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Justyna Fijałkowska

SAN University, Poland

jfijalkowska@san.edu.pl

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-4236-1491

Federico Lanzalonga

Department of Management,

University of Turin, Italy

SAN University, Poland

federico.lanzalonga@unito.it

ORCID ID: 0000-0003-3195-3528

Working Later in Life: How Research Frames the Challenges and Possibilities of Ageing at Work¹

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: This study explores how academic literature addresses the professional inclusion of older adults in the workforce. It investigates emerging patterns and proposed solutions to support later-life employment in the context of demographic ageing and the active ageing policy paradigm.

Methodology: The paper adopts a Structured Literature Review (SLR) methodology, combining bibliometric and thematic analyses. A total of 161 peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2012 and 2024 were analysed using performance metrics and co-occurrence clustering to identify key themes and intellectual trends.

Findings: The analysis identifies five main thematic clusters: policy narratives, digital inclusion, workplace flexibility, emotional well-being, and place-based autonomy. These findings reflect a shift from deficit-based to relational and context-sensitive understandings of ageing at work. However, the literature remains fragmented and limited in intersectional scope.

Value Added: This study provides a novel, multidimensional synthesis of the literature on ageing and work by integrating bibliometric and thematic approaches. It bridges conceptual gaps across disciplines and proposes a coherent framework to guide future policies, organisational strategies, and research on age-inclusive employment.

Recommendations: Organisations and policymakers should adopt inclusive, age-sensitive strategies. They should promote lifelong learning opportunities, enable flexible and phased retirement options, reduce age-related bias in human resource practices, and design physical and social environments that support autonomy, well-being, and meaningful participation for older adults.

Key words: Active Ageing, Older Workers, Age-Inclusive Employment, Structured Literature Review (SLR), Human Resource Management (HRM)

JEL Codes: J14, J26, J21

Introduction

The progressive ageing of the global workforce is reshaping how labour markets, organisations, and policymakers address employment across the life course. In the European Union, the number of employees aged 55 or older rose from 23.8 million in 2010 to nearly 40 million in 2023, driven by higher retirement ages, longer life expectancy, and better health (Eiffe et al., 2025). This demographic shift intensifies the need to understand how professional participation can be sustained and adapted in later life. While the rhetoric of “active ageing” promotes the view of older adults as vital contributors to society, significant discrepancies persist between these aspirations and the organisational, cultural, and policy realities that older workers encounter. For instance, despite policies encouraging extended working lives, many organisations have yet to implement age-inclusive practices effectively, leading to challenges in retaining and supporting older employees.

Research on ageing and work has expanded across multiple disciplines. In gerontology and public policy, the focus has been placed on social inclusion, well-being, and active participation (Foster & Walker, 2015). Human resource management (HRM) and organisational behaviour studies have, in parallel, explored how work systems and practices can be recalibrated to support ageing employees (Kooij et al., 2010). However, despite the growth of scholarship, existing knowledge remains fragmented, with limited integration between policy frameworks, organisational initiatives, and the lived experiences of older workers (Post & Byron, 2015). Moreover, the literature remains compartmentalised across disciplinary and institutional boundaries, limiting the development of unified models of age-inclusive employment.

To address this gap, the paper investigates two research questions:

- RQ1. *What are the main bibliometric and thematic patterns in the literature on support for older workers?***
- RQ2. *What policy, organisational, and managerial solutions are identified to support the professional inclusion of older adults?***

A Structured Literature Review (SLR) methodology was employed, integrating bibliometric and thematic analysis. The selection of this method is justified by the need to systematically organise and critically synthesise a multidisciplinary and evolving body of knowledge, ensuring transparency and replicability (Zupic & Čater, 2015; Massaro et al., 2016). The bibliometric analysis enables the identification of performance trends and intellectual structures, while thematic clustering captures underlying conceptual orientations.

The analysis, based on 161 peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2012 and 2024, reveals a dynamic field structured around five thematic clusters: (1) active ageing and autonomy; (2) societal perceptions of demographic change; (3) agency and place in later life; (4) emotional and social dimensions of ageing; and (5) policy narratives and cross-national perspectives. These findings illustrate a gradual shift from medicalised and deficit-oriented perspectives towards relational, contextual, and socially embedded understandings of ageing and work.

The paper contributes theoretically by advancing a multidimensional conceptualisation of support for older workers that bridges individual, organisational, and societal levels. Methodologically, it demonstrates the efficacy of bibliometric and thematic integration in capturing fragmented scholarly landscapes. Practically, it highlights the need for more coherent, inclusive, and actionable strategies to promote the professional inclusion of older adults.

The structure of the paper is as follows: Section 2 provides the conceptual background; Section 3 details the methodology and data selection process; Section 4 presents the bibliometric and thematic results; Section 5 discusses the findings in relation to the research questions; and Section 6 concludes by outlining theoretical and practical implications, as well as suggesting directions for future research.

Background

The progressive ageing of the workforce has reshaped the way labour markets, organisations, and policymakers approach employment across the life course.

Following the European Parliament's 2012 Resolution on "Active Ageing and Inter-generational Solidarity", ageing has increasingly been reframed not as a burden but as an opportunity for societal and economic participation (Tymowski, 2015).

However, despite this discursive shift, tensions remain between policy aspirations and workplace realities. Older adults continue to encounter persistent stereotypes regarding their productivity, flexibility, and adaptability (Taylor & Walker, 1998). Although the notion of work ability has offered a valuable conceptual foundation for sustaining employment in later life, translating this into concrete practices has proved complex and uneven across industries and national contexts (Ilmarinen, 2001).

Several studies highlighted that targeted HR strategies, such as flexible working arrangements, continuous learning opportunities, and age-sensitive career pathways, can effectively support older workers (Kooij et al., 2010). Nevertheless, organisational responses often remain fragmented. According to Armstrong-Stassen (2008), post-retirement employment, for example, is frequently treated as a secondary pathway rather than as a structured opportunity for knowledge retention and workforce sustainability.

Cultural barriers further complicate the picture. Institutionalised ageism continues to shape recruitment, promotion, and retention practices (Loretto et al., 2000). Without intentional efforts to transform organisational cultures, policy initiatives risk remaining superficial, failing to address the deeper biases that exclude older workers from meaningful professional participation.

Additional insights emerge from diversity management literature. While demographic diversity, including age diversity, can enhance organisational performance, these gains are not automatic. They require leadership commitment, inclusive practices, and an environment that genuinely values heterogeneous experiences (Post & Byron, 2015).

Collectively, these findings suggest that supporting the professional activity of older adults demands more than isolated initiatives or symbolic policy gestures. It calls for integrated strategies that connect individual capacities, organisational systems, and societal frameworks, fostering environments where ageing is not simply accommodated but actively leveraged as a source of innovation, resilience, and continuity (Truxillo et al., 2015). Table 1 reveals principal concepts

emerging in previous literature on supporting professional activities for older people.

Table 1. Key Concepts from Seminal Papers

Paper	Concept	Critical Insight
Ilmarinen (2001)	Work ability	Work ability is dynamic and shaped by lifelong organisational and social investments.
Taylor & Walker (1998)	Stereotypes and HR bias	Age bias persists even amid policy reforms, limiting access to meaningful employment.
Kooij et al. (2010)	Age-specific HRM, Workplace flexibility	Without differentiation, HR policies risk marginalising older workers' motivational needs. Flexibility is necessary but often insufficient without changes to organisational expectations and values.
Armstrong-Stassen (2008)	Post-retirement employment	Organisations undervalue the contribution of retirees without tailored engagement strategies.
Loretto et al. (2000)	Anti-ageism strategies	Structural ageism must be dismantled, not merely compensated through surface interventions.
Post & Byron (2015)	Organisational diversity	Diversity benefits depend critically on leadership practices and inclusive cultures.
Truxillo et al. (2015)	HRM frameworks for ageing	A holistic, proactive HRM approach is essential to counteract exclusionary dynamics in ageing workforces.

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

This study adopts an SLR to investigate how academic research addresses support for the professional activity of older adults. SLRs are particularly suitable

for synthesising knowledge in multidisciplinary and evolving domains, offering transparency, replicability, and the capacity to highlight research gaps. According to Massaro et al. (2016), the present research integrates bibliometric and thematic analysis to explore both the structural characteristics and conceptual dynamics of the literature.

Moreover, this study applies a hybrid methodology, which combines performance analysis, including publication trends, citation patterns, with conceptual structure mapping based on keyword co-occurrence (Sadraei et al., 2023; Secinaro et al., 2025). This approach enables a dual perspective: identifying influential sources and tracing thematic developments within the literature (De Bem Machado et al., 2022). The aim is not merely to summarise the existing body of work, but also to provide insights that support theoretical advancement and inform policy and organisational strategies related to age-inclusive employment.

Data Selection

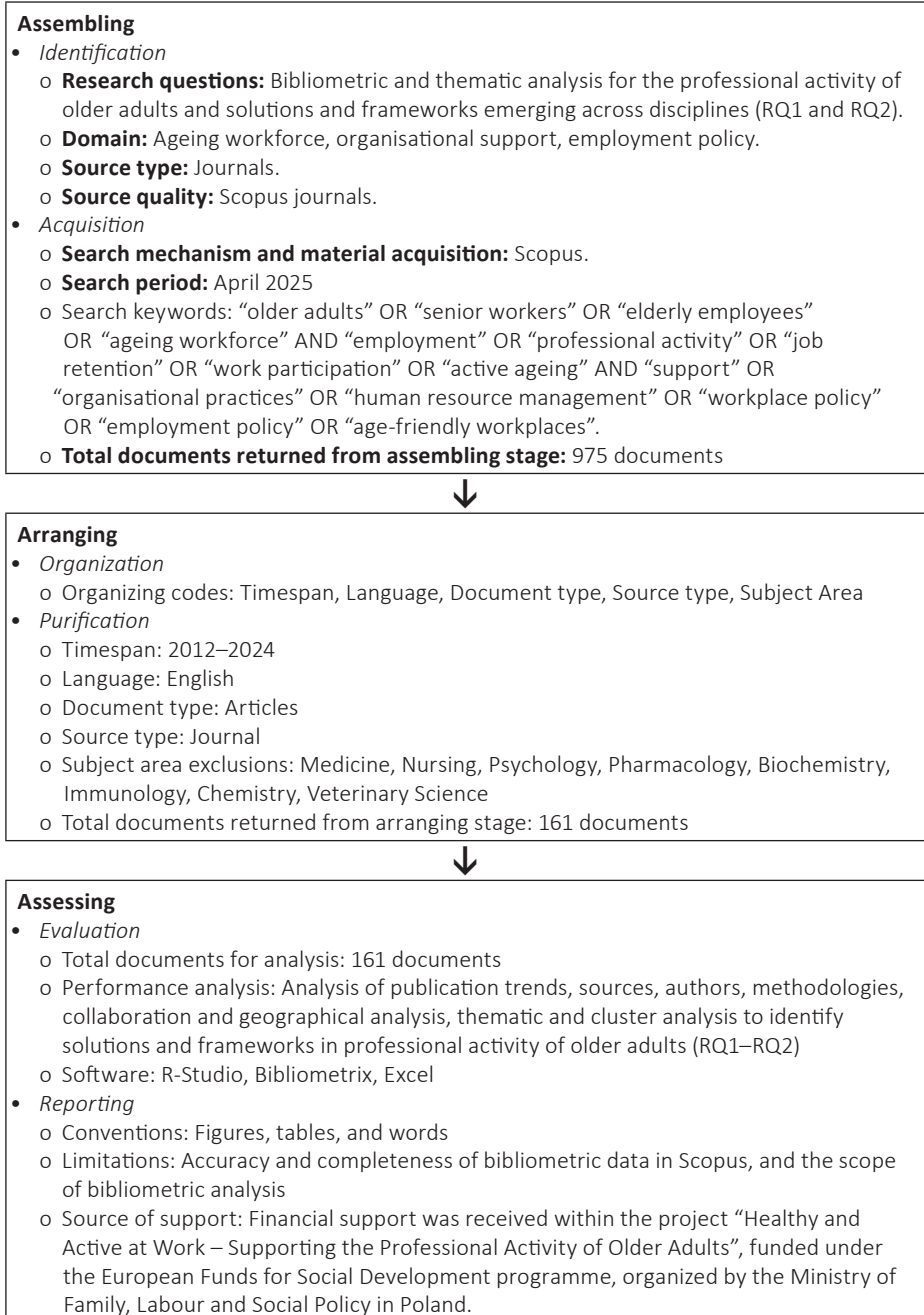
The Scopus database was selected as the sole source for data extraction due to its comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed journals across relevant disciplines and its high compatibility with bibliometric tools. According to Okoli (2015), Scopus is a multidisciplinary resource that indexes a broader range of journals than Web of Science, making it particularly appropriate for research in management and social sciences. Its use ensures access to relevant and updated contributions, especially for studies focusing on organisational and policy dynamics. Furthermore, relying on Scopus is consistent with bibliometric best practices in business research, which seek to balance coverage, transparency, and analytical robustness (Zupic & Čater, 2015).

