

Older Students as Active Citizens?

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Abstract

The relationship between older adults' education and activities of citizens within the community has been examined in this paper. The analysis has been carried out within the context of lifelong learning, where objectives of strengthening employability and active citizenship have been clearly defined. This also includes adult education, where competitiveness for the labour market has squeezed out social and political dimension of a citizen. Documents' analysis and survey research conducted on the students at the University of the Third Age Zagreb have been taken into account. The perspective of users, that is, the third age students, has also been examined. The key question is to what extent education can contribute to the process of older citizens becoming more active in the community, which issues interest students most and which methods the university has most often been using in order to develop their knowledge and skills? Examples of activities which learners carry out in the community as a part of educational process have been analysed here, together with the activities that they have been doing outside the university's structure, but for which they use knowledge and skills that have been acquired at the University.

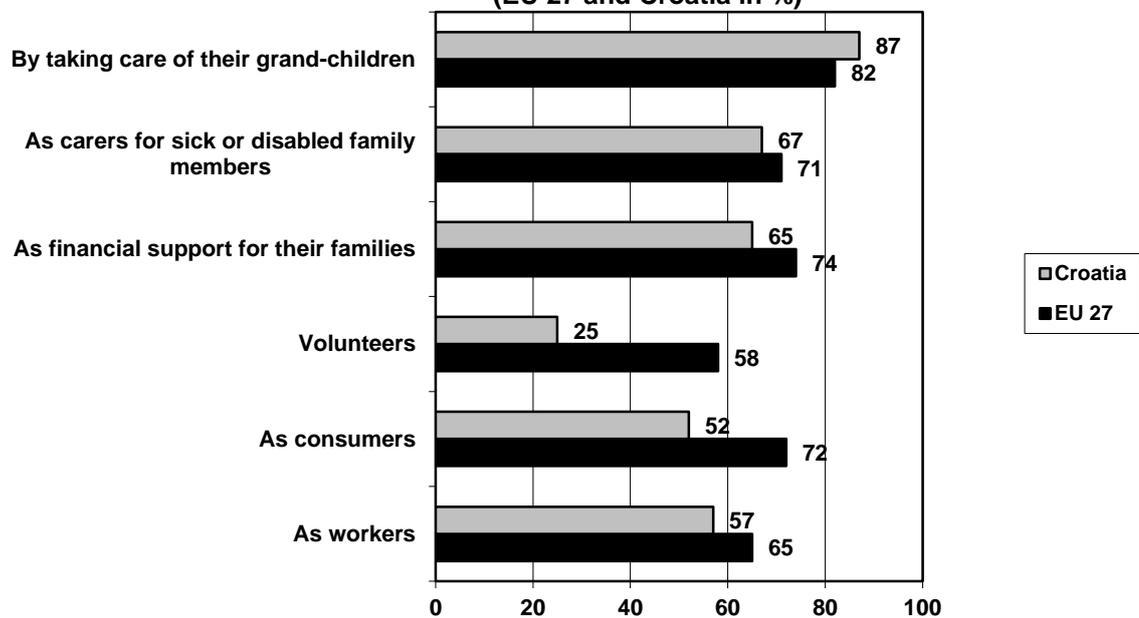
Key words: lifelong learning, citizens, University, Third Age

Introduction: The Context

Active ageing becomes more and more significant part of public policies. It becomes as such because of broadening the offer of public services, and the increase of public expenditures for individuals of the third age, because of the transformed role of older persons, within their families, and the process of (de)familiarisation (Castels, 2008; Esping-Andersen, 2003), as well as for the reason of requests they have put forward as politically active participants. Therefore, individuals of the third age are beneficiaries or consumers of services, sometimes providers, but also active participants within the public policies.

Within the analysis of older people education most frequently the starting point is numerical data on population ageing, which develops on a global level, and especially

Table 1
Areas/Roles in which individuals older than 55 could be socially most useful
(EU 27 and Croatia in %)



in Europe it is observable via the indicator of the persons who belong to the age group older than 60 or 65 (Špan, 1994). However, the question arises: Who are older individuals? What are the crucial issues of ageing? Is it about the question of retirement income and/or the question of labour (employability, competitiveness), active living of older persons (quality of life), what is the situational context of ageing in different welfare regimes (Ney, 2004)? He or she belongs to the age group adequate to their feelings and belonging to the age group according to what he or she can do (M. Špan, 1994).

Data from Eurobarometer 2012

The differences between Croatian citizens and citizens of the EU are not significant in relation to the subjective judgment, starting from the period a human could be regarded as being old. Croatian average response is 62.9 and the EU average is 63.9. (Eurobarometer 2012: 29).

