

Educational Opportunities for the Senior Citizens Living in Rural Areas in South-East Slovenia

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Abstract

This article starts with an analysis of the European and national documents which shows that senior citizens are not considered one of the major target groups in the implementation of the lifelong learning concept. The author draws attention to the importance of lifelong learning and every person's responsibility to learn as a result of the process of transferring the responsibility for education from the government to the individual. Further, the article introduces educational opportunities for senior citizens in Slovenia, especially in the region analysed, i.e. South-East Slovenia (SE Slovenia). Findings show that the majority of educational opportunities for senior citizen are being offered at the Universities of the Third Age (U3As). Hence the author studies whether the educational offer of the U3As, operating within the local people's universities, meets the needs and interests of the senior citizens; how the education providers strive to meet the needs of senior citizens; and if a more active role of senior citizens would have an impact on the more diversified educational offer. The data was collected in 2010 with a combination of two methodological approaches (anonymous questionnaires on a sample of senior citizens living in rural areas and semi-structured interviews with all four heads of the U3As of SE Slovenia). The study results show that the U3As offer inadequate educational programmes and courses for senior citizens. All three levels that relate to the inadequate educational offer were analysed: the senior citizen at the micro level, the education providers at the meso level and, at the macro level, the step-motherly attitude of the government towards education of senior citizens considering the funding and regulatory framework in this field. Finally, the article concludes with a consideration about the methods and possibilities to overcome marginalisation of senior citizens and strengthen their social inclusion for the political, social and collective actions.

Key words: senior citizens, lifelong learning and education, rural areas, educational programmes, University of the Third Age – U3A

Implementing the lifelong learning concept among senior citizens

Lifelong learning no longer seems to be a free and voluntary decision of every individual but a “forced choice” and a necessity to survive. Individuals, thus also senior citizens, are becoming the so called “managers of their own development”, since they take responsibility for their own education as regards content, organisational aspects and financing (Kirchhofer in Tuschling and Engemann 2006, 458). This importance of one's own responsibility for learning and education is a result of the process of transferring the responsibility for education from the government to the individual (whereas the government's responsibility remains to provide the necessary conditions!). However, in order to create a knowledge-based society, the national education policy should reflect these developmental changes, whereas the right of adults to learn should become an active right ensured by law. Despite the fact that the number of senior citizens is growing, the senior citizens are not considered one of the major target groups neither in European documents (Lisbon Treaty, Memorandum on Lifelong Learning, It is never too late to learn, It is always a good time to learn etc.) nor in Slovenia's national documents (Slovenia's Development Strategy, National Development Programme of the Republic of Slovenia, regional development programmes, Resolution on the Master Plan for Adult Education in the Republic of Slovenia, Operational Programme for Development of Human Resources for the period 2007-2013). They focus more on economic goals, promotion of employment and investments for more competition in the employment market and general economic growth. How can we speak then of justice, equality and democracy as results of lifelong learning (Gouthro 2002, 342)?

Development of educational programmes for senior citizens in Slovenia

In Slovenia, the main educational opportunities for senior citizens are currently offered by the U3As. The education of senior adults started in 1984 with the implementation of first experimental educational programme for senior citizens. In 1986 a group of volunteers within the Andragogic Association of Slovenia under the initiative of Ana Kranjc officially established the first University of the Third Age (U3A) in Slovenia. It evolved into the largest network of organisations in adult education in Slovenia, incorporating 45 local U3As in 41 towns which are operating within people's universities, libraries or as independent associations. Some are also located in smaller towns, thus ensuring equal and better access to education for senior citizens. Altogether, around 20,000 seniors learn within U3As. However, despite offering more and more educational programmes the U3As cannot meet all the needs of senior citizens. But they are of course the driving force and an example of good practice in broadening the educational offer and extending the activities in rural areas. The U3As offer varied educational programmes: language, computer, preventive health care courses, history and arts courses, creative workshops etc. (Ogulin 2004, 175–176; Univerza za tretje življenjsko obdobje). The U3A of Ljubljana is the largest university, has the most members and is the most active in the field of voluntary work. It offers education for voluntary work as well as organises voluntary educational work in public cultural, educational, health care and humanitarian organisations (UNICEF's project Rag doll [»Punčka iz cunj«]) and computer learning in pairs (movement If you can, teach the others [»Znaš, nauči drugega«]) (Izobraževanje za/in prostovoljstvo na Univerzi za tretje življenjsko obdobje v Ljubljani, 2011).

