

# European Union policy on older adult learning: A review of issues and future options

**Marvin Formosa PhD**

European Centre of Gerontology,

University of Malta

marvin.formosa@um.edu.mt

## EU policy and older adult learning

In recent years it has become virtually impossible to locate a policy document issued by the European Commission [EC] that makes no reference to lifelong learning (Findsen and Formosa, 2011). The Commission declared 1996 to be the European Year of Lifelong Learning and published a series of directives that left no doubt as to the lynchpin status of the concept in EU socio-economic and political policy. This ‘fixation’ with lifelong learning reflects two key facets of the EU’s modus operandi - namely, economic competitiveness and citizenship. On one hand, the EU shares the dominant global concern with regard to the strategic importance of lifelong learning “in meeting the challenges of globalization and the emergence of knowledge economies, promoting the competitiveness of national economies, creating jobs and reducing unemployment, and securing the social inclusion of groups at risk of exclusion” (Hake, 2006 : 37). Indeed, lifelong learning has been adopted as the basis of the EU’s education and training strategy to achieve the Lisbon objective - namely, making the continent “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion” by 2010 (EC, 2000a : 3). On the other hand, the EU believes that lifelong learning holds the potential to unite the member states of this diverse continent into a coherent whole. Although the initial countries in the union were wealthy capitalist countries from Western Europe with a great deal of common and overlapping history, the EU now incorporates countries from both the Eastern Bloc and Southern Europe that have a very differentiated history and are less economically advanced. Through lifelong learning the EU hoped to introduce a new form of citizenship, “a sense of belonging to overlapping (local and global) communities of interest and affection” (Held et al., 1999 : 449). It was emphasized that

Lifelong learning will facilitate an enhancement of citizenship through the sharing of common values, and the development of a sense of belonging to a common social and economic area. It must encourage a broader-based understanding of citizenship, founded on active solidarity and on mutual understanding of the cultural diversities that constitute Europe’s originality and richness. (EC, 1997 : 4)

Following the millennium, the EC published the *Memorandum on lifelong learning* (2000b) and *Making a European area of lifelong learning a reality* (2001 : 33) where lifelong learning was defined as “all learning activities undertaken throughout life with the aim of improving

knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and / or employment related perspective”. In June 2002, the European Council of Heads of State and Governments adopted a *Resolution on lifelong learning*, as the guiding principle for the reform of education and training in the member states, and which argued that lifelong learning is an “indispensable means for promoting social cohesion, active citizenship, personal and professional fulfilment, adaptability and employability” (CEC, 2002 : 1). Furthermore, it was underlined that lifelong learning “should enable all persons to acquire the necessary knowledge to take part as active citizens in the knowledge society and the labour market” (ibid.).

## **EU and older adult learning**

Older persons were a late entry in policy documents as it was only in 2006 - some eleven years after the first policy document - that late-life learning was first mentioned. This was during a time when the EU was expressing serious reservations as to whether member states were making adequate progress towards the targets of economic growth and job creation established in Lisbon. One key preoccupation consisted in the decreasing average age at which older persons exited from the labor force into retirement when (i) by 2030 the number of younger Europeans (>24 years) will fall by 15 percent, (ii) the old-age dependency ratio in 2060 for the EU27 is projected to more than double from its current level, (iii), whereas currently in the EU27 there are four persons of working age (15-64 years old) for every person aged 65 years or over this number is expected to fall to two by 2060, and (iv), the median age in the EU 27 is projected to rise from 40.4 years in 2008 to 47.9 years in 2060. Arguing that the participation of older workers in the workforce is vital to the development of socially inclusive economies and the reduction of the risk of social exclusion among the older population, the EU issued directives calling for active employment policies to discourage older workers from leaving the workforce and the development incentives to stay in work (CEC, 2004). Although the key argument consisted in that lifelong learning and access to training must provide older workers with the necessary skills to adapt to changes on the employment market, with the EU encouraging member states to use the European Social Fund to develop active labor market policies (ibid.), the subsequent documents *Adult Learning: It is never too late to learn* (2006) and *Action Plan on Adult Learning* (2007) attempted at developing a more holistic approach to older adult learning. Stressing that the growing numbers of retirees in Europe should be regarded as a potential source of educators and trainers for adult learning, the former posited two objectives for lifelong learning as far as older adults are concerned:

