

# READINESS OF SLOVENIAN STUDENTS FOR AGE AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN THE WORKPLACE: ANALYSIS OF ATTITUDES TOWARD OLDER MIGRANTS

ANNA ULIUEVA, MARINA DEŽMAN

University of Maribor, Faculty of Organizational Sciences, Kranj, Slovenia  
anna.uliueva@student.um.si, marina.dezman@um.si

In the context of demographic crisis and increasing net migration, the involvement of older migrants in active labour activity is an important task for emerging “longevity society.” The study presented in this article is aimed at identifying latent contradictions in the attitudes of Slovenian students toward cooperating with older migrants, as future recruitment specialists, managers and employees working in multicultural teams. The results obtained demonstrate that students’ attitudes toward older migrants in the workplace do not represent coherent attitudinal constructs ranging from negative to positive, but rather a space of semantic tension in which declared norms of inclusivity conflict with persistent stereotypes about them. The study contributes to the discussion on managing age and cultural diversity under conditions of demographic change and proposes a non-standard methodological tool for the in-depth analysis of latent social attitudes.

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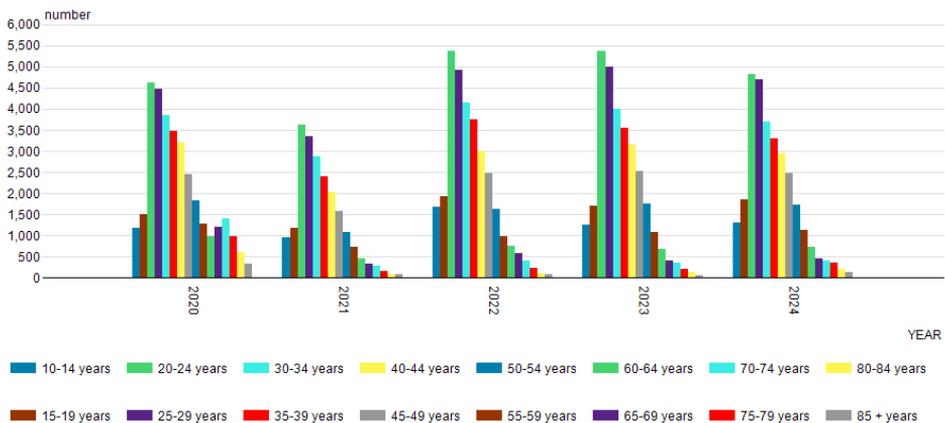
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## 1 Introduction

International migration by AGE GROUPS and YEAR. Immigrants from abroad, Sex - TOTAL.



Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia

**Figure 1: migration data in Slovenia**

**Source:** Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia. (n.d.). SiStat Data Portal – Table 05N1004S

From a theoretical perspective, attitudes toward older migrants in professional activities largely depend on age-related and migration-related stereotypes. The research demonstrates the dual nature of stereotypes on the basis of which attitudes toward older workers are formed. As a rule, they combine positive qualities (experience, loyalty) with negative traits (conservatism, low learning ability) (Chiu et al., 2001; Rothermund & Couto, 2024), stigmatizing and fostering ageism in society (Zakharova, Korobko & Sotnikov, 2022). At the same time, the perception of older working migrants is often burdened by a sense of cultural distance (Britvina & Shumilova, 2018). As a result, attitudes toward older migrants are determined by the superimposition of these two positions, which contributes to the formation of double discrimination (Lee & Piper, 2013). As a basis for the formation of such a situation, complex and internally contradictory attitudes of the host population can be identified, which are the subject of this study.

The prevailing conditions create long-term structural tensions that require businesses and public institutions to rethink principles of social responsibility and human resource management strategies. This study focuses on the figure of an older migrant, whose position in the labour market serves as an indicator of the maturity of inclusive practices in still emerging “longevity society.” From the perspective of crisis management, the stability of the national economy and social sustainability depends on the ability to utilize maximally the potential of all working-age groups. It should be noted that the human capital of older migrants is a significant advantage in labour activity. However, the attitudes of work teams and decision-makers involved in hiring may become a substantial barrier for such employees. Therefore, students’ attitudes toward hiring older migrants become a predictor of future corporate norms, as they will act as future managers, HR specialists, and rank-and-file employees. Hence, it is important to study youth attitudes in this area in order to identify latent stereotypes and determine contradictions in respondents’ attitudes toward age diversity and older migrants.

## **2 Method and Methodology**

The operationalization of key concepts is based on contemporary approaches and reduced to the following terms: a longevity society, student attitudes and stereotypes, an older migrant.

A longevity society is understood here in a broad sense as a socio-economic and organizational system aimed at creating conditions for productive, healthy and inclusive life at all stages of age. This includes restructuring labour market institutions, social security and corporate governance in order to unlock the potential of age diversity (Naegele & Walker, 2006; Principi et al., 2016).

