

LEARNING SOCIETY: HOW DOES OLDER PEOPLE'S LEARNING CONTRIBUTE TO ITS ADVANCEMENT?

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Abstract. *The article discusses the characteristics of the formation of a learning society and the learning opportunities for older adults. As international documents note, the aim of adult education and lifelong learning is to equip adults of all ages with the necessary skills to exercise and realize their rights and control their destinies. It promotes the personal and professional development of adults, the increased involvement of adults in the creation of learning communities and sustainable environments. Adult education is therefore becoming a crucial tool for reducing poverty, improving health and well-being and contributing to the creation of a sustainable learning society. Scientific literature, document analysis and secondary data analysis reveal that for construction of a learning society in Lithuania older people should be actively encouraged to join the learning process.*

Keywords: *learning society, older adults, Third Age University.*

Introduction

Continuous societal alterations determine the need for adults to progress steadily and to develop their ability to harmonize with the changing requirements and environments. European Commission notes (2021) that lifelong learning is a priority for everyone in a rapidly changing world. Parallel rapid demographic changes encourage numerous organizations around the world to pay more attention to the ageing population by discussing the agenda for active ageing. World Health Organization (WHO) has highlighted the need for countries to invest into the maintenance of strategic policies to answer the needs of ageing populations and to ensure healthy and active ageing in separate states" (Strategy and Action Plan..., 2012). While analysing active ageing the issue of the active engagement in learning of older people comes to view. Thus, although the learning society has been the subject of discussion for longer than a few decades, recently there emerges a need for linking two significant aspects of society: keeping older people active in an ever-ageing society for as long as possible, and developing a learning society. This is approached through active encouragement of older adults to participate in learning, and, simultaneously, augmenting numbers of learners in society.

The aim of this paper is to explore the role of older adults` learning for development of the learning society in Lithuania. The paper is based on secondary data analysis, including legal documents (EU and national programmes and strategies), research results (national and international levels), statistical data (population of older adults) and other data (results of national surveys).

Construction of a Learning Society

One of the most important modern life features is the need for continuous learning: the pace of life is accelerating, knowledge and skills once acquired are rapidly becoming obsolete, professional and personal life are constantly innovating, so there is a need to relearn to be able of applying these innovations in our daily activities. Over the past few decades, continuous adult learning and the pursuit of new knowledge, skills and competences has become one of the greatest educational challenges in Europe and in the world. The importance of lifelong learning as the democratization of education was reiterated at the Seventh UNESCO Conference in Morocco in 2022. UNESCO documents underline that the purpose of adult education and lifelong learning is to equip people with the necessary skills to exercise and realize their rights and control their destinies. It promotes the personal and professional development of adults, the increased involvement of adults in the creation of learning communities and sustainable environments. This makes it a crucial tool for reducing poverty, improving health and well-being and contributing to a sustainable learning society. The "Lithuania 2030" Strategy mentions lifelong learning as one of the key factors in ensuring that Lithuanian society is prepared for global change and enabling the development of a learning society. Although Lithuania is among the leaders in the EU in terms of tertiary education completion, the country is far behind in terms of the proportion of adults participating in trainings, with a rate of 7.2% in 2021 according to Eurostat data compared to a European average of 12%.

When analysing if Lithuanian society is a learning society, it is important to define how we understand "learning society" and what features allow us to identify one or another society as a learning society. Fullan (1998) names creation of a learning society as the highest goal of education. In his view, the most important features of a modern society are inseparable from learning, education and knowledge. Giddens (1992) highlights the need to combine intellectual development, which he calls education for understanding, with social development. The ability to speculate and generate ideas, and to work collaboratively with others, is recognised by both educators and businesses as essential for the future of the world. Scientists (Fullan, 1998; Boud, 2000; (Hakkinen et al, 2017) believe that the development of a learning society is an

ultimate goal for society as a whole, as this cannot be achieved by any single education system. Active engagement in learning activities, he believes, must take place in all organisations and institutions (not just educational organisations) if it is to make a difference in society as a whole. Ranson (1994) instructs against creating a learning society as just one separate component of a new moral and political order. Only when the value and processes of learning are at the centre of political strategy will it be possible to create the conditions under which each individual can develop his or her own capacities and institutions can change with the times. The changes of the last decades require constant updating of learning content and assessment, blurring of boundaries between cultures and languages; the need for new skills and knowledge in the world of work is imperative. In particular, it is important to move away from passivity and inertia. The aim is to actively engage adults of all ages in learning processes.

An ageing society and Third Age University

In recent decades, the proportion of older people in the total population has been rising. And this process is accelerating inexorably. According to projections by Eurostat, the European Union's statistical office, the number of people aged 65 and over will double by 2060 compared to the number of people of working age. The ageing population and the growing disparity between the working and retirement age groups are posing a challenge to a wide range of public and private sector sectors. As societies age, researchers are increasingly focusing on creating the conditions to help older people remain active and full members of society. One way of creating such conditions is through the establishment of training facilities for older people.

One of the main institutions focusing on promoting learning for older people is the Universities of the Third Age. Third Age University (TAU) is a provider of non-formal adult education and continuing education, a unit of a university, which provides non-formal education and continuing education for older people, meeting their knowledge, competence development and cultural needs (NSE Law).