In 1990 a network of study circles has started to form in Slovenia and has been implemented mainly within people's universities, the U3As, libraries and other organisations (Jelenc Krašovec and Kump 2005, 247). Because of the method of work and content flexibility, study circles are a very suitable form of education also for senior citizens. The data on membership in study circles from 1993 to 2000 (since 2000 such data has no longer been gathered) shows that more than 10% of all members were senior citizens above 60 years of age (Malečkar 1999, 21; Bogataj 2003, 5).

Most of the people's universities do not offer specialized educational programmes for senior citizens. They have to some extent been limited to courses within the U3As and study circles or have mostly been offered programmes for general non-formal education aimed at all adults, not only at seniors. In 2012, however, new tailor-made educational programmes for senior citizens have been initiated within the project General Non-Formal Adult Education.

Besides people's universities and U3As, education for senior citizens is taking place within seniors associations and other associations organising local sports, cultural, recreational, social and other events. Similar also the Democratic Party of Pensioners of Slovenia and other parties. Moreover, the local libraries, museums, religious organisations, health and welfare organisations (homes for the elderly) play a significant role in providing education for seniors.

Recently in Slovenia like the rest of the world many intergenerational programmes have been initiated to promote solidarity and interaction between generations and strengthen the social networks of seniors. »... there are some organisations who carry out such programmes, such as the Social Gerontology and Gerontogics Association of Slovenia, Association of Intergenerational Societies for Quality of Life in Old Age, Gerontological Association of Slovenia, and especially the Anton Trstenjak Institute which by offering various courses and educating volunteers are aiming to develop an up-to-date social network of intergenerational programmes for quality of life in old age and solidarity between generations« (Jelenc Krašovec and Kump 2005, 248).

Educational programmes and other activities for senior citizens in SE Slovenia

In the region of South-East Slovenia, there are four U3As operating within the following people's universities: Centre for Education and Culture Trebnje [Center za izobraževanje in kulturo Trebnje – CIK Trebnje], People's University of Kočevje [Ljudska univerze Kočevje – LU Kočevje], Development and Education Centre Novo mesto [Razvojno izobraževalni center Novo mesto – RIC Novo mesto], and Institute for education and culture Črnomelj [Zavod za izobraževanje in kulturo Črnomelj – ZIK Črnomelj].

According to the statistical data for the 2009/2010 school year the largest U3A by number of members was operating within RIC Novo mesto (312 members), followed by ZIK Črnomelj (221), CIK Trebnje (176) and LU Kočevje (120). In the same school year LU Kočevje carried out the largest number of educational programmes for senior citizens (38), followed by RIC Novo mesto (37), CIK Trebnje (25) and ZIK Črnomelj (14). In the course of six education periods (from 2005 to 2010), RIC Novo mesto and CIK Trebnje carried out the majority of their educational the programmes in the field of general education, whereas ZIK Črnomelj and LU Kočevje carried out programmes mostly in the field of health care. Table 1.1. below shows the programmes carried out by field of

education and individual people's university. The usual programme duration is 25–30 hours.

Table 1.1: Educational programmes carried out by field of education and people's university

No.	CIK Trebnje	LU Kočevje	RIC Novo mesto	ZIK Črnomelj
1.	<i>General</i>	<i>Health care</i>	<i>General</i>	<i>Health care</i>
2.	<i>Health care</i>	<i>Languages</i>	<i>Health care</i>	<i>Creative workshops</i>
3.	<i>Creative workshops</i>	<i>General</i>	<i>Computer courses</i>	<i>History</i>
4.	<i>History</i>	<i>Creative workshops</i>	<i>Languages</i>	<i>General</i>
5.	<i>Languages</i>	<i>History</i>	<i>Creative workshops</i>	<i>Languages</i>
6.	<i>Computer courses</i>	<i>Computer courses</i>	<i>History</i>	<i>Computer courses</i>

Source: Own resources.

Looking at the membership of senior citizens from surrounding rural areas (outside the seats of the four U3As/people's universities), the following data was gathered. The U3A at RIC Novo mesto recorded an increase of members from surrounding localities in the period from 2000 to 2008, since RIC Novo mesto extended its activities in rural areas with the aim to bring »education closer to people's homes« (there were 112 members from rural areas in 2007/08). However, since 2008 the membership rates of seniors from rural areas have fallen due to the project Centre for Lifelong Learning of Dolenjska¹ which offers diverse programmes and workshops free of charge at the so called Lifelong Learning Points throughout the region. Although the number of members from rural area in the U3A fell (47 members in the 2009/10 school year), the number of active members did not decrease which is of crucial importance.