The attitudes are understood as a stable set of beliefs, feelings and behavioural tendencies toward a social object or a subject (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Stereotypes are a cognitive component of attitudes representing simplified and generalized beliefs about the characteristics of an object or a subject. For example, studies show that as age increases, a worker’s attractiveness to an employer changes (Chiu et al., 2001), and in the case of migrants, perception is burdened by ideas about cultural distance.

An older migrant is an ambiguous concept, as there is no single age threshold for inclusion in the category of “older migrants.” At the same time, the age of 50 is widely used in studies devoted to the labour market, health and integration, since it often marks the onset of increased risks of age discrimination and specific problems with access to employment (Ciobanu et al., 2017). Therefore, the questionnaire includes the following definition: “An older migrant is a person aged 50 and over who was born and/or lived for a long time in another country and is now living and working (or seeking work) in Slovenia.”

A mixed qualitative–quantitative approach with a focus on an interpretative method was used to evaluate young people's opinions toward older migrants in order to determine their attitudes and stereotypes. The goal of the study is to understand the semantic structures and contradictions in respondents' consciousness. Therefore, primary quantitative data were subjected to secondary qualitative analysis. The online questionnaire using Google Forms (N = 30) was used as a primary tool. It consisted of thematic blocks reflecting the following content: assessment of general attitudes toward age and cultural diversity in organizations; perceptions of specific competencies and characteristics of older migrant workers; a block assessing comfort levels in specific professional situations to identify latent attitudes; and a demographic block. Respondents were offered statements revealing the content of the thematic blocks, which were evaluated using a Likert scale from 1 to 5. For an in-depth analysis of the structure of respondents' attitudes, a qualitative content analysis approach was applied (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2025). Based on identified stable sets of responses to standardized statements, holistic “statements” about each respondent's attitude toward older migrants were reconstructed and expressed in numerical form, further combined into a single semantic construct. Personal experience of interaction with migrants was used as a contextual parameter. For example, a set of evaluative responses from a respondent looks like the following: “1.1 = 4, 1.2 = 4, 1.3 = 5, 2.1 = 5, 2.2 = 4, ... 5.5 = They were my co-workers...” Accordingly, in the form of a single “statement” these responses read as: “I generally agree that diverse teams work better (4) and foster innovation (4), and that today leaders must know how to manage teams with age and cultural diversity (5). I believe that older migrants are rather loyal and reliable (5), but they may have difficulties with digital technologies (4). At the same time, based on my personal experience of interacting with migrants as co-workers and friends...” etc.

Thus, applying the logic of qualitative content analysis to the assessment of questionnaire statements makes it possible to study latent features of attitudes toward older migrants that remain hidden under standard statistical processing.

The results of the analysis with the identified main categories of contradictions are presented below. The following contradictions were identified and interpreted: a value–hierarchical gap between abstract recognition of the usefulness of diversity and personal comfort in status-unequal situations; heterogeneity of perceptions of older migrants; misalignment between positive images of migrants and respondents' readiness for concrete actions influencing their integration.

### **3 Results**

The following procedure, which is an adaption of the traditional scheme of qualitative content analysis, was used for the secondary analysis.

Each questionnaire was considered as a holistic text, which made it possible to form understanding of the range of respondents' attitudes toward older migrants and identify points of potential semantic conflict.

Next, these “statements” were compared with each other to identify recurring sets of responses and evaluations. In the course of this comparison, recurring configurations of numerical responses were identified. For example, several respondents demonstrated a configuration of high scores for the statement “Today's leaders need to know how to manage teams with age and cultural differences” (4–5 points) combined with significantly lower scores for the statement “How comfortable would you feel if an older migrant were your direct manager?” (2–3 points). Thus, three variants of recurring patterns were identified. They were coded and described as follows:

“Value/Power”: A configuration characterizing a gap between recognition of value of diversity in the workplace and feeling of personal comfort in a situation where a migrant has power over a respondent.

“Image/Action”: A configuration indicating dissonance between a positive assessment of migrants’ work qualities (“They are loyal and reliable,” “They are motivated and appreciate their job”) and unwillingness to hire them (“How likely are you to support hiring a qualified older migrant into your team?”).