The construction of the search string was informed by a preliminary reading of key studies addressing age and employment (Rinsky-Halivni et al., 2022; Salomão Filho et al., 2023). These works helped identify relevant terminology and conceptual dimensions related to older workers, employment dynamics, and organisational or policy support.

The search string was constructed using Boolean logic and applied to the title, abstract and keywords fields. It was structured around three main thematic axes: the target population, the employment-related domain and the support mechanisms:

("older adults" OR "aging workforce" OR "senior workers" OR "elderly employees") AND ("employment" OR "professional activity" OR "job retention" OR "work participation" OR "workforce inclusion" OR "active aging") AND ("support" OR "organizational practices" OR "human resource management" OR "workplace policy" OR "employment policy" OR "age-friendly workplaces").

Figure 1. Procedure for review adopting the SPAR-4-SLR protocol.



Source: Authors’ elaboration based on Paul et al. (2021).

The time span was limited to 2012 to capture contemporary literature aligned with the “active ageing” paradigm institutionalised by the European Parliament (2012) European Commission. This marked a policy shift framing ageing not as a burden but as a resource in the labour market. Additional filters were applied to include only peer-reviewed journal articles (Biancone et al., 2022), published in English and in their final publication stage, ensuring thematic relevance and academic quality (Lanzalonga et al., 2023). After applying the initial inclusion criteria, a total of 632 papers were identified. This set was subsequently refined through manual screening, excluding documents not aligned with the analytical focus of the review, specifically those belonging to fields such as medicine, nursing, psychology, pharmacology, and related biomedical sciences. The final sample includes 161 papers in the field of management and social sciences.

To structure and report the review process, the study follows the SPAR-4-SLR framework (Paul et al., 2021). This model organises the SLR in three phases: assembling, arranging, and assessing. Its structured logic enhances the clarity, consistency, and transparency of the review. A visual representation of the SPAR-4-SLR structure as applied in this study is provided in Figure 1.

Analysis was conducted using the Bibliometrix R package, which supports both descriptive and conceptual bibliometric analysis (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017). By combining bibliometric rigour with a structured review protocol, this methodology offers a robust foundation for understanding the development and orientation of the literature on age-inclusive employment support, while also providing a framework for future research agendas.

Results

The bibliometric approach enables the exploration of the research questions while simultaneously mapping the core dimensions of the scientific domain (Secinaro et al., 2022). In this section, the descriptive characteristics of the selected corpus are presented through keyword analysis and publication metrics, offering insights into the structure of scientific production and supporting the

response to the first research question. Author-level metrics further contribute to this analysis. Thematic analysis is then introduced to address the second research question, identifying key concepts and recurring frameworks adopted by scholars in examining support for the professional activity of older adults. This thematic classification highlights emerging directions and opportunities for future research in the field of age-inclusive employment.

Descriptive analysis

The refined dataset includes 161 documents, published between 2012 and 2024, reflecting growing academic interest in the professional inclusion of older adults following the institutionalisation of the “active ageing” paradigm. The analysis of Table 2 shows that the sample comprises 109 peer-reviewed journal sources, with an annual growth rate of 20.81%, indicating a rising trend in scholarly output.

The documents have an average age of 4.35 years and receive 12.69 citations per document, suggesting a moderate impact across the field. A total of 8,727 references were captured, illustrating the breadth of the knowledge base.

The dataset includes 1,003 Keywords Plus and 573 Author Keywords, revealing a rich and diverse thematic landscape. 612 authors contributed to the literature, with only 14 single-authored documents.

Table 2. Sample characteristics

Description	Results
<i>Main Information about Data</i>	
Timespan	2012–2024
Sources (Journals, Books, etc)	109
Documents	161
Annual Growth Rate %	20,81
Document Average Age	4,35
Average citations per doc	12,69
References	8.727
<i>Document Contents</i>	
Keywords Plus (ID)	1003
Author's Keywords (DE)	573
<i>Authors</i>	
Authors	612
Authors of single-authored docs	14
<i>Authors Collaboration</i>	
Single-authored docs	14
Co-Authors per Doc	3,89
International co-authorships %	31,06
<i>Document Types</i>	
Article	161

Source: Authors' elaboration using Bibliometrix.