According to statistics data in Lithuania in 2021 there were 45 Third Age Universities organised into the National Association of TAU, which brought together around 16 000 older people. According Jarvis and Griffin (2003), Third Age University is not a regular university (it possesses no campus), but rather a growing voluntary association that provides adult education to its members, as well as an opportunity for them to come together to form groups of different interests and to teach and learn from each other. The basic principle of this educational institution is that it allows the teacher and the learner to exchange activities. In some activities, the same person acts as a teacher and in other, the

same person acts as a learner. The classes are mostly organised in different locations and are not certified.

The main objectives of non-formal education at the University of the Third Age:

- to empower individuals to meet their independent learning needs;
- to develop personal creative abilities and skills;
- to encourage individuals to become active citizens of a democratic society;
- to develop personal cultural interests (Analysis of the functioning of the TAU system, 2012).

Third Age University is actively involved in finding a solution to one of the fundamental objectives of adult education in society: to enable older people to adapt to a changing environment and to meet people`s personal needs for socialisation, communication, learning and cognition. According to researchers (D'Orazio & Florenzano, 2000; De Camillis, 2000; Gustaitienė & Benevičienė, 2014, Žemaitaitytė, 2016), Third Age University, in comparison with other adult non-formal education institutions, is a rather specific educational institution, where people from a certain age group study. Therefore, working with this age group requires specific andragogical knowledge. On the other hand, like entire adult non-formal education, it is a voluntary and non-compulsory activity which is as attractive to people as it corresponds to their interests. Third Age University learners are active, curious, oriented not to the formal educational, but rather cognitive growth goals and possibilities in meeting new people. Third Age University empowers older people to remain active members of society, enrich their leisure time; for those in employment conditions, it helps to adjust to new developments in the labour market. TAU is particularly active in the development of digital competences for older people and in their absence, it is quite difficult to get by in today's world. When participating in Third Age University activities, older adults not only learn new things but also, they have the opportunity to share their own life experiences, which opportunity is of equal importance. This form of education/learning helps older people to review critically and assess their personal life circumstances, to identify new opportunities and to contribute to constructive changes in society. In Lithuania, TAU is often seen as an institution for the self-realisation and cooperation of older people, with a spectrum of institutional objectives, not limited solely to the augmentation of academic knowledge, but also engaged in the development and education of artistic and creative self-expression.

Older people`s learning research

When analyzing the needs and opportunities for adult learning in Lithuania, and the reasons for no acceleration in the number of learners, researchers are

increasingly focusing on aspects of the teaching and learning process for older people.

The study "Analysis of the performance of the Third Age University system" (2012) carried out in 2012 revealed that older adults (70% of respondents, 480 respondents in total) are motivated to study at a Third Age University by the desire to improve themselves and broaden their horizons. The researchers attributed these rather outlook related reasons not to the function of a specific educational institution, but to an individual's internal disposition to act and communicate. Around a fifth cited a desire to gain knowledge in a specific field and unwillingness to be left behind. More than half of respondents (58%) said that learning gives them the opportunity to meet new people. Researchers particularly highlight this aspect of socialisation of older people as a motivation for choosing to learn. And it can be linked to older people's enjoyment of life and the pursuit of well-being. Participants in a 2013 qualitative focus group study of older people (Mockus et al., 2013) noted that interpersonal relationships, relationships with former co-workers, and relationships with members of a social organisation in which they are actively involved, are important for their life satisfaction. According to the researchers, "the study participants 'supported' the classical theory of activity, which states that higher levels of social activity and leisure activities promote well-being in older people". Third Age University is actively involved in supporting older people's engagement and leisure time through a range of learning activities.

A study conducted in 2014 (Kalvaitis et al., 2014) aimed to look at the development of Third Age Universities in Lithuania and to provide guidelines for their development. According to the researchers, Third Age Universities in the country have been driven mostly by private initiative and the willingness and desire of some municipal leaders to develop adult education. This phenomenon is certainly welcome, but it is regrettable that it hasn't turned out into a common characteristics, i.e. when all Third Age Universities are fully supported by local governments. Hopefully this will be encouraged by a currently drafted new law on non-formal adult education.

Researchers also focus on the assessment of older adults' improved health, in addition to socialisation as a learning impact aspect. Studies on the impact of learning on the older adults' quality of life conducted in 2015 and 2018 (Sučylaitė et al., 2015; Sėlenienė, 2021) have confirmed that older adults see learning as an opportunity to turn run their lives along a better line, to lead a more informed life, and, in this way, learn to manage performance impairments due to emotional limitations. Measuring overall health status of older adults in different cities, researchers found that older people in cities with active Third Age Universities rated their health better.

The study in 2018, "Third Age Universities in Lithuania. Situation in 2018" (Kalvaitis, 2018), revealed that in 2017-2018, 16.5 thousand students attended

65 third-age universities in Lithuania. The number of older people attending TAUs is increasing every year. The majority of TAUs in Lithuania invite all older adults who wish to improve their skills. The researchers highