

# What does retirement mean for academics?

THE [timeshighereducation.com/features/what-does-retirement-mean-for-academics](http://timeshighereducation.com/features/what-does-retirement-mean-for-academics)

12/7/2016

My first boss, the chairman of my department when I was a young lecturer, was Wilfrid Harrison. Even though there was approximately 40 years' difference between our ages, I would have described Wilfrid as a friend.

He was a distinguished and influential figure in many ways: the first person to be appointed a teaching fellow in politics alone at an Oxford college, a former editor of *Political Studies* and a founding member of the Political Studies Association – which still awards a major prize honouring his name. He was also the founding professor of the department, at the University of Warwick, in which I spent 35 years.

When Wilfrid retired, properly and traditionally at the age of 65, he sold all his books, severed all substantive contact with universities and devoted himself to his wife, his daughters, his dogs and his cooking (my memories of the latter are centred on the observation that whisky and cream seemed to feature in all his dishes).

In many respects, Wilfrid's retirement took the classic form described by literature's most famous retiree, King Lear, at the beginning of Shakespeare's play:

*'tis our fast intent  
To shake all cares and business from our age  
Conferring them on younger strengths while we  
Unburden'd crawl toward death.*

I plan to ignore the rest of the story, in which Lear's retirement proceeds very badly indeed, and to concentrate on the purity of his intentions. One's time has come, so one abandons the job and lets younger people get on with it. "Unburden'd" sounds good, "crawl toward death" less so, although it might be a long crawl, with many pleasures on the way.

The Lear-Harrison Model, as we can call it, was once the way almost everybody retired. My grandfathers, a ship's captain and a shopkeeper, also gave it all up at 65 and didn't go near their previous work again. My father, a headteacher, retired a little earlier, somewhat disillusioned, cancelled his subscription to the *Times Educational Supplement* and stayed as far away from schools as he could manage.

How very different from the retirements of most of my academic contemporaries! I will call their style the Bulge Model, because its chief practitioners are people born in the years after the Second World War. I sometimes sit among career academics of my own age and hear tales of an entirely different kind. Nobody admits to complete retirement. There are various kinds of semi-retirement, and retirement at different ages. Multiple retirement is the order of the day (since you ask, I have retired three times, the first being at the age of 57). There are buy-backs by universities short of someone to teach a lecture course or to prop up their research output. There are book contracts still to be fulfilled. There are visiting posts and emeritus ranks. Then there are committee memberships and consultancies, articles to write and enormously important bodies to advise.

In not very extremis, we suffer from MOGS: Mad Old Git Syndrome. The chief symptom of this is use of the phrase "busier than ever". In extremis, the patient actually turns into a white rabbit with grey whiskers who scampers around all day saying nothing but "busier than ever". The cure, some believe, is for a young person to put an arm round the patient and say, very slowly and loudly: "Daddy, but you haven't got a job!" For what it's worth, the distinct minority of female academics of my age are, for the most part, at least as prone to MOGS as the men, although in some cases grandmotherly duties provide an antidote.

A starting point for understanding the shift in retirement models must be the observation that it applies to other members of the Bulge generation as well. Thus, any contemporary former “businessman” one plays golf or tennis with is likely to bang on about stipendiary directorships, consultancies and at least one unrefusable offer made in the past month. But the proportions are different: some retired businessmen are mad old gits: nearly all academics are. And there can be no doubt that academic work just lingers in ways that other work does not: doctoral students don’t finish when you retire, and you are still somebody’s obvious choice to put a particular case at a conference or examine a particular candidate or review a particular book. Most likely, the person making the choice about such matters neither knows nor cares that you are retired.

Lingering effects occur more naturally for those in the arts and humanities than for natural scientists or those who had more administrative roles, but I did have a scientific relative who was still supervising doctorates in his late seventies, and I have come across another septuagenarian teaching undergraduate physics. By comparison, although he was vastly more important than I was, Wilfrid had no doctoral students (they were rare in those days), attended no conferences and had, in his own opinion, published quite enough for one lifetime.