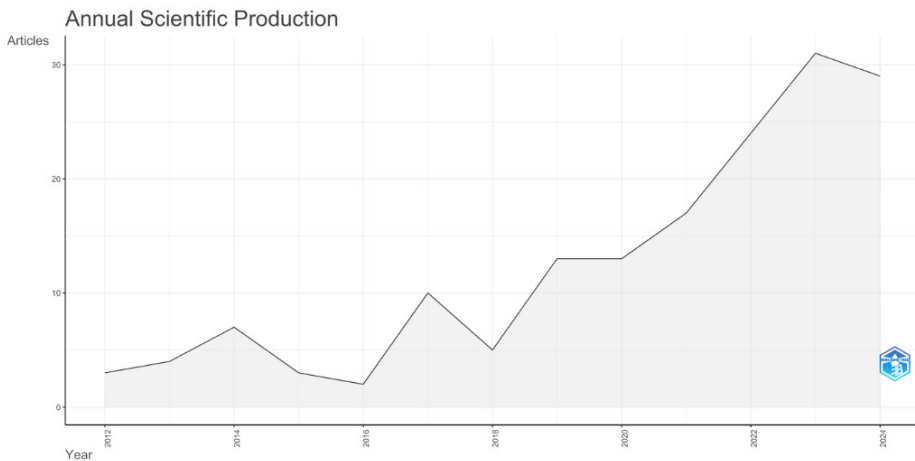
The average number of co-authors per document is 3.89, and 31.06% of the works involve international collaboration, confirming the global nature of the discourse.

All documents are classified as articles, confirming a focus on peer-reviewed academic outputs. These results highlight an active and collaborative research domain with increasing visibility, forming the basis for the performance and thematic analyses presented in the following sections.

As shown in Figure 2, the annual scientific production on the topic has followed a clear upward trajectory, with a notable increase from 2019 onwards. The number of publications peaked in 2023 with over 30 articles, reflecting

a growing academic interest in the professional inclusion of older adults. This trend is consistent with the increasing societal and policy focus on active ageing and extended working lives.

Figure 2. Topic development over the years.



Source: Authors' elaboration through Bibliometrix.

Source's analysis

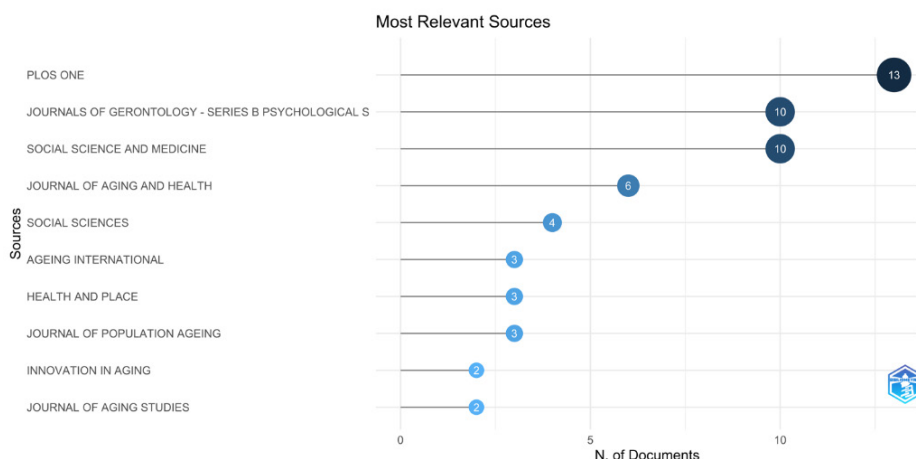
As shown in Figure 3, the most relevant sources contributing to the topic of support for the professional activity of older adults include a mix of interdisciplinary and health-oriented journals. PLOS ONE leads with 13 articles, followed by The Journals of Gerontology: Series B, Social Science & Medicine, and the Journal of Aging and Health, each contributing 10 or more publications.

Although some of these journals are traditionally associated with medical or health sciences, their scope clearly extends to social, psychological, and policy-oriented dimensions, justifying their inclusion in the thematic core of this review. For instance, PLOS ONE publishes research across disciplines, including public health, policy, and ageing in the workforce. The Journals of Gerontology: Series B explicitly focus on psychological and social aspects of ageing, particularly in relation to functioning in later life. Social Science & Medicine covers a broad

spectrum of societal health determinants, including labour participation and ageing. Similarly, the Journal of Aging and Health centres on the relationship between ageing and functional outcomes in social and institutional contexts, often including employment and retirement transitions.

These sources reflect the interdisciplinary nature of the topic, where health, work, and policy are deeply interconnected. Their prominence supports the idea that contributions to the discourse on ageing and professional inclusion often emerge from fields where medical and social research converge.

Figure 3. Ranking of journals by the number of publications



Source: Authors' elaboration through Bibliometrix.

Author's analysis

As illustrated in Figure 4, the production of the most active authors within the dataset appears fragmented, with a few notable exceptions demonstrating consistency over time. Adam Evans stands out as the most prominent contributor, with two articles and the highest total citations per year. In the co-authored work, the author critically addresses the concept of active ageing from a design

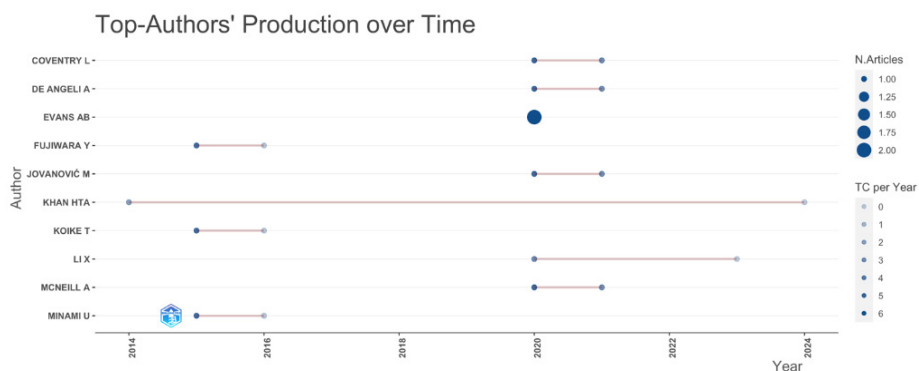
and technology perspective, positioning older adults as central actors in the development of inclusive digital environments (Evans & Nistrup, 2020; Gerling et al., 2020).