[1] to ensure a longer working life, there is a need for up-skilling and increasing lifelong learning opportunities for older workers. It is widely acknowledged that in order to keep older workers employable, investment is needed throughout the life cycle and should be supported by government, professional bodies and sectors...[2] an expansion of learning provision for retired people is needed (including for instance increasing participation of mature students in higher education)...Learning should be an integral part of this new phase in their lives...the Commission invited universities to “be more open to providing courses for students at a later stage of their life cycle”. Such provisions will have a vital role in keeping, retired people in touch with their social environment (EC, 2006 : 8-9).

The *Action Plan on Adult Learning* (EC, 2007) reiterates the assumption that in a ‘knowledge-based’ and ‘aging’ society, access to lifelong learning is a condition for both economic growth and social cohesion. However, although it calls upon member states to ensure sufficient investment in the education of older people, it is disappointing that the document does not address the issue of late-life learning in any specific detail. As the following excerpt shows, the directive seeks to locate one solution for all subaltern citizens:

This Action Plan focuses on those who are disadvantaged because of their low literacy levels, inadequate work skills and/or skills for successful integration into society...these could include migrants, older people, women or persons with a disability. It starts from the premise that the need for a high quality and accessible adult learning system is no longer a point of discussion, given the challenges Europe has to meet in the coming years: [i] to reduce labour shortages due to demographic changes by raising skill levels in the workforce generally and by upgrading low-skilled workers...[ii] to address the problem of the persistent high number of early school leavers (nearly 7 million in 2006)...[iii] to reduce the persistent problem of poverty and social exclusion among marginalised groups...[iv] to increase the integration of migrants in society and labour market...[and v] to increase participation in lifelong learning and particularly to address the fact that participation decreases after the age of 34. (EC, 2007 : 3)

In an attempt to link policy with practice, as well as aiding member states reach the directives’ objectives, the EU coordinates the Grundtvig program which provides funding for projects on lifelong learning. Priority 6 in the Grundtvig guide pledges financial resources to learning programs related to ‘teaching and learning in later life’ and ‘intergenerational and family learning’ (EC, 2010). More specifically, funding is promised to programs engaging in “[i] transferring knowledge, methods and good practice for senior citizen education, [ii] equipping senior citizens with the skills that they need in order to cope with change and remain active in society, [iii] strengthening the contribution of older people to the learning of others, and [iv]. innovative approaches to inter-generational and family learning” (ibid.: 29-30). Over the last ten years, the Grundtvig program has supported many projects aimed at promoting active aging and solidarity between generations. The breadth of funded projects is impressive as a recent mapping exercise identified some 200 initiatives covering a range of learning activities, but mostly, elearning, inter-generational learning, and older volunteering (Soulsby, 2010). Table 1 provides information on a small sample of Grundtvig projects on learning in later life.

Although the list is not complete of all that is being done and has been done, it shows a clear emphasis on information and communication technology, volunteering, and intergenerational learning. It also signifies how the notions of ‘active citizen’ and ‘voluntary worker’ are considered as key roles in the shaping of future European societies. Whilst training may be required for an optimum functioning of such roles, they are perceived as a means through which older persons may be encouraged to participate in learning. The implementation of Grundtvig projects resulted in a number of clear benefits such as recognizing that older adults are valuable human capital, that in the context of population aging lifelong learning is a necessity rather than a luxury, and that both computer and intergenerational learning offer a great potential for active aging. Another benefit includes the mobilization of national senior organizations to involve

themselves in policy for late-life learning - hence, “a change from a ‘top-down’ to a ‘bottom-up’ approach to policy-making” (Klercq, 2010 : 105). Moreover, instead of waiting for policy makers to become aware of issues around education for older adults, funded programs “prompted initiatives and actions which would put pressure on the policy makers at national and local level to acknowledge the magnitude of the human capital represented by older adults” (ibid.).

**Table 1: A range of Grundtvig projects on late-life learning**

<b>Project</b>	<b>Goal</b>	<b>Website</b>	<b>Duration</b>
SEVEN (Senior European Volunteer Exchange Network)	Promoting international voluntary service in Europe as a lifelong learning tool	<a href="http://www.routestowardseurope.eu">www.routestowardseurope.eu</a>	2006-9
SenEmpower: Empowering seniors to take part in community life	Implementing training programs for members of self-help groups and voluntary initiatives, as well as guidelines for adult educators, seniors’ associations, and local authorities.	<a href="http://www.seven-network.eu">www.seven-network.eu</a>	2007-10
Golden Age	Introducing seniors to IT, focusing on aspects of teaching/learning process and adapting seniors to ICT	<a href="http://goldenage.felk.cvut.cz/index/index_cz.html">http://goldenage.felk.cvut.cz/index/index_cz.html</a>	2004-7
Senior Learning	Designing a user elearning system offering an on-line course for people over the age of 55 to enable them to learn how to use the internet and its services	<a href="http://www.seniorlearning.eu">www.seniorlearning.eu</a>	2006-8
SILVER (Stimulating ICT Learning for active EU elders)	Drafting a sustainable digital literacy and lifelong learning program to provide elders and others with competences and resources to benefit from ICT	<a href="http://www.mondodigitale.org">www.mondodigitale.org</a>	2009-10

*Source:* Klercq, (2010); Soulsby, (2010); EC, (2011)

## **The limits of activity rationales**

EU policy and funding priorities lauds late-life learning for its potential to aid older adults remaining active and find new roles following the end of work and independence of children. This is a valid argument as many an older adult has substantiated how late-life learning helped him/her to adjust, and at times overcome, the physical, social, and psychological challenges brought on by the onset of later life. However, such a rationale has its own limitations. One key lacuna consists of its support of an ideological construction of later life where - to paraphrase Mills (1959) - 'public issues' are projected as 'private troubles'. It is unjust to expect older persons to solve the contemporary problems associated with retirement when such issues surfaced only as the result of wider and structural predicaments. Hence, rationales for late-life learning remain incomplete unless they are framed in terms of a discussion of appropriate provision on behalf of the state for both active and excluded elders. This is because irrespective of older persons' interests and yearning for learning opportunities, structural circumstances continue to impact greatly on the extent of participation in older adult learning.

A general disinterest to participate in learning activities on behalf of non-typical learners - that is, working class, men, those living in rural areas, and elders from ethnic minorities - does not suffice as a complete justification for their invisibility in learning programmes. For instance, one study on working-class participants' access to and experience of learning programmes found interviewees to be highly motivated to acquire new knowledge (Findsen & McCullough, 2008). It is thus more plausible that certain features of the way elder-learning programmes are organized are somehow acting as a barrier to the enrolment of working-class elders whose life situation tends to be characterised by 'at-risk-of-poverty' lifestyles (Formosa, 2009). The low percentage of older men signals strongly that for a number of reasons opportunities for late-life education are not attractive to them. Primarily, third-age learning activities are promoted in avenues - such as health programs on the broadcasting media or through leaflets at health centers - where most of the clients are women. Secondly, late-life learning tends to be 'feminized', with Williamson (2000 : 63) concluding that "in Universities of the Third Age, for example, not only is the membership mostly female, but so are management committees". As Scott and Wenger (1995) stated, older men tend not to want to become involved with old people's organizations they perceive to be dominated by women. Thirdly, courses tend to reflect the interests of the dominant female membership. Research at the Universities of the Third Age in Malta found health promotion courses to be delivered by female tutors with a bias towards women-related health issues such as osteoporosis (Formosa, 2010). Indeed, a cursory look of the subjects offered for the 2011-2012 academic year locates an absence of traditional male interests such as astronomy and zoology (University of Malta, 2011). Although no comparative studies on curricula in late-life learning are available, it is noteworthy that Golding and colleagues (2007 : 7) note how in Australia "adult and community education tends to be underpinned by feminist pedagogies and practice that tends not to encourage or welcome working class masculinities and pedagogies".

One's residential location is also an important variable to consider as only a very limited number of learning programmes tend to be available in 'rural' areas - that is, farms, towns, and small cities located outside urban or metropolitan areas. Research finds that living in rural areas arises as a strong barrier to participation in late-life learners since residents find it difficult to travel to metropolitan areas. Whilst many rural elders (especially women) neither own a driving license

nor a car, public transport tends to be limited in rural areas. The absence of outreach work on behalf of formal and non-formal education providers means that rural elders are generally left out in the cold, with state subsidies and volunteering activities being disproportionately biased in favor to those living in metropolitan areas. Of course, there have been a number of projects which addressed successfully the problems experienced by older learners in rural communities. For instance, the Department of Continuing Education at Lancaster University operated an innovative *Learning from Home* program that enabled groups of adults, many of whom were older people living in rural areas, to engage in learning through telephone conferencing (Withnall, 2010). Another success story is *Stories of Our Age* - coordinated by the Workers Educational Association Northern Ireland and Age Northern Ireland - and which was aimed at older people living rurally to give them the opportunity of having their voices heard on issues affecting them as they grew older, and to offer them the chance to develop some new skills using digital technology (WEANI, 2011).

EU policies on older adult learning are characterised by unwarranted optimism as far as participation is concerned when it is clear that opportunities to learn are not evenly distributed. Although we can celebrate that life expectancy is increasing, and with it the opportunities to live an active life, some groups of older persons are at a higher risk of social exclusion. Indeed, the Grundtvig program is biased by an urge to showcase the potential of the well educated, healthy, and affluent seniors whilst overlooking the increasing dependency ratios and that as much as 19 percent of persons aged 65 and above in the EU (a total of 16 million) experience at-the-risk-of-poverty lifestyles. As Parent (2010 : 88) emphasized, it is important that Grundtvig “respond[s] more effectively to the very diverse and evolving needs of older people and the challenges that to many of them posed by financial constraints, social exclusion, lack of basic skills, digital illiteracy, and discrimination. Whilst ensuring that the freedom of those who choose not to be included is not taken away, policy has the obligation to facilitate the inclusion of persons who, shackled by structural inequalities, are unable to participate in elder-learning. This warrants the drawing of inclusive strategies that overcome class-, ethnic-, and gender-specific barriers that hinder the realization of a more democratic version of elder-learning practice. Financial support and funding is to made available to help those with least initial schooling and those with the lowest levels of income. Achieving a lifelong learning for all necessitates a ‘widening participation’ agenda where policy-makers and providers ‘think out of the box’ to attract older adults who could or would not usually participate in traditional organized provision. The achievement of this objective will indeed be facilitated if the EU mandates local authorities and voluntary agencies a clearer role in the coordination and lead development of older adult learning. Local authorities are to be encouraged to partner with third sector agencies to engender learning hubs that bring all the providers - public, private, and voluntary - to coordinate resources...and promote learning among older people. Diverse agencies have different skills, knowledge, and experience of providing for and supporting older learners. Indeed, a key policy of older adult learning is that programs should be designed with, and not simply for, older people.

## The ideology of productive aging

Another positive aspect of EU policy is a strong commitment to portray aging in a positive light, and especially, highlight the potential of an aging population. In this sense, it provides a welcome respite from traditional policies on social and health care which support the stereotypes of frail elders, and the view of older persons as dependent members of our population. Learning is treated as a key strategy in bringing unprecedented levels of 'productive aging' - which refers to any activity "that contributes to producing goods and services or develops the capacity to produce them" (Caro et al., 1993 : 6). Such activities "are social valued in the sense that, if one individual or group did not perform them, there would be a demand for them to be performed by another individual or group" (Bass & Caro, 2001: 37). The EU's position is admirable as it affirms a cultural ideal, one promoting the idea that older adults can be productive, and hence, counteracting the stereotypes of older adult as 'greedy geezers'.

The problem, however, is that such an commendable rationale is not embedded in a wide range of possible productive lifestyles - ranging from volunteering, informal care, to independent living - but solely in the sphere of paid employment. The assumption is that economic status has the most profound impact on the older adult's ability to experience a meaningful and productive aging experience. Albeit the goals of lifelong learning as premised by the EU also include inclusion, active citizenship, and personal development, nevertheless, the discourse linking 'learning' and 'later life' is biased towards the economic realm. Human experience is surrendered to the controls of the market, so that any notion of meaning detached from 'work' and not defined according to capitalist logic, simply disappears. This stance is not surprising considering that from the very beginning the EU (2001 : *passim*) posits the need to expand lifelong education and learning in terms of the "competitive advantage" that is 'increasingly dependent on investment in human capital', and on knowledge and competences becoming a "powerful engine for economic growth". As Bauman (2005: 121) underlines, the task of achieving a 'more inclusive, tolerant, and democratic' society marked by 'greater participation, higher reported well-being and lower criminality' seems like an afterthought in the EU's documents on lifelong learning, as some kind of natural consequence of a full labor market.

Human capital theory is a key driving point in the EU's vision on lifelong and later learning, as it is assumed that there will be economic payoffs if a society broadens access and opportunities for lifelong learning. Indeed, it is the "future worker-citizen" rather than the "democratic-citizen who is the prime asset of the social investment state", so that one locates a strong interdependence between citizenship and employability (Lister, 2003 : 433). The position promulgated in EU policy for late-life learning is unashamedly economic, where the solution to the 'aging' problem is put as simply finding a way for older people to be economically useful. Yet, it is noteworthy that there is hardly any evidence to support the usefulness of a strong human capital theory for older persons. The increase of opportunities for late-life learning does not result in a surge of older persons going back into either full- or part-time employment, but only a rise in pensioners becoming increasingly active in community and civic engagement affairs. The EU's extensive drive to improve the elearning skills of older is also problematic as this neglects the whole range of abilities of the aging population. Indeed, the dominant emphasis towards elearning that weaves through Grundtvig-funded projects in late-life learning is, ultimately, nothing more than a response to 'skills crisis' in information and communication

technology that characterises older cohorts in European society. As Borg and Mayo (2005) point out, the net result of this European hysteria around ICT skills is an increase in public financing of private needs in an area of human resources that is crucial to latter-day capitalism so that private and public interests and concerns are slowly becoming one. Borg and Mayo (ibid.) conclude that ‘the memorandum’s messages ought to be read against an economic backdrop characterized by a market oriented definition of social viability.

In short, the EU vision on late-life learning never escapes the greater project to render Europe more competitive in the face of fierce competition from the transitional and multinational corporations’ ability to reap the advantages of economies of scale through expansion of international capital mobility. However, aiding older people to remain in paid work represents only one goal amongst others for late-life learning, with other possible objectives being recognizing the diversity of older persons, challenging stereotypes of aging, maximizing social inclusion, maintaining personal independence, and retaining a sense of purpose and meaning. Of course, this does not mean that policies seeking to improve the skilling of older adults should be thrown out of the window since the crucial role of paid work to well-being is well-documented, but only to underline that the vocationalization of late-life learning will not on its own solve the future structural lag in employment or non-sustainability of pensions. As highlighted elsewhere, so that the integration of older persons in the labor market becomes a real possibility, policies must break down barriers to labor market entry with active and preventive measures such as job search assistance, guidance and training (Formosa, 2010). Late-life learning must also be supplemented by measures that break down barriers between age groups in the work place, by taking a holistic approach to the needs and wishes of older workers with respect to motivation, time management, and income and social protection issues (ibid.). It is hoped that in the foreseeable future EU policy on late-life learning embraces a broader perspective of citizenship, one that includes both political and social rights. However, this goal will certainly not be achieved by any type of learning environment and I join other critical educators in stressing the importance of educators and learners to embrace a transformative rationale that - not only dissects the realities surrounding older citizens - but also enables them to imagine and work together towards the realization of a social world that is governed by life-centered values rather than the ideology of the market. Late-life learning has huge potential to expand the opportunities for ‘civic engagement’ for those older persons who choose such a path, and wish to partake in volunteerism that is generally expected from older generations. Moreover, it holds much promise to lead towards higher rates of political activism, a type of activity that despite being central to citizenship has been delegitimized and is absent from the official policy agenda.

### **The limits of third ageism**

Another limitation of EU policy and Grundtvig funding priorities constitutes their celebration and promotion of third age learning, ultimately at the expense of older and more defenceless people - namely, those in the fourth age. The ‘third age’ refers to a specific socio-demographic trend within population aging. It alludes to how the combination of increased longevity and a number of other social factors - ranging from earlier retirement, improving health status, establishment of the welfare institutions of retirement and pensions schemes, to more positive values and beliefs towards older persons - have opened up what could be loosely termed as a new phase in life, in which significant numbers of older persons spend a considerable amount of

time in relative active years following exit from work. The third age thus denotes the emergence of a period of time separating the working years on one hand, and frailty and death on the other (Laslett, 1989). In Weiss and Bass's (2002 : 3) words, the third age is described as a "life phase in which there is no longer employment and child-raising to commander time, and before morbidity enters to limit activity and mortality brings everything to a close". On the other hand, the fourth age refers to "the age of frailty, dependency and being in need of care" (MacKinlay, 2006 : 12). Indeed, even at a relatively young age, many older adults experience complications from strokes, diabetes, and neurological diseases. Suffice to say that as much as 17 and 23 percent of men and women aged over 65 in the EU experience some level of physical dependence (ECFIN, 2006). The range of cognitive limitations experienced in later life is also substantial with, for instance, 9.95 million older adults suffering from some form of dementia in Europe, a figure that should reach approximately 18.65 million by the year 2050 (Alzheimer Disease International, 2010). Indeed, some 8 percent of persons aged over 65 in the EU resided in long-term care settings in 2004 (ECFIN, 2006).

The rationale underpinning fourth age learning is that dependent older adults still hold varied cognitive needs and interests which can be met through learning opportunities. Aldridge (2009) reports on the UK context which includes programs such as the *Music for Life* program consisting of regular weekly activities including quizzes, puzzles, and games and discussions, and *The Signatures Project* which engages older migrants in an eight-week project to assist them in developing their written signatures and learning to print their names. Other literature documents the potential of reminiscence to aid older persons remember forgotten proficiencies and even develop new skills. Housden (2007), for instance, forwards many examples of learning projects in nursing homes which use learners' personal memories as a resource in learning, and where residents have gone on to develop skills in forming and sustaining relationships, oral and written communication, as well as engaging in arts, crafts and literacy. Fourth age learning has also been developed with homebound elders, with most programs providing distance learning through radio, television, and especially, online information and communication technology. Programs providing learning opportunities to older persons at different stages of dementia have also registered varying degrees of success in improving learners' levels of social and emotional intelligence. However, and notwithstanding this rich vein of literature, EU policy on late-life learning overlooks how rising life expectancies warrants new learning needs and interests amongst the oldest and most frail sectors of the older population. It is assumed that only 'healthy' older adults are capable of engaging in learning initiatives, and no call is made for governments to reach those persons who due to various physical and/or cognitive challenges are precluded from participating in lifelong learning. Indeed, there seems to be no place for frail elders and carers in EU policy on lifelong learning, and as far as the available literature indicates, no Gruntvig-funded project has yet focused exclusively on fourth agers.

It follows that, for lifelong learning to be really 'lifelong', learning opportunities should also be provided to occupants of residential and nursing homes. Although the link between learning and good health is a slippery one and may never be unequivocally resolved, older people who continue to engage in cognitively stimulating activities have been found to be in a better position to adopt strategies assisting them to augment their well-being and independence. This warrants that EU policy mandates learning opportunities to be made central to daily life in long-term care settings. For example, residential and nursing homes are to provide arts and crafts centers with

paid teaching staff, as well as employ an activity and leisure manager who facilitates or runs clubs, discussion groups, reading societies, social/cultural outings, as well as in-house magazine. Residents are to be encouraged to engage in life-history project where they record their past, the present, and most importantly, the future in terms of unfulfilled ambitions, dreams, and aspirations, which they can present to their relatives, friends, and case workers. Interest-groups ranging from choirs, horticulture therapy, reflexology, keep fit, and sports activities, must also be encouraged. Residents are to be empowered to run their own programmes through residents' committees, especially as many residents have a wide range of abilities and expertise. Residents experiencing confusion and dementia, together with their carers, are to be engaged in reminiscence activities which focus on the personal manner one experiences and remembers events, and hence, re-living the experiences that are personal in a way that is vivid and engaging. Through such interpersonal relationships residents will have the opportunity to keep on learning that their personhood is still valued, that they are valued, and that they still have some power over their own lives. Following Jarvis (2001), it is beneficial if there was one person in each long-term care setting who is a specialist in helping create and facilitate learning environments. This position need not necessarily be a separate occupation, but could be a 'specialism learning' by any one from the caring professionals who could be sponsored to read for a post-secondary or tertiary qualification in social gerontology or adult education. Only so will long-term settings be successful in drawing together the seemingly disparate but ultimately overlapping acts of 'learning' and 'caring'.

At the same time, EU policy on late-life learning should not overlook the learning needs and interest of frail elders whose mobility, sight, and/or hearing impairments restricts them from leaving their homes. The goal of such programs can range from empowerment to retaining a degree of autonomy, as well as enabling homebound elders to engage in pleasurable and relaxing activities. One strategy to provide adequate transport facilities to and back from the learning centre. Although this approach is fraught by many logistic and financial obstacles, it becomes more feasible if providers pool their resources and provide disability vehicle-careers that are multi-seated. Buddy programs that pair frail elders with more mobile peers are another possibility. Other possible strategies include enabling homebound elders to participate in learning environments through elearning strategies, or as practiced by some U3As in Britain, having the learning session taking place in learners' homes. Despite widespread skepticism towards the provision of online learning towards homebound elders, participants display great enthusiasm throughout such programmes. It is also important that homebound elders are provided with the opportunity to engage in self-directed learning through the availability of informative radio/television programmes, mobile libraries, and inter-generational activities such as grandchild-adoption initiatives. The special needs of some elders are also to be given attention. For example, whilst partially sighted elders require publications to be issued in 'clear print', large print and 'raised diagrams', and would also need screen-magnifying computer screens, it is also necessary that information is presented in Braille tactile codes, and speech-reading computer software. Learning opportunities is also be made available to informal carers where curricula may range from assertiveness, welfare benefits, self-protection, to social/cultural outings. Of course, providers must also provide respite care while the learning program is taking place, for which funds may be derived from Grundtvig programs.

## Conclusion

Although EU policy on lifelong learning does hold some promise towards more optimum levels of active, successful, and productive aging, it fails to render the fast changing world more hospitable to humans. As Bauman (2005 : 126 - italics in original) underlines, “it is not only the *technical skills* that need to be continually refreshed, not only the *job-focused* education that needs to be lifelong” but “the same is required, and with greater urgency, by education in *citizenship*”. Whilst the EU’s rationale for older adult learning is characterized by a sense of urgency to keep up the rapid ‘technological process’, no exigency is located “when it comes to catching up with the impetuous stream of political developments and the fast changing rules of the political game” (ibid.). This lacuna may be overturned if policy makers shift their focus away from formal ‘economistic’ avenues of education to informal ‘humanistic’ contexts of learning - ranging from libraries to social dancing to volunteering - which are so popular with older persons. Here, it is noteworthy to point out Hiemstra’s (1976) long-standing finding that the marginalisation of subaltern groups in late-life learning relates to non-participation from *education* rather than *learning* per se. Indeed, future EU directives on (older) adult learners would do well to heed his advice that “educators must learn to remove institutional barriers and recognize that self-directed, independent learning is going on - outside of institutional structures” (ibid. : 337). Such a policy vision, together with accompanying action plans, has immense potential to construct a more holistic approach to late-life learning, one that is sensitive both to the heterogeneous character of older cohorts as well as the diverse meanings that the act of learning has for different persons. In this respect, there is no better way to end this critical commentary than to leave the final word to Withnall, a key contributor to the field of older adult learning, who stressed how lifelong learning policy needs

...a better understanding of the ways in which older people learn, whether and how they differ from those used by younger people and if so, how their learning could be enhanced. This is particularly important because older people could be given more formal encouragement to share their knowledge and skills with younger generations and to learn from them in return...Such a move would help us to move towards a more inclusive society where all forms of learning are valued, older people are held in higher esteem for the contribution they make, and learning for everyone is truly acknowledged as a desirable lifelong process.

Withnall, 2008 : 3

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