Undoubtedly, the lingering effect has been exacerbated – in the UK, at least – by research assessment. I realise that this has broadened in scope since my day, but the effect over the long term has been to make current, full-time career academics concentrate on “research” in a fairly narrow, points-scoring sense, leaving a labour shortage for a variety of other forms of academic production – thus, obviously, the teaching taken on by the elderly scientists I have mentioned, but also textbooks, dictionaries, encyclopedias and a great deal of media work that the harassed mid-career academic is not going to find time for.

There are also questions of fashion, social norms and expectations. I have had many older relatives and friends who were *proud* of being retired. They had paid their dues, done their bit, had nothing left to prove and were pleased to have been sufficiently prudent and well organised to be able to afford to live comfortably without working. But I don’t feel like that, and I don’t think most of my generation do. We moved quite suddenly from a feeling that everyone should be prepared to move on, so that younger people could have more opportunities, to the idea that it is good to continue, and a mark of success that people want you to continue. The formal validation of this change, in the UK, was the abolition of the compulsory retirement age in 2011.

My first retirement – when I ceased to receive a salary – was in 2004. But teaching on degree programmes continued for 10 more years, and I still give the odd non-examinable guest lecture. Doctoral supervision went on for about four years. I lingered at conferences for about six; currently, I still get invited, but not funded. I hung on to an office for seven years; finally being asked to vacate it was a bit of a drag, not because I wanted to sit in it but because it was a repository of books, files, pictures and so on, which I then had to dispose of. I was just wondering how long it was since I’d written a reference for someone when a request popped up in my email, which I granted between paragraphs of this article. And then there are many things that still continue, including writing books and articles, and all the “rent-a-gob” media stuff.

At the heart of the difference between the two retirement models is their concept of work. When someone asks me “Have you given up work?”, my wife kindly replies for me: “He never worked” – or, alternatively, “How would we/he know?” I have no problem with these responses. For 35 years, my maternal grandfather captained ships, 10 of which were subject to U-boat attack (he was shipwrecked three times). I read and wrote books and articles and talked to nice young people for 35 years. There is no comparison between what we did, and there can be no comparison between what it means to stop doing it. My wife’s point about never having worked is entirely well taken and can be illustrated by the confession that I used to find my hobbies more stressful than my work. Putting out a cricket team – assembling the right number of players, minibus drivers, balls, scorebooks, scorers and cups of tea – is considerably more onerous than academic work, even before you try actually winning the game or pacifying your No 8 batsman, who has always thought he was a natural No 5.

It does seem pretty obvious, however, that the Bulge Model is now doomed. Indeed, I can imagine that younger academics might see this article as mocking their condition. Those who are 40 years younger than me and just

getting into their stride are unlikely to have anything like the range of options we had. When they reach standard retirement age, they will have had anything resembling tenure for a much shorter period, and will have started paying into a pension fund much later (I was 22). They will have spent much more of their professional lives in the stressful pursuit of such things as research funding and a permanent post. They will have to work longer, whether they want to or not, and their pensions will be based on their average rather than their final salary. Under those circumstances, it is easy to imagine them moving back to the Lear-Harrison Model and saying to themselves: “Thank God that’s over.”

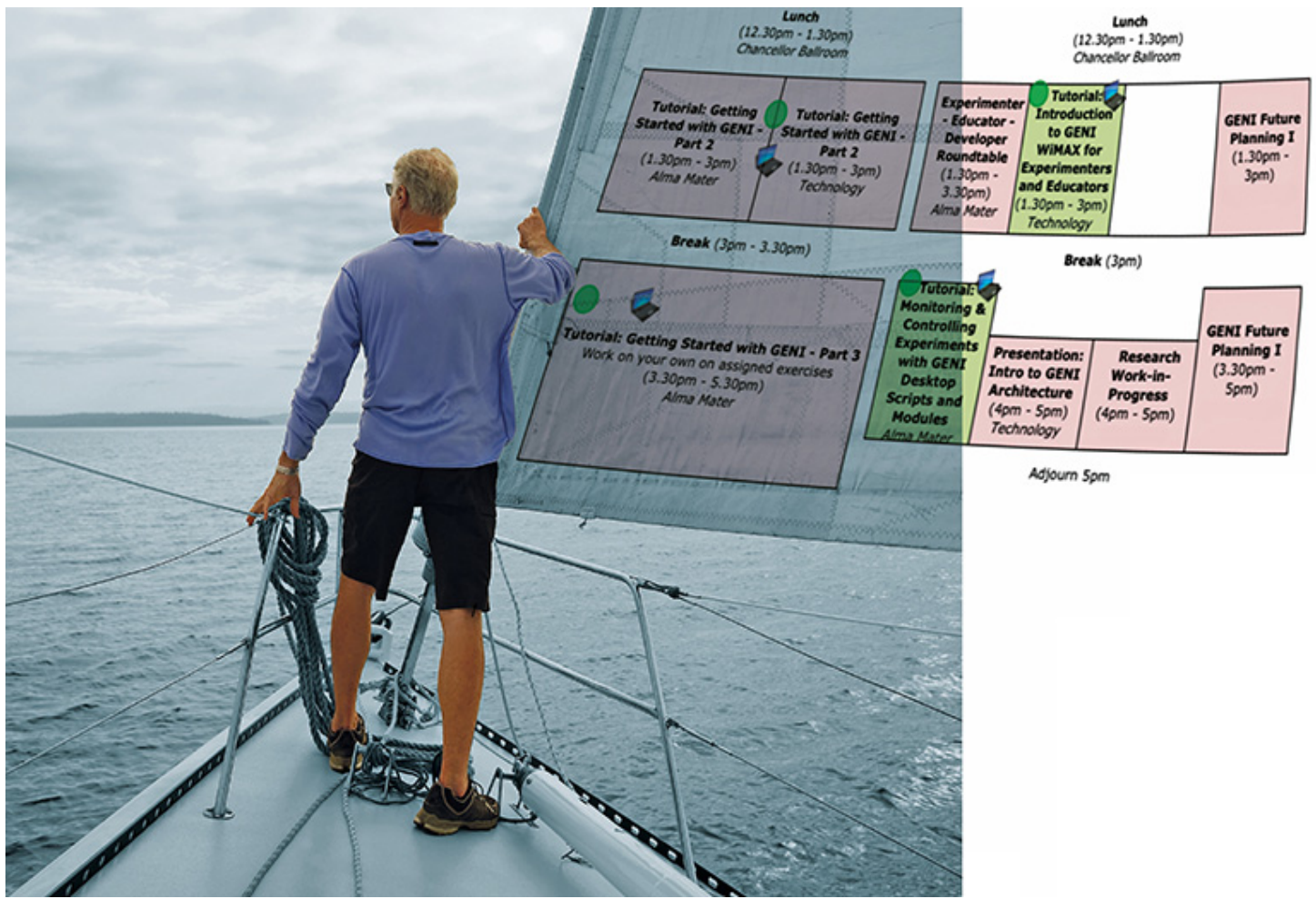
There are some further comments on the Bulge Model that need to be made. Retired academics’ lives may feel only a bit like genuine retirement, but that bit is real. There has always been, for me, the satisfying joy of *not* being an employee. But there is a recurring unpleasant moment that arises when you come across something – a book, a film, a quotation, an example – that would fit perfectly into your lecture in *n*th week. And then you realise that you will never use it, and that the crawl towards death has begun. There are many ways of expressing yourself as a Bulge retiree, but none of them is quite as satisfying as delivering a full-year module to able students. I even know one contemporary who texts his successor with lecture ideas.

The Bulge Model also leaves a difficult question, which was dealt with automatically under the Lear-Harrison Model: when do you finally bow out? When you are invited to give a lecture and nobody turns up but you’re glad anyway because you can’t remember what you were going to say? Or when, in a fleeting glimmer of perspicacity, you realise that you’ve written the same article this week as you wrote last week?