The same conclusions can be drawn for the decrease in membership rates of the U3A at CIK Trebnje, which is a partner in the CVŽU project and also established a Lifelong Learning Point with free learning opportunities. In the 2009/2010 school year the number of members from surrounding rural areas fell almost to the initial number of members, i.e. 45 members. LU Kočevje recorded lower membership rates in 2009/2010 due to a newly established, independent U3A in the town of Velike Lašče (45 seniors from rural areas were previously members at LU Kočevje's U3A). ZIK Črnomelj, however, recorded a constant increase in number of members (in the 2009/10 school year there were 73 members from rural areas).

There are two other U3As operating in the region of SE Slovenia which are registered as associations. The first is operating within the *Pensioners Association of Novo mesto* which has more than 2700 members, one third of which are from the rural areas surrounding the city of Novo mesto. The association has more than 1600 active members, mostly in the fields of sports activities, followed by culture (literary and arts sections,

¹Since 2008 RIC Novo mesto has been the lead partner of the project Centre for Lifelong Learning of Dolenjska Center vseživljenjskega učenja Dolenjska – CVŽU Dolenjska), co-financed by the European Social Fund and the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport. Among the others the project aims to offer various educational opportunities close to home and free of charge.

choir, theatre subscribers), handicraft, foreign languages, cookery and dancing courses and various lectures. The association also organises tours, holidays, trips and celebrations for its members. More than 50 members have been active volunteers in the field of health and welfare for many years.

Another U3A is operating in area of Kočevje in the municipality of Velike Lašče within the *Trubarjevi kraji Public Institute*. It was established three years ago on the initiative of the citizens. In the first year, the 2009/2010 school year, the U3A already had more than 30 members, which may be attributed to the fact that senior citizens in this town were actively involved in the associations' activities before and that this is a rural area. They carried out nine study circles in their first year of operation (e.g. in the field of art history, computer, literary, beekeeping, photography, cookery and bookbinding). The U3A in Velike Lašče is somewhat special since it is not intended only for senior citizens but the mentors of study circles are mainly young people or young adults, which is vital for strengthening the cooperation between generations.

Following the U3A's model, in Novo mesto there is also the *Association of Interest Activities of Novo mesto*, which has around 250 members being mainly citizens of the municipality of Novo mesto and some also from the surrounding municipalities. Their members can choose from a variety of recreational activities, bathing in Slovenian spa resorts, trips to foreign countries, cultural and educational activities, like courses on the city's history, theatre subscription, health care and travel lectures, which are the most visited (around 100 participants per lecture) (Gazette of the Association of Interest Activities of Novo mesto, 2009 and 2010; Ogulin Počrvina 2011). The activities listed above comprise the association's permanent offer, which in recent years was accompanied by cookery and vegetarian cookery courses, body care courses etc. In the first years the association also had an active alpine and painting group. The first ceased to exist because the members got older and the latter became an independent cultural society, since in this way it is eligible to receive funds from the municipality.

It therefore follows that besides people's universities and U3As the education of senior citizens is mainly ensured by the local pensioners' organisations or pensioners' organisations of specific companies.

There are altogether 33 *local pensioners' organisations* in SE Slovenia which organise various sports and leisure, recreation, cultural, educational, welfare and other programmes. Half of the associations are more active and work together with local people's universities to supplement their educational offer. Further, there are *seven pensioners' organisations* registered in the region operating under the patronage of the local companies. The largest and most active is the Pensioners' Organisation of Krka Novo mesto which has over 600 members. There are also other organisations who play an important role in extending the educational opportunities for seniors: *cultural and artistic associations* (around 140 of such associations), *associations for the town development* (e.g. tourist associations, rural women societies, associations for preservation of folk customs, around 100 associations); *associations for environment protection and breeding of animals* (around 140 associations); *associations for helping people in need*, like voluntary fire fighters' associations, disabled persons' associations, Red Cross and Karitas aid organisations, associations of people with chronic diseases, since the majority of the members in all these associations are senior citizens. Most of the associations in the region with senior citizens as members are registered in the field

of helping people in need (more than 200); however, this number is quite high mainly due to the voluntary fire-fighters associations (Ministry of Public Affairs).