Authors such as Jovanović, Coventry, and De Angeli each appear with multiple contributions over consecutive years. Jovanović's work explores digital literacy and its impact on work and participation in later life (Jovanović et al., 2021), while Coventry and De Angeli focus on issues of trust, agency, and privacy in technological contexts involving older users (De Angeli et al., 2020). These authors reflect a growing strand of research that connects ageing with digital and organisational inclusion.

Meanwhile, Fujiwara, Koike and Minami contribute to the field with punctual but meaningful studies in psychosocial well-being and social participation, domains particularly relevant to the cultural and institutional structures that shape older adults' access to work and community life (Minami et al., 2015, 2016).

While the overall volume of individual author production is limited, the thematic contributions of these scholars point to a diversified and multidisciplinary landscape, where technological, psychological, and policy-oriented approaches converge to address the challenges and opportunities of an ageing workforce.

Figure 4. Authors' production over time and the number of papers



Source: Authors' elaboration through Bibliometrix.

Geographical and collaboration analysis

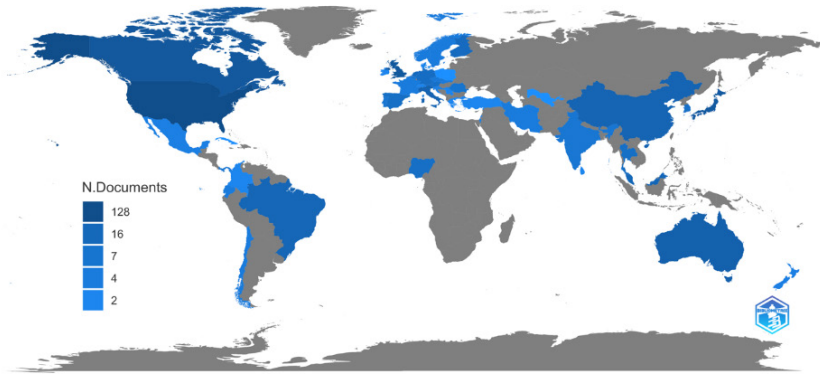
As shown in Figure 5, the scientific production on support for the professional activity of older adults is predominantly concentrated in high-income countries, particularly the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and several European nations. This pattern can be explained by the policy frameworks and demographic dynamics outlined in several articles within the dataset. For instance, multiple studies originating from Australia and the UK explicitly connect active ageing policies and public health agendas to initiatives promoting later-life employment and digital inclusion for older adults (Gerling et al., 2020; Jowsey et al., 2013).

The strong representation of Australian and UK-based research is further justified by the emphasis in these contexts on lifelong learning, digital literacy among seniors, and active ageing strategies embedded in national policies. According to Minami et al. (2016), national-level programmes, particularly in East Asia and Europe, have encouraged empirical studies addressing both psychosocial well-being and professional participation of older adults.

Conversely, there is a relative underrepresentation from low- and middle-income countries, despite some notable contributions from nations such as China and Singapore, where productive ageing and social participation are emerging policy priorities (Aw et al., 2017; Ko & Yeung, 2019).

Figure 5. Country map for production

Country Scientific Production



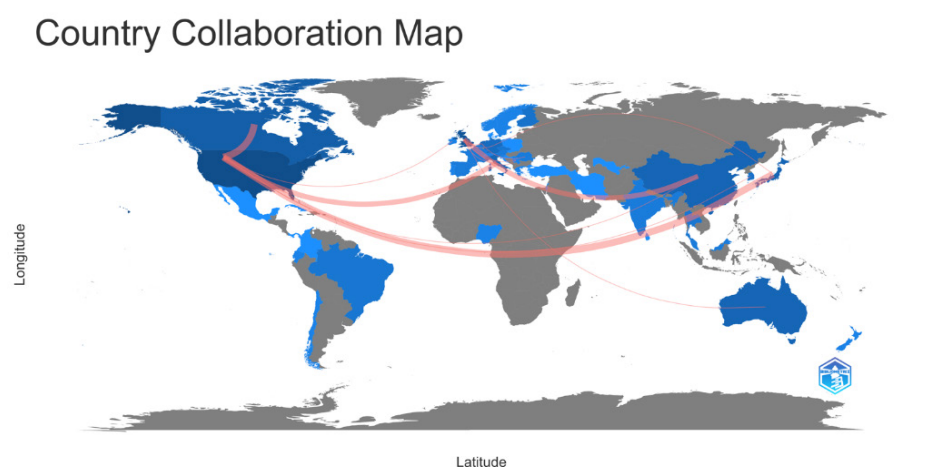
Source: Authors' elaboration through Bibliometrix.

As shown in Figure 6, international collaboration in the field of older adults' professional activity is led by a core group of countries, notably the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, which form consistent bilateral and multilateral research ties with European and Asian nations. These collaborations often reflect joint research initiatives, shared policy concerns regarding ageing populations, and the globalised nature of institutional responses to workforce ageing.

The map highlights particularly strong research links between the UK and Australia, as well as between the US and East Asian countries such as Japan, China, and Thailand. This corresponds with several studies in the corpus that emerged from multi-institutional or cross-national projects, often focused on digital inclusion (Weerasombat et al., 2024), workplace adaptation, or comparative policy frameworks (Minami et al., 2016).

In contrast, countries in Africa, Eastern Europe, and parts of Latin America show minimal or no collaboration lines, mirroring the earlier observation on the unequal geographical distribution of scientific production. The absence of structured collaboration from these regions may be linked to disparities in research funding, access to international academic networks, and differing policy priorities regarding ageing and employment.

