

Understanding Ageism

What is Ageism?

Ageism refers to stereotypes (how we **think**), prejudice (how we **feel**), and discrimination (how we **act**) towards others or ourselves **based on age**. It can affect people at any stage of life.

Ageism can manifest in various ways that reinforce inaccurate expectations about what people can or cannot do at different ages:

Forms

- **Benevolent:** Well-intentioned attitudes and behaviours that limit autonomy
- **Ambivalent:** A mix of positive and negative attitudes about age resulting in inconsistent or unequal treatment
- **Hostile:** Openly negative attitudes or behaviours toward people based on age

Levels

- **Institutional:** Organizational policies, practices, and norms that disadvantage people based on age
- **Interpersonal:** Everyday interactions shaped by assumptions about someone's age
- **Internalized:** Age-based beliefs that people adopt and apply to themselves

Ageism often appears in subtle, normalized ways. Many assumptions about age are embedded in cultural norms and daily habits that are rarely recognized as bias or intended to be harmful.

Intersectionality and Ageism

Intersectionality refers to the idea that people's experiences are shaped by multiple social identities such as age, gender, or race, and that these identities interact to influence experiences of advantage or disadvantage.

One common example is the intersection of age and ability. Many stereotypes about aging, especially in later life, are based on assumptions about physical or cognitive decline, even when a person does not experience these limitations.

Recognizing these intersections helps shift attention away from inaccurate assumptions and toward what individuals actually need to participate and succeed. This approach supports the creation of environments that accommodate diverse physical, cognitive, sensory, and social needs across all age groups.



Why Focus on Older Adults in Higher Education?

Although ageism can affect people at any stage of life, colleges and universities have historically been structured around younger and middle-aged students and employees. This focus has contributed to longstanding assumptions about who “fits” in higher education, creating barriers for older adults pursuing learning or employment.

Older adults bring valuable experience, mentorship, and institutional knowledge to campus communities. Yet, age-based assumptions may still influence how they are perceived and included. Recognizing and addressing ageism, particularly toward older adults, is therefore necessary for fostering inclusive environments that support engagement across the lifespan.

As a member of the Age-Friendly University (AFU) Global Network, UCalgary—through the Centre on Aging—is working to build a campus where people of all ages can learn, contribute, and thrive.

Strategies to Combat Ageism

The World Health Organization has identified three evidence-based approaches for reducing ageism: policy and law, education, and intergenerational interventions. In higher education, each of these strategies can help build more age-inclusive environments.

1 Policy and law

Policy interventions focus on creating systems and practices that prevent age-based discrimination and ensure fair access for people at every stage of life. These measures help establish campus environments where individuals of all ages can participate fully and equitably.



2 Education

Educational interventions aim to correct misconceptions about aging and reduce bias by providing accurate, realistic information. These efforts help foster age-positive attitudes among campus members.



3 Intergenerational

Intergenerational activities bring people of different ages together and are especially effective for reducing stereotypes and prejudice. In higher education, these experiences enhance understanding across age groups, challenge assumptions, and strengthen campus connections.



Want to Learn More?

World Health Organization. 2021. [Global Campaign to Combat Ageism](#).

Canadian Coalition Against Ageism. 2025. [Ageism Toolkit](#).

**This summary is adapted from the Centre on Aging’s [Age-Inclusive Guide](#).
Explore the full guide to learn more.**