There are far greater differences in the comprehension of the social involvement of persons of the third age. The comparison shows that only in the classic role of taking

care of the grand-child, Croatia is ahead of the EU average, and in cases of doing volunteer work it is most inferior (Eurobarometer, 2012). Therefore, regardless of the proclaimed social objectives and the expected active ageing, the traditional role is significant, that emphasizes their roles within their families as well as the process of de-familiarisation, but, along with being less oriented on social activities. This confirms findings on the decrease of the level of a social capital in the entire Croatian population, as well as in other transitional countries (Šalaj, 2007), i.e. by retaining the only bonding part of social capital (Bežovan, Matančević 2011, Šalaj 2007). Participation in volunteer work is also small in the general population (7%), and the level of citizens' participation is also low (Bežovan, Matančević 2011).

Special importance in changing the approach to learning, regarding older persons, is provided by the concept of lifelong learning. It opens completely new possibilities for learning after the end of one's professional career. On the other hand, the definition of the concept of lifelong learning should be revisited. If lifelong learning (LLL) is analyzed as a combination of temporal continuum and different learning paths (formal and non-formal education as well as informal learning), then there will be no greater difficulties in comprehending the suitability of this concept for the students of the third age. However, if objectives of the LLL within educational policies are analyzed, then much more doubts arise (Field, 2006; Schuetze, Casey, 2006: 282-3). As it has already been defined in the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning, there are two key objectives: employability and active citizenship, and in this way the dualistic quality of objectives, which are directed towards the dimension of building up economic and social goals, is integrated (Commission of the European Communities, 2000).

Adult education has been developed for the most part as continuing vocational education for the last ten years in Croatia, and all forms of non-formal education for self-fulfilment, spare time or simple longing for learning have come in a position of secondary importance. Active citizenship remained as objective for which no institutional or financial prerequisites have been agreed on for stable development. Therefore, while the U3A has been being developed as an area of general education in contrast to vocational training, by the 2012 - European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations, the issue of vocational training, of these beneficiaries, has also been put forward, as well as the issue of learning for new careers, in relation to the persons of the third age, as well as that of opening possibilities of working while being in retirement. This dominant discourse on lifelong learning can be followed, as it has been retained during the last 12 years in company with the knowledge on competitive economy, as well as how it has been transferred into recent documents connected with the Croatian educational policy.

When it is a question about adult education within the Croatian educational policy, education of the persons of the third age is in fact out of that interest and it is mainly situated within the dimensions of the social policy (care for older persons, spare time of older persons). Within the educational policy, adult education is relegated to a marginal status, and within adult education, education of older persons is relegated to a marginal status. The only actors who are concerned about the transformation of this situation are the students and those who carry out the programmes, while they do not have sufficient social or financial power or the power for advocacy.

What is then the position of this form of adult education, that can be included within it, and what is the relation toward the community that does not recognize educational potentials of this educational form. Could the students of the third age offer more different outputs and outcomes from the low expectation of the social

environment? The answers to these questions could be found in the case study of the students of the University of the Third Age (U3A), Zagreb.

University of the Third Age Zagreb

Public Open University Zagreb (POUZ) has been active for 105 years, and since the very beginning, it is oriented to general adult education and building up the competences for active life in political activities, local community and family. The Open University started with lecture activities on political, historical and law issues. The founder, a then-young assistant professor Albert Bazala wrote in 1907, in his inaugural address, 'Family and civic duties cannot be carried out without cultural and aesthetic development. Without these duties, there is no political freedom' (Bazala, 1997). Nowadays, this tradition has been partially lost, especially in formal education, and most of our programs are directed only to employability.

At POUZ, the institution designed for programmes of education and culture for different generations, from preschool youngsters to the third age individuals, the U3A programme has been realized for 20 years, educational – cultural programmes aimed at older persons. The programme started as a joint project of the Faculty of Philosophy, Zagreb – Department Section of Andragogy, and the POUZ (Špan, 1994). The students learn foreign languages, attend various programmes related to general culture, computer literacy workshops and creative workshops, upgrade the quality of their psychophysical condition through related programmes. Apart from regular programmes, there are also several extracurricular activities on the occasion on which the students who have greater interest for socializing and learning are stirred to activity in addition. These are forums, the debate club, students' exhibitions, study trips and tours, concerts and performances, humanitarian activities and volunteerism, participation in international projects, working in a journal editorial board. Previously acquired knowledge and experience of students is included within the programme activities, and so the considerable part of the programme is based on their self-activity. They act as group animators, deliver lectures at forums, organize concerts, exhibitions and humanitarian initiatives, etc. (Ćurin, 2010)

Zagreb U3A is the only such model of lifelong learning in the city of Zagreb and in Croatia. Although there are programmes aimed at persons of the older age carried out within gerontological centres, pensioners' homes, pensioners' clubs, culture centres, people's universities and the like, as well as at some locations in other part of Croatia, they remain within the framework of the realization of individual workshops. Just this integral entirety of graded programmes differs the U3A from other programmes on offer.

Social Dimension of Education within the U3A

Within such diversified activities, important is the question of what kind of educational outcomes are produced by the U3A in the area of social competences for active citizenship (European Parliament and Council, 2006)? An survey related to U3A students has been carried out for the purpose of this paper, and the data on groups and programmes in connection with the U3A documentation have been used. What has been examined is appreciation with the content of the programmes on the part of the students, then, what stimulated them to join the U3A programme, what they have been given as an experience personally and in relation to their broader social context, what are their plan for the near future. This survey was carried out on a sample of 554 students, which represents slightly less than a half of the total number of students. Several identical

questions were put also to their teachers (24) in order to compare the differences among responses.

Examining the data that are in relation to the profile of a U3A student, it can be observed that it is a matter of separate, highly educated (mostly with academic degree) group, with stable household income within the general population of retired persons in Zagreb. Therefore this case confirms St. Mathew's effect in this field (Pallas, 2003). As the programme is financially supported only by students' tuition fees, so are the household incomes in connection with the level of education significant for the attainment in education.

Observing the age variable, the largest number of students is concentrated in the age group from 66 to 75. The piece of information that women are always in the majority among students who attend U3A programmes should be additionally examined, but less attendance on the part of the male student population coincides with the findings from other countries (Formosa,2010).To summarize, the typical student of the Zagreb U3A is a female student, 66 years of age, with academic grades, attending the foreign language course and is a student of the U3A for several years.

Which are the basic motives for registering into this educational programme according to the opinion of students and their teachers?

Table 2
Basic Reasons for Attending the Programmes

Reasons	students %	teachers %
Spending free time	7.5	38
Wish for learning something new	77	31
Because of reputation	0	10
Wish for practical and useful knowledge	0	21
Other	15.5	0
Totals	100	100

N students=554

N teachers=24

Motives of attending the U3A programmes are not perceived equally by the students and their teachers. The wish for learning something new could be observed more with students than it is perceived by their teachers. They think that their prime motif of attendance is fulfilment of free time, socializing, loneliness. According to their opinion, the wish for practical knowledge, which will bring them some benefits, is also important. It is that either intrinsic motives are not observed by the lectures at their first impression, or the students are hiding them.

Extracurricular activities represent a well-formed part of the U3A by which self-activity of the students is preferred, being an important link with social activities that are not exclusively connected with regular educational programmes. Therefore, it is important how frequently the students participate in these activities, which activities do they prefer more, and which activities do they prefer less. Just over the half attended extracurricular activities. Those activities, which demand most intense involvement, more specific work and preparation (Senior Debates, International Projects and Volunteering) have been preferred the least, on the part of the students, only from 2 % to 4%. That means that although the students represent in general more active part of the

general population of retired persons according to the issue of broader engagement, they will choose only those activities which are not too demanding and do not put a burden on them more than enough. Out of all of expectations on their part and their additional engagement, this piece of information should be taken into account.

One aspect of additional engagement is an animator activity (Ćurin, 2010). Animators are representatives of the groups and they promote the spirit of cooperative behaviour, deliver information, activate other students for additional activities, communicate on observations to the organizers, help in administrative work and speak for the U3A in media. Therefore it is important what do they think on this role. The majority of students (and teachers) evaluates animators as useful and key persons for group cohesion, especially if they want to engage themselves more. Animators are the first link in an advance of the U3A students toward social cohesion and social engagement.

Validation of the point that the U3A should really be a significant subject of social transformations in relation to older persons and the creation of the policy aimed at this generation has been found within responses of teachers and students according to the Lickert Scale of Estimation, that relate to the connection of the U3A and a broader social community.