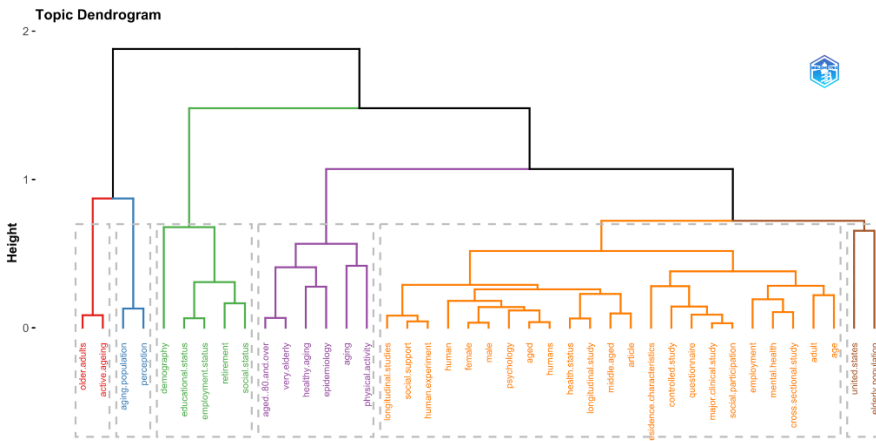
Figure 6. Country collaboration map



Source: Authors' elaboration through Bibliometrix.

Thematic Analysis

This section presents the thematic structure emerging from the bibliometric clustering process. Five distinct clusters were identified (Figure 7), each capturing a core domain of research on ageing and professional activity through shared keywords, conceptual orientations, and methodological patterns.

Figure 7. Topic dendrogram via multidimensional scaling

Source: Authors' elaboration through Bibliometrix.

Active Ageing and the Construction of Autonomous Older Adults (Red Cluster)

The Red Cluster revolves around the keywords “older adults” and “active ageing”, capturing a significant conceptual shift in how ageing is addressed across social, policy, and technological domains.

The core theme emerging from this cluster is the transition from deficit-based views of ageing towards asset-based approaches that stress autonomy, participation, and social engagement of older adults.

Gerling et al. (2020) critically assess how active ageing narratives influence the design of assistive technologies, arguing that many interventions risk reinforcing negative stereotypes about ageing rather than fostering genuine inclusivity. Moreover, other authors analyse public policy frameworks, showing how active ageing discourses often impose a moral obligation on older individuals to remain productive and self-reliant (Evans & Nistrup, 2020).

From another perspective, technological innovations can support the emotional and social well-being of older adults, suggesting that the active ageing

paradigm is evolving beyond its traditional focus on physical activity to incorporate digital inclusion and emotional resilience (Alzyoudi & Mazroui, 2024). This cluster illustrates a broadening of the active ageing concept, moving towards a multidimensional understanding that integrates health, technology, social participation, and psychological well-being.

Perceptions and Social Responses to Population Ageing (Blue Cluster)

This cluster focuses on how the ageing of populations is perceived at societal, institutional, and individual levels. The inclusion of the keywords “aging population” and “perception” suggests a thematic concern with how demographic change is framed and understood, particularly in relation to planning, inclusion, and public space.

One key theme in this cluster is the perceptual experience of ageing in the context of urban environments. According to Lau et al. (2021), older adults’ perceptions of safety, accessibility, and psychological comfort in urban green spaces significantly shape their engagement with public life, suggesting that age-friendly planning must integrate lived experience, not just physical design.

Other authors analyse ageing populations through the lens of intergenerational economic and workforce transitions. This study reveals how perceptions of demographic shifts are tied to concerns about economic dependency and labour market imbalance, which in turn influence policy approaches to older workers (Grenčíková et al., 2023).

This cluster reveals that perception is not a secondary issue, but a central factor influencing how societies respond to ageing demographics. In this perspective, “perception” appears not merely as a reflection of individual or collective opinions, but as an active process of constructing social reality – one that shapes which needs of older adults are recognised, which actions are legitimised, and which remain invisible or marginalised.

Structural Determinants of Ageing: Education, Employment, and Social Status (Green Cluster)

The green cluster centres on the socio-demographic determinants of the ageing process, such as demography, educational status, employment status, retirement, and social position, which are conceptualised as key factors influencing older adults' ability to participate in professional and social life. At the centre of this cluster are structural variables which shape individual ageing trajectories and determine access to resources and forms of support. The cluster highlights the importance of a life-course perspective in understanding how early-life inequalities influence later-life opportunities and resources.

Many studies in this cluster adopt the life-course framework to emphasise the cumulative nature of disadvantage. Minami et al. (2016), for instance, show that lower-educated individuals often remain in the labour market for financial reasons, indicating how education and social class relate to prolonged work. Burnay and Sanderson (2022) explore the Belgian context, where low participation of older workers is linked to institutional barriers and early retirement culture. Their research addresses employment status and structural factors that hinder prolonged professional activity, including issues related to education and social position. Wickrama et al. (2013) demonstrate that occupational status in later life correlates strongly with health and well-being, while Lasso and Frasser (2015) note that job quality for older workers remains low, underscoring inequalities tied to age and social position.

An important contribution within this cluster is offered by Ko and Yeung (2019), whose study of productive ageing in China shows that childhood conditions – such as family socioeconomic status and neighbourhood cohesion – have long-term effects on work and caregiving in later life. Their use of the pathway and latency models underscores the importance of biographical factors in shaping later-life inclusion.

Overall, the green cluster stresses that promoting active ageing requires policies that go beyond chronological age and consider the long-term impact of earlier educational, occupational, and social experiences.

Rethinking Agency and Place in Later Life (Purple Cluster)

The Purple Cluster explores the social and experiential dimensions of very old age, centred around the keywords “aged 80 and over”, “very elderly”, “healthy aging”, “aging”, and “physical activity”. Rather than focusing on medicalised interpretations, this body of literature interrogates how autonomy, agency, and place-making evolve in later stages of life.