Probably someone else decides for you: “Daddy, you *really* don’t have a job any more.”

**Lincoln Allison is emeritus reader in politics at the [University of Warwick](#). Along with fellow retiree Alan Tomlinson, he has just completed a book on *Understanding International Sports Organisations*.**

---



Source:

Getty

## There are significant existential questions: what is my current and future purpose? And is that mortality I see in the (hopefully) far distance?

Benjamin Franklin famously remarked that nothing can be said to be certain except death and taxes. However, if you cheat death for long enough, there is another certainty: retirement. Yet, like an embarrassing disease, nobody speaks about it. In fact, the term “retirement” isn’t used at all any longer: people talk about the “next phase” instead. But let’s agree that while you may do other things in the future, when there is no more full-time work, no more of what has defined you for more than four decades, that is retirement.

It brings many advantages. The lifting of the burden of accountability and the demise of free-floating anxiety are especially welcome. Almost every retiree loses weight and becomes more active. Some even see their blood pressure returning to normal. There is the joy of doing simple things: if you want to spend an hour reading the newspaper with a coffee, you can just do it. If the cricket is beamed in from Australia in the middle of the night, you can just watch it. Gardening is actually quite good fun, especially if it requires the buying of a whole new set of toys. There are so many good books to read. And whoever said that lunch is the second best pleasure of the flesh was right on the money.

Almost everybody does more travelling, too. The benefits of off-peak train fares and hotel tariffs become apparent, and the quiet is especially welcome – although I have also noticed that many a grandiose plan to travel the world is permanently shelved for the pleasure of looking after grandchildren. Either way, there is a pervading sense of being



much more relaxed.

But not everything in the garden is rosy. Three challenges resonate with all retirees when I talk to them. The first is income. Many of my generation have the benefit of a good pension, and we should be very grateful for that. However, almost nobody's pension pays the same as their previous salary. Everyone wonders how they will manage, and there is added tension over how much of your pot you need to save for support in later life.

Second, rediscovering who your partner is and renegotiating your relationship after all those years of separate toil entails both pleasures and challenges.

Finally, and most deeply, there are significant existential questions: what is my current and future purpose? And is that mortality I see in the (hopefully) far distance?

I have three thoughts on that last issue. First, as you retire, many people say to you things like "You must give back to society" and "Someone like you will have to find something to do". I find such remarks quite presumptuous. I have known people who were very driven at work but who do nothing but relax, play golf and fish on retirement. On the other hand, there are those retirees who seem incapable of doing anything else but building a burdensome portfolio of paid and pro bono work. The simple answer is that this is your retirement, not someone else's. There is no moral right or wrong about how you play it: it is for you to decide.

Second, you must remember that you have a past. Virtually all human beings try to do good, and nearly all of us will have made a positive difference in one way or other. We should not bask in glory about that, but there is no harm in taking quiet satisfaction in remembering it. There is a profound sense of completion in the act of leaving the field of play. Your innings is over, you didn't do so badly and now the pavilion and rest beckon. There is no obligation for you to take up the bat again.

Unfortunately, many people think you should. For those who were senior executives, opportunities will be laid out like Balthazar's feast, especially for pro bono work, and it is easy to be ensnared into applying, being short-listed and interviewed. But if you are ultimately rejected, there are psychological consequences, and many are left wondering why they ever started in the first place.

So my third piece of advice is to remember in these interactions that you are the commodity, not the client. Your involvement is the result of the real client's effort to assemble an interesting shortlist. Personally, I find the idea that you have to compete to give significantly and freely of your own time challenging. I understand the issue of governance, but I certainly wouldn't have to compete to give the equivalent cash donation.

In short, there is no good or bad retirement, only yours. It is probably the first time in your life that you can do precisely what you want. Be comfortable with that, and be wary of siren voices.