Table 3
Social role of the U3A

Social impact of U3A education	Average Estimation of Agreement (Marks)	
	students	teachers
U3A should encourage initiatives for transformations of relationships within the community in order to use experience and knowledge of students and teachers in solving problems connected with older generation	4.3	4.5
U3A should be a partner to Municipal authorities in discussing education of the third age persons and the issues of older persons fellow-townsmen	4.5	4.7
U3A is not an isolated organisation, but its work should be of benefit to other citizens who are not its students	3.6	3.7
Attending U3A programmes positively influences on social engagement of seniors	0	4.7

N students=554

N teachers=24

There is a wish for social engagement considering these responses but only the elements of the bonding social capital and of strengthening the cohesion of the certain social group are deducible from that. The bridging social capital, which could be discernible out of the benefit for the broader community itself (for those who are not members of the learning community or connected just to the problems of this community), is represented to a lesser degree. On the existence of the influence of the U3A on a broader social community in terms of changes in relation to ageism (Binstock, 2005) and the relation to older generation generally also speaks a high mark in relation to agreement with the statements on prejudices.

In connection with the statement ‘Prejudices toward older persons are still markedly present in our society’, the students expressed considerably high mark of agreement. The teachers were even more positive on that. This remark is important also because of the fact about the representation of discrimination in relation to the third age persons within public services and on the market that is above the EU average (Eurobarometer 2012, 32). An agreement to a lesser degree with the claim that existence of the U3A can considerably influence the changes of attitudes in the society toward older persons.

These items of information differ from the dominant approach toward education of seniors in Croatia, which is separated from other aspects of education and is perceived more as idle socializing of older persons – which is less respectable than vocational education of adults. It is frequently and in a wrong way identified with other programmes, where their social dimension is their sole function, and the educational dimension is passed over.

It was interesting how students use their new knowledge they acquired at the U3A. The level of positive changes in different components of personality and lifestyle surprised even the organizers. Have they changed in some of their attributes?

Table 4
Sites of Using Knew Knowledge

Sites, occasions	students %	teachers %
During uninfluenced, individual engagement in activities and further learning	51	35
During common activities with friends and neighbours who have identical interests	20	25
STŽD Within family – transferring knowledge and conversations on activities within the U3A	16	30
Nowhere except during the class	9	5
Cannot estimate	4	5
Totals	100	100

N students=554

N teachers=24

The students are much more diligent and focused on the learning process itself than their lecturers perceive that process, but social dimension of practicing acquired knowledge is far lower than that of personal fulfilment and independent practice of new knowledge. Findings from the survey shows that attending the U3A can be stimulating in several ways. Above all, it encourages more active lifestyle and that makes the person more pleased. It can influence on the transformation of views on learning as something important in one's life. However, the majority of activities are directed toward personal content, pleasure of learning, while the social dimension is neglected.

Table 5
Personal Benefits from the U3A Programme

Benefits on a Personal Level of Attending the U3A	%
New knowledge related to the programme I attend	22
Greater self-esteem, more positive image of myself as an older person	21
Increase of social contacts	20
Better psychophysical condition	17
Acquiring skills of the 21 century	15,5
More intense social engagement	4,5
Total	100

N=554

These responses complete benefits, that attending the U3A programmes can bring about on a personal level. What can be recognized immediately is acquiring new knowledge that as a benefit students estimate very much. Social contacts are evaluated as being on a scale after that. There again appears information that learning is more important than socializing for the students, although their teachers think that this is for them equally important! However, students are more focused on personal that on social transformations or on a social engagement.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that U3A is an important part of a system of lifelong learning that is a reflection to transformations of an individual-student and a teacher. Attending the U3A programme is several ways beneficial. On the level of broader social community, students are focused on the transformation of prejudices and affirmation of all activities connected with learning and the U3A. This programme increases bonding aspect of social capital, and far less bridging aspect. It has more of a defensive social role (fight against ageism) than the affirmative on (inclusion within activities brought into action by them within and outside the U3A). The inclusion of students is conditioned by the status, income and previous education. Local and national educational policy systematically disregards the support for opening U3A for the groups that are in inferior economic situation, having lower qualifications as well as possibilities of travelling to the U3A.

Lifelong learning proved to be also in this case as a burden, while responsibilities and learning expenses are shifted exclusively to students. It offers key competences, but does not succeed in making the move toward active citizenship. Nevertheless, students do not differ in that from other population in Croatia and fit into

the image of resigned citizens who do not want to be engaged in a serious manner as citizens, nor do they try to increase their civility index.

Prestigious and well structured programme of the U3A, satisfied students, motivated and competent animators will certainly also increase the level of social impacts over the long term, but without public support, cannot solve the problem of inclusiveness for all disadvantaged social groups in less time as well as their retroactive effect on the social community.

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