Exploring the shifting meaning of independence for older adults in the context of weakening intergenerational support, reveal that older individuals are increasingly required to reconfigure their roles and expectations, often embracing self-reliance in response to changing family and community structures (Zhang & Cheng, 2024).

According to Motomura et al. (2024), the proximity to urban green spaces facilitates daily movement and engagement among older adults, framing physical activity not as an outcome of health behaviour, but as a relational practice embedded in place and routine. This perspective emphasises the importance of lived environment in sustaining functional autonomy, especially when formal supports are limited.

Therefore, growing interest in the lived experience of ageing beyond the age of 80, where health and participation are not just biological but entangled with everyday environments, social expectations, and material conditions. The cluster points to the need for more inclusive narratives and infrastructures that recognise the diversity of ageing paths in late life.

Social Participation and the Emotional Politics of Ageing (Orange Cluster)

The Orange Cluster reveals a multidimensional strand of literature concerned with how older adults navigate identity, participation, and emotional well-being in later life. The presence of keywords such as “social support”, “social participation”, “mental health”, “employment”, and “questionnaire” suggests a thematic fusion of empirical analysis and sociopsychological insight into ageing experiences.

A key focus within this cluster is the continuity of identity and meaning making through post-retirement employment and caregiving roles. Individuals

transitioning into “bridge employment” maintain a sense of purpose while managing age-related and structural constraints (Mazumdar et al., 2021). Similarly, other authors investigate how informal caregivers balance labour responsibilities and emotional strain, shedding light on how ageing individuals are embedded in broader relational economies (Longacre et al., 2017).

Another prominent dimension is the connection between social inclusion and mental health, that show that cultural engagement serves not only as entertainment, but also as a mechanism for preserving emotional well-being and cognitive stimulation in later life (Fancourt & Steptoe, 2019). In particular, loneliness and depressive symptoms among racialised older adults, framing social isolation as a structural issue shaped by intersecting inequalities (Taylor & Nguyen, 2020)

The present cluster provides interesting insights from a methodological point of view. The prevalence of terms like “longitudinal study”, “controlled study”, and “cross-sectional study” indicates a solid empirical foundation underpinning this body of work.

Ageing Populations in different Context (Brown Cluster)

The Brown Cluster groups together papers that conceptualise “elderly population” not simply as an age-based demographic, but as a socio-political construct shaped by policy environments, geographic contexts, and institutional narratives. The recurring presence of the term “United States” suggests that much of this literature either directly focuses on the U.S. case or implicitly treats it as a benchmark for comparison.

Karlin & Weil (2017) compare frameworks of healthy ageing across countries, revealing how American perspectives tend to emphasise individual responsibility, productivity, and health optimisation, reflecting broader neoliberal ideologies around ageing. This contrasts with more collectivist or rights-based approaches observed elsewhere.

A complementary angle explores how elderly populations perceive the age-friendliness of their environments across various European regions, exposing how U.S.-centred models of active ageing may not fully account for cultural or structural specificities elsewhere (Ivan et al., 2024).

Finally, other papers discuss that ageing in geographically and economically marginal contexts, showing how structural vulnerability is compounded by place-based exclusions, a theme highly relevant in U.S. discussions around ageing in rural or climate-affected areas (Sandra, 2017).

Discussion

The complexity of supporting older adults in the labour market cannot be effectively addressed through isolated actions or one-dimensional theoretical approaches. As demonstrated in the preceding sections of this report, the academic literature offers a wide range of perspectives – from institutional and organisational frameworks to psychological and social approaches – providing theoretical models, empirical evidence, and practical recommendations. These perspectives reflect, on the one hand, the evolution and deepening of scholarly engagement with the issue of later-life labour market inclusion, and on the other, the considerable fragmentation of the field – both methodologically and institutionally. In light of this diversity of approaches and the inconsistency of practice, the need for integrated strategies becomes particularly urgent – strategies that connect individual, organisational, and systemic factors shaping professional activity in later life.

To respond to the research questions, this discussion section is structured in two parts: first, it examines how the reviewed literature aligns – or diverges – from the theoretical foundations outlined in the background (Section 5.1); second, it explores the range of policy, organisational, and managerial solutions proposed to sustain the professional inclusion of older workers (Section 5.2). Through this structure, the section aims to reconcile conceptual expectations with empirical findings and to assess the extent to which current approaches meet the challenges of an ageing workforce.

Reconciling Theoretical Foundations with Empirical Trends

The findings confirm and extend the conceptual tensions outlined in the background literature on support for the professional activity of older adults. According to Ilmarinen (2001), the notion of “work ability” remains a central, albeit evolving, reference point. While traditionally rooted in biomedical and ergonomic assessments, current research reveals a broadening of the concept to include psychological well-being, digital inclusion, and place-based autonomy (Motomura et al., 2024; Zhang & Cheng, 2024). This evolution is particularly visible in the Red and Purple Clusters, where ageing is framed not merely in terms of capacity loss, but as a process shaped by context, identity, and design.

The review also confirms the persistence of institutionalised stereotypes and cultural barriers (Taylor and Walker, 1998; Loretto et al., 2000). However, recent studies take a more nuanced approach, addressing how such stereotypes are embedded within specific policy narratives and technological solutions. Gerling et al. (2020) highlight how discourses of “active ageing” can reinforce expectations of productivity and independence, even as they seek to empower older adults. These findings complicate earlier calls for anti-ageist HRM strategies by revealing how empowerment narratives themselves can become exclusionary.

From an HRM perspective, the expected emphasis on flexible work arrangements and age-sensitive HR practices is only partially reflected in the dataset (Kooij et al., 2010). While flexibility and post-retirement employment appear as relevant topics in the Orange Cluster, many contributions focus instead on broader dynamics such as emotional well-being, social participation, and informal caregiving (Mazumdar et al., 2021; Longacre et al., 2017). This suggests a growing recognition that older workers’ professional activity is deeply entangled with family, community, and care structures, challenging the idea that organisational solutions alone can address the complexity of ageing in the workforce.