**Sir Eric Thomas was vice-chancellor of the [University of Bristol](#) between 2001 and 2015, and was president of Universities UK from 2011 to 2013.**

---

Source:

Getty/Alamy montage

**Now in my Manhattan pied-à-terre, I decided to focus on activities that would make at least some use of my academic training – but without the constraints of full-time employment**

*Times Higher Education* readers may recall that my retirement from the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth three years ago was precipitated by the Boston Marathon bombing ("[Fallout from the Boston Marathon bombings](#)", 7

November 2013). I had been suspended for disseminating information about the failing UMass grades of one of the



bombers, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, and ultimately decided to take the generous retirement package on offer. After more than four decades fighting administrators less concerned with academic standards than with the bottom line, I was already thoroughly disaffected. Still, I was unable to overcome the force of inertia and actually retire.

Anyone who doubts the power of inertia should consider my two closest friends and colleagues. One, then aged 79, was living 60 miles from campus but attempted unsuccessfully to continue lecturing despite quadruple bypass surgery, closely followed by rehospitalisation for breathing difficulties; the other, aged 72, suffers from both pancreatic and liver cancer that require monthly chemotherapy treatments and regular hospitalisation but has yet to retire. Courageous, to be sure, but – as he himself fully acknowledges – also insane.

My first inkling of academic insanity took a somewhat different form during my interview with the dean of arts and sciences at my 1972 contract signing. Just beginning my full-time, tenure-track academic career, I listened in wonderment as he went on at considerable length about the generous retirement terms then being offered by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Once the combined total of age and years in service reached the magic number of 96, I would qualify for 80 per cent of my final salary and no longer pay either union dues or state income tax – worth an additional 10 per cent. Nor, of course, would I pay federal tax on that sum, so I would be left in effect with my full pre-retirement salary... Was the man deranged, I wondered? Of what possible interest could such detailed information be to a 28-year-old? Oh, callow youth!

When time and tide inevitably did beckon me, I could not have more appreciated the wisdom of that former *old man*. Thus, a one-bedroom pied-à-terre on the Upper East Side of Manhattan (my version of migrating to the South) was affordable even for part-time use.

While a city such as New York offers an endless array of stimulating activities, I decided to focus on those that would

make at least some use of my academic training – but without the constraints of full-time paid employment. My daughter, who helps to administer a major non-profit corporation, suggested that I volunteer with the national Americorps programme. Designed, in part, to place retired professionals in settings that can benefit from their expertise, in New York it focuses on assisting the staff of secondary schools with at-risk minority students. In my case, I was assigned to the Thurgood Marshall Academy in Harlem, where I supported the efforts of the extraordinarily dedicated 23-year-old [Columbia University](#) graduate in charge of college placement.

My specific thrice-weekly assignments included helping students write the notorious “college essay” and, after they were accepted, the financial aid application. But once I was fully integrated, students came to me for help with a variety of writing assignments and general classroom preparation. One young man, whose life had been saved by a kidney transplant when he was 12 years old, wanted me to help him rehearse his PowerPoint presentation on, of all things, the function of excretion. (My doctoral research on Jonathan Swift very much came to the fore!)

I also interacted with the other end of the age spectrum by teaching five-week mini-courses at the 92nd Street Y cultural and community centre. Because the same three dozen people kept showing up, I had to organise these discussions of poems, plays, short stories and novels around different themes each session. The last of these was “The ‘60s”, starting with Bob Dylan’s *The Times They Are A-Changin’* and ending with David Lodge’s *Changing Places*. Once I mistakenly referred to my students as belonging to my own “demographic”, only to be corrected by a 93-year-old woman who said that she had a daughter my age! That, and the applause at the end of every session, was all the compensation I needed.

New York museum exhibitions and theatre performances are, of course, plentiful, and I make good use of the complimentary tickets to top Broadway productions that I receive in exchange for reviewing for the French journal *Cahiers Élisabéthains*. That said, when I occasionally return to UMass for mail or for lunch with former students, I’m poignantly reminded that I’m now invisible to current students and that a significant part of my professional life is fully over.

And whenever a colleague contemplating retirement asks me whether I would recommend it, my customary response is to fall back on that old standby of psychotherapists: “Well, what do you think?”

**Richard Larschan is emeritus professor of English at the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth.**