factors. The evaluator's perspective, based on the viewing of the first and final session of course, is that the level of student interaction and participation in these two sessions was in fact not as high as may be desirable. As indicated by Professors Maginess and Nayar, this arguably has to do with the limited duration of the course and, possibly, with the online medium. As the literature suggests, the online medium presents its own set of challenges, and does not necessarily lead to a more active student involvement than face-to-face learning.

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Professor Maginess would be interested in developing the pilot and exploring avenues to increase the interactive element of the course.

The evaluator's perspective is that bringing together two different student cohorts – one, more academically-oriented, and one, more experientially-oriented – is a very valuable pedagogical endeavour. It introduces a very important *experiential* element to the learning process, and therefore has the potential to engage the students more actively, than traditional, homogenous teaching/learning. The challenges deriving from the involvement of two different student cohorts should not be regarded as insuperable. A possible strategy to satisfy the academic needs of MA-Level students could be to offer them the course as a tutorial-type of course, where experiential and theoretical aspects can be discussed, beside more theoretically oriented lessons, in which the theoretical framework could be expanded. An effort in this direction was made in this course, with the inclusion of the Reading List and Extras session, which provides an analysis of additional texts.

With regards to student participation, a longer-running course would give the teachers the opportunity to experiment with a multitude of teaching/learning tools, for instance, small group reading sessions, small group discussion sessions, visual prompts, quick-write exercises and brief brainstorming sessions to prompt group discussion, and short weekly assignments in which the students may be asked to relate the topics discussion in each session to their personal experiences and/or to social phenomena that they have observed in their environment. In each session, one or two students could present their reflections for group discussion in 5-minute presentations. These are just examples of practical strategies that may be implemented in a longer-running course.

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The evaluator's perspective, based on the analysis of all the data, is that the pilot course, **Ageing in Literature: Global South and Global North** constitutes an excellent example of intercultural and intergenerational learning/teaching, and may be used both by the course facilitators and by other educators, as a starting point for exciting future projects.

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