Moreover, while earlier literature advocates for a diversity-sensitive approach to inclusion (Post & Byron, 2015; Truxillo et al., 2015), the bibliometric analysis reveals limited integration between diversity management and ageing studies. Although some work incorporates intersectional considerations, there is a relative lack of

engagement with gender, migration, or class as compounding dimensions of exclusion. This gap points to a potential area for theoretical enrichment and suggests that the current literature may still be operating within siloed disciplinary boundaries.

The geographical patterns identified in the review further reinforce the findings of Armstrong-Stassen (2008), who emphasised the uneven implementation of age-inclusive strategies across contexts. The strong presence of North American, European, and Australian contributions confirms that most empirical insights derive from settings with established policy infrastructures and demographic urgency.

Policy and Organisational Solutions for Supporting Older Workers

Thematic findings highlight a range of strategies aimed at fostering the professional inclusion of older adults, though these vary in scope and coherence across contexts.

At the policy level, many studies (Red and Brown Clusters) refer to national and international frameworks such as “active ageing” or “productive ageing”. While European approaches tend to promote intergenerational solidarity, U.S.-based policies focus more on personal responsibility and activation (Karlin & Weil, 2017; Ivan et al., 2024). However, authors note that without practical tools, such as pension flexibility or accessible training, these narratives remain largely aspirational (Sandra, 2017).

Organisational strategies, particularly from the Orange Cluster, stress the importance of HR practices such as flexible hours, gradual retirement, and supportive work environments (Kooij et al., 2010; Mazumdar et al., 2021). Yet, these are often inconsistently applied and not well integrated into broader diversity frameworks (Armstrong-Stassen, 2008; Post & Byron, 2015).

Managerial approaches increasingly emphasise relational dynamics over formal processes. Leadership support, inclusive communication, and recognition of older workers’ roles in knowledge sharing are key to fostering sustained engagement (Gerling et al., 2020; Evans & Nistrup, 2020). Studies also underline how emotional and social factors shape participation, especially in caregiving or community contexts (Longacre et al., 2017).

Technology appears as both an enabler and a challenge. Digital tools can promote autonomy and inclusion, but only if designed with attention to trust, accessibility, and user experience (Alzyoudi & Mazroui, 2024; De Angeli et al., 2020).

Finally, place-based factors are emerging as central. Access to public transport, green areas, and age-friendly infrastructure can support continued participation in professional and voluntary roles (Motomura et al., 2024; Zhang & Cheng, 2024).

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how academic research has addressed support for the professional activity of older adults, with the aim of mapping both bibliometric trends (RQ1) and strategic frameworks (RQ2) to enable age-inclusive employment. The issue gains salience from the demographic ageing of workforces and the paradigm shift formalised by the European Parliament's 2012 Resolution on "Active Ageing and Intergenerational Solidarity", which frames ageing as a resource. However, enduring stereotypes and inconsistent HR practices (Taylor & Walker, 1998; Kooij et al., 2010) underscore persistent tensions between inclusive discourse and practice.

To address this, this research adopted a SLR supported by bibliometric and co-occurrence analysis, a recognised method for clarifying fragmented and multidisciplinary domains (Zupic & Čater, 2015; Massaro et al., 2016). This dual approach allowed to identify dominant themes while uncovering gaps in integration across disciplines and practices.

From a theoretical point of view, the results reflect a clear shift from deficit-based to asset-based approaches to ageing (Gerling et al., 2020; Zhang & Cheng, 2024). While HRM theory has stressed flexible and differentiated practices (Kooij et al., 2010), most contributions concentrate on emotional well-being, informal caregiving, and participation beyond traditional employment, revealing a broader notion of "support" for older workers (Longacre et al., 2017; Mazumdar et al.,

2021). Critical perspectives highlight how activation policies, though framed as empowering, may reinforce expectations of productivity that marginalise more vulnerable ageing trajectories (Evans & Nistrup, 2020; Foster & Walker, 2015). Moreover, although diversity management offers tools to support inclusion (Post & Byron, 2015), intersectional factors remain largely underexplored.

From a practical point of view, active ageing frameworks vary widely: European models emphasise solidarity, while U.S. approaches often focus on individual responsibility (Karlin & Weil, 2017). Yet, without concrete tools, such as flexible pensions or accessible upskilling, these narratives risk superficiality (Sandra, 2017). Organisationally, fragmented HR strategies must evolve into systemic, inclusive models that value older workers as knowledge holders and contributors (Armstrong-Stassen, 2008; Truxillo et al., 2015). Technological tools also play a dual role, as enablers of autonomy, but only if aligned with accessibility and trust (De Angeli et al., 2020; Alzyoudi & Mazroui, 2024). Finally, place-based infrastructures, public transport, green spaces, age-friendly design, emerge as crucial to sustained professional and social engagement (Motomura et al., 2024).

This review offers three main contributions. First, it synthesises dispersed literature into a coherent thematic map. Second, it advances a multidimensional framework that spans individual, organisational, and spatial dimensions. Third, it identifies fragmentation and limited interdisciplinarity as barriers to more inclusive approaches.

Nonetheless, limitations remain. The review's language and database scope exclude non-English and grey literature. Future studies should widen the corpus to include practice-led and Global South perspectives. Second, while conceptually rich, many studies lack empirical validation. Longitudinal and intervention-based designs are needed. Third, the neglect of intersectionality signals the need for more nuanced, equity-focused frameworks. Finally, regional disparities in research call for increased attention to contexts where ageing and labour policy evolve under different structural pressures.

Ultimately, ensuring the professional inclusion of older adults requires rethinking work not as an endpoint but as a dynamic and relational process, shaped by organisational systems, societal narratives, and material infrastructures that either enable or constrain meaningful ageing trajectories.

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