In addition, there are around 60 *occupational or professional associations* which offer many lifelong learning opportunities for senior citizens. Such associations are rare in the Kočevje-Ribnica region where only one such association is registered (ibid.). Very active are also numerous *sports and recreation associations* and the *party of pensioners*.

In the SE Slovenia region, two intergenerational associations are operating under the patronage of the Social Gerontology and Gerontogogics Association of Slovenia. Their members are mainly leading groups for self-help with the aim to maintain and strengthen the social network of seniors above 65 years of age. All in all, 46 intergenerational associations and other organisations (only 5 from the SE Slovenia region) are linked into the national union of associations, and 523 *seniors' groups for self-help* (only 38 in SE Slovenia) are linked in the respective national network. This shows that such groups are rather poorly represented in the region of SE Slovenia (Social Gerontology and Gerontogogics Association of Slovenia).

Senior citizens can also get involved and learn in local libraries, museums, religious organisations, health and welfare organisations (e.g. homes for the elderly), however, the offer there is mostly poor and not targeted only at senior citizens.

To sum up, there are only limited opportunities for spending active leisure time during the third age in the municipalities of the SE Slovenia region, except in Novo mesto. Although, there are small pensioners organisations and other associations operating in smaller municipalities, their offer is rather poor and limited to yearly trips, hikes, lectures, visits of jubilees or gatherings during public holidays. This, however, cannot meet all the needs of the senior citizens, especially the growing psychosocial needs.

Does the educational offer of U3As meet the needs and interests of senior citizens?

The data on the local educational offer was collected in 2010 with a study on lifelong learning and education among senior citizens living in rural areas. The combination of two methodological approaches was used, i.e. anonymous questionnaires on a sample of senior citizens living in rural areas and semi-structured interviews with all four heads² of the U3As of SE Slovenia which are operating within the local people's universities. In the 2009/2010 school year the people's universities had 210 members from surrounding areas (outside the U3A's seat). The survey was conducted on a sample of 119 seniors who were members of a U3A and lived outside the seat of the U3A in the region of SE Slovenia. The response rate amounted to 56.67% of all members³ from the surrounding villages.

² Interviews were conducted with three directors of the people's universities who are at the same time heads of the U3As (Center za izobraževanje in kulturo Trebnje, Ljudska univerza Kočevje, Razvojno izobraževalni center Novo mesto), and with the adult education manager at Zavod za izobraževanje in kulturo Črnomelj.

³ More than one half (58%) of the respondents were under 64, and 42 % of them were above 65 years of age; 79.3% of respondents were women and 20.7% were men. The majority of the respondents had secondary education (42.0 %), followed by vocational education (23.5%), primary education (14.3%), vocational college education (8.4 %) and university degree (7.6 %). There were only 4.2% respondents with no completed primary school.

In general the educational offer of the U3As was assessed as poor except at CIK Trebnje where the offer was rated as very good. 95.7% of the members of CIK Trebnje's U3A stated that the educational offer meets their needs and interests, whereas this percentage is considerable lower in members of the other three universities (lower than 40%). The CIK Trebnje's director pointed out that their members mainly get involved in the U3A to meet their need for socialisation and inclusion. These results can also be connected with the low level of education of this U3A's members, since among them were 43.5% respondents with a primary school or less. This percentage is lower in other U3As, between 8.0% and 15.2%. Compared to other U3As the positive assessment of the educational offer recorded by CIK Trebnje's members can also be attributed to a different type of educational needs (not focused so much on cognitive skills).

There are several reasons for dissatisfaction of the members with the U3A's educational offer in rural areas. First, one of the reasons may be the limited knowledge about the educational programmes offered by individual U3As, since the majority of the programmes for senior citizens are implemented at the U3A's seat (in larger towns). Longer programmes (except short workshops and lectures which are regularly scheduled) can only be implemented in the surrounding towns if there are enough members interested to enrol in a programme. Secondly, not all of the programmes carried out at the U3A's seats and programmes with more demanding intellectual contents are implemented in the rural areas due to the small number of members interested in such topics. Here, the people's universities have to respect the minimum numbers of participants in a programme which are defined by the programme financing authorities (e.g. Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport). It can be noted that the representation of respondents with secondary and higher education or more was very good (RIC: 86.8 % and ZIK: 92.0 %). Finally, the third reason is systemic in nature: the offer of the people's universities depends on the results of the public tenders which does not enable them to have a permanent offer for the U3As or the senior citizens in the rural areas. The people's universities always have to wait for the public authorities to determine what kind of programmes (content), how much (financial) and when the programmes (the public tenders are published only in spring when the school year is almost finished) are going to be funded. Moreover, the public tenders mostly already define the priority areas or types of educational programmes. This has a great influence on the educational offer of U3As because the people's universities (as education providers) try to obtain as much public funds as possible to enable a (nearly) free of charge education and more educational opportunities for senior citizens.

