

# Ageing well in the real world

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Credit: Heriot-Watt University

Heriot-Watt psychologists are to carry out a new study to look across the board at what sort of 'real-world' activities might best protect thinking and memory skills into old age.

The three year study, supported by Velux Stiftung, a Swiss charitable foundation that supports research on healthy ageing, will look at how increasing mental, physical or [social engagement](#) might improve

[cognitive skills](#) in older people.

Study leader Dr Alan Gow said that while a range of lifestyle factors might be beneficial, a large part of the research developing these findings into interventions remains lab-based. The aim of the new study is to provide evidence about the sorts of activities which are already widely available in the community and which might offer people the best opportunities for a mentally active old age.

"Keeping intellectually, socially or physically engaged have all been proposed as potentially protective. Many laboratory studies have also been undertaken, but can be difficult for people to relate these to their own lives and what is available to them.

"What we want to look at is the sort of activities which are available to people in the real world, options like language classes, dancing or social groups, and within a single study look at the effects of such mental, physical and social stimulation, individually or in combination.

"We will then be in a position to offer the sort of evidence-based advice that people can choose to act on within their own communities."

## **Keeping engaged**

Dr Gow added, "As we age, we may experience general declines in our thinking, memory and reasoning skills, what we call cognitive ageing. There is, however, large variation in the degree of decline experienced.

"Cognitive ageing is one of the most feared aspects of growing older, and is related to lower quality of life and loss of independence. Keeping intellectually, socially or physically engaged have all been proposed as potentially protective, but we still need to better understand the relative importance of these different factors to provide advice and support for

older adults.

"Given international trends towards increased longevity, ensuring the health and wellbeing of an older population will remain a priority. This project's community-based setting has been designed to reduce barriers for people to apply the findings to their own lives for real-world benefit."

The study, by the Aging Lab team at Heriot-Watt, will involve 300 people aged between 65 and 75, and will work closely with local government, older people's organisations and charities, in addition to an internationally-recognised advisory panel of leading experts in psychology, gerontology, public health and cognitive interventions.

Provided by Heriot-Watt University

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