**Table 1: Summary Table of Identified Contradictions in Students’ Attitudes Toward Older Migrants**

Configuration	Meaning	“Statement” Example
Value/Power	Shows the gradient of comfort when interacting with a migrant in a work environment, expressed through contradictions between accepting an abstract norm and being personally ready to accept its consequences. Several types of attitudes appear: a coherent positive attitude, a coherent negative attitude, and a contradictory type where responses “argue” with each other. The recurrence of contradictions indicates a stable pattern.	“I completely agree that diversity in teams increases creativity and helps avoid group thinking... But to be honest, I would feel very uncomfortable if my direct supervisor were a person over 50, especially if he or she were an immigrant. There would be too many misunderstandings in communication and work approaches.” (Respondent No. 14, experience with migrants: “neutral”)
Image/Action	Contradictions between positive generalized beliefs about older migrants and readiness for real personal interaction. Respondents often show <i>symbolic tolerance</i> (positive evaluations of the group in general) but <i>real distance</i> (reluctance to work closely with them). Two directions of semantic rupture show how the migrant image is used to justify distance.	“I think older migrants are often very responsible and loyal workers... However, if I had to make a hiring decision for my work group, I would probably choose a younger candidate, possibly a local one... The risk of conflict due to differences in habits or work pace would be lower.” (Respondent No. 08, experience: “migrant friends”)
Evaluative Contradiction	Internal inconsistency of stereotypical images of older migrants: respondents combine logically incompatible evaluations. Stereotypes appear as unrelated labels whose relevance depends on personal experience with migrants.	“On the one hand, these are people with enormous life experience... On the other hand, digitalization is everywhere today, and they often have problems mastering new programs... They are simultaneously valuable and, in some ways, helpless in the face of new technologies.” (Respondent No. 23, experience: “migrant co-workers”)

Source: own

“Evaluative Contradiction”: A configuration showing internal inconsistency and illogicality of the stereotype of an older migrant (cognitive eclecticism of stereotypes). This is expressed in simultaneous agreement with mutually

contradictory statements such as “They can mentor younger co-workers” and “They may find it hard to learn new digital technologies.”

All questionnaires with their response configurations were assigned codes in accordance with their interpretative meaning in the context of the respondent’s holistic “statement.” Codes were assigned providing that the gap between dissonant responses was at least 2 points (both values were in the strong response zone, i.e., 1–2 or 4–5 points). A gap of 1 point was coded only if it was semantically significant in a specific context (for example, 5 points versus 4 points on key questions against generally positive background). Thus, the assigned codes made it possible to compare responses with each other at the level of a general system of categories and produce generalizations at the level of these categories rather than individual numbers.

#### **4 Conclusions and Discussion**

The main conclusions of the presented analysis can be summarized as follows.

Among students, attitudes toward older migrants characterized by internal inconsistency and complexity were identified. Cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components of attitudes were found to have stable configurations of semantic contradictions.

The most pronounced contradiction lies at the intersection of recognizing the value of age and cultural diversity in the workplace and personal discomfort with a situation in which an older migrant holds power over a respondent (“Value/Power”). This indicates that acceptance of inclusivity is restricted to specific status dispositions.

Another significant discrepancy was recorded between declared positive image of older migrants and unwillingness to engage in practical interactions for their labour integration (“Image/Action”). This indicates a gap between symbolic and real tolerance in students’ attitudes.

Eclecticism and lack of internal coherent logic were found in the stereotype of older migrants (“Evaluative Contradiction”). Respondents simultaneously assign them an ability to serve as mentors and an inability to learn new technology. This reflects superimposition of two independent sets of stereotypes such as age-related and migration-related stereotypes.

The results obtained are consistent with the theory of social stigmatization of older people (ageism) and studies of multiple discrimination. Older migrants become a projection of attitudinal conflicts based on the discrepancy between modern corporate norms of inclusivity and persistent stereotypes toward them.

Youth attitudes toward older migrants in the context of a longevity society represent not a coherent set of representations from negative to positive evaluations, but a space of tension and internal logical ruptures. They reflect the state of contemporary consciousness, in which norms of inclusivity and values of diversity are superimposed on persistent stereotypes and forms of group thinking. Older migrants find themselves at the intersection of two lines of “otherness” — age-related and cultural — which makes them a figure in relation to whom cognitive dissonances manifest with particular force. Nevertheless, under the conditions of the values of a longevity society and shrinking population, this topic will become increasingly salient, and the study of attitudes of future employees and managers may become a basis for education and work with youth regarding inclusivity and perception of age and cultural diversity.

Despite being an experimental approach, the application of qualitative content analysis procedures to standardized quantitative data allowed for the semantic deconstruction of numerical responses and the analysis of their meaning in order to find contradictions in students' attitudes toward older migrants. While qualitative approach permits analytical conclusions about the structure of the studied social phenomena, the quantitative sample restricts the potential for statistical generalizations to the total Slovenian student population. Survey methods capture verbally expressed attitudes, which may differ from actual behaviour. Nevertheless, the identified internal contradiction within respondents' attitudes themselves represent significant scientific interest. This approach corresponds to the goal of the study, which was to understand complex and often ambivalent nature of attitudes toward older migrants in the context of a longevity society.

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