Study results show that the educational programmes offered by various providers do not meet the actual needs of the senior citizens. The most common barriers that senior citizens referred to are institutional, such as inappropriate teaching methods (teachers, methods, resources), inappropriate provision of information and advice about the programmes and their selection, (in)appropriate educational courses, inconvenient scheduling of lectures/workshops and programme duration. Situational barriers (lack of time, overwork, family responsibilities, course fees, geographical distance) and dispositional barriers (self-confidence, age, health problems, prior knowledge) are not considered the main reasons for non-participation in educational opportunities by senior citizens. However, seniors with a lower level of education more often encounter dispositional barriers such as lack of self-confidence, no need to learn and insufficient prior knowledge. Besides they are more often faced with the situational barrier of overwork, most likely because of the work on the farm and other responsibilities, but this

might also be an excuse for non-participation in education. Furthermore, the survey showed that the offer of educational programmes is a much more important factor for senior citizen with a higher level of education and considerably influences their decision to participate in education. Thus, for more educated senior citizens cognitive needs are a significant factor for participation in educational opportunities.

On the contrary, educational institutions put forward the situational barriers (overwork, geographical distance and mobility problems, lack of childcare) and dispositional barriers (low education, not used to learning, negative attitude towards constant changes, lack of interest and curiosity), while they quite rarely mention the institutional barriers (only inconvenient time schedule and not being informed about the educational offer in the region). The four interviewees from the people's universities do not consider educational offer one of the key factors for (non)participation in education, while senior citizens rank the educational offer 3rd by importance (after free education and good location or transportation possibilities).

In view of the senior citizens' and interviewees responses, the people's universities are making great efforts to take into account the needs and interests of the U3A members (to realize their proposed contents and form of implementation). When preparing the educational offer the universities consider two main factors, i.e. interesting and up-to-date contents, and available financial resources. However, it is evident that due to limited financial resources and specific conditions of public tenders, the people's universities cannot fully respond to the expressed and potential needs of the senior citizens. Results also show that the U3A members do not cooperate enough with the education providers to prepare a tailor-made educational offer. Clearly, by taking a more active role in putting forward their own suggestions the senior citizens could influence the educational offer, contents and course implementations to a greater extent taking into account their needs and interests. The interviews with people's universities' representatives revealed that only few individual members are prepared to sacrifice their free time for good course implementation. Further, the data collected with questionnaires shows low willingness on the side of senior citizens to cooperate in activities of the U3As. Most members (42.0%) stated that they would be ready to give suggestions for new topics/contents of the educational programmes and teaching methods, whereas only 10.1% would be ready to participate as lecturers. The RIC Novo mesto's director stressed that senior citizens could get more involved in the work of the U3A in such a way that they propose new contents and teachers, even coordinate the course implementation with the teachers, point out their interests and needs and actively participate in implementing a programme (as mentors or animators). Further, she noticed that they often leave it up to the people's university to organize all the aspects of education and provide some kind of full service solutions for seniors. Thus it is evident that there is still little voluntary involvement of senior citizens in the work of the U3A.

Conclusion

Now that a large generation of adults is turning 65, all born after the Second World War and with different requests and expectations of the quality of life than previous generations, the educational programmes should be tailored to their needs and interests (by taking into account their motivation, expectation, level of education, education experience, socio-economic status). Fisher and Wolf (2000, 489–491) point out that in

practice senior adult education mostly focuses on offering leisure activities, however, taking into account the ageing society there will be a greater need to overcome the marginalisation of seniors and strengthen their influence on political, social and collective actions by introducing critical educational gerontology. Increased attention should be paid on establishing the actual needs of this heterogeneous target group, develop educational programmes in accordance with the critical principles of gerontology and increase the role of senior citizens in planning, developing and evaluating the programmes.

To date the senior adult education has not been considered a significant issue in political discourse and documents, as is reflected by funding and regulatory framework in this area. Increasing professional and political support for education of senior adults will ensure more power and influence for senior citizens (Kump and Jelenc Krašovec 2005b, 245–246). However, in this the senior citizens themselves can contribute the most by playing an active role in education and gathering new funding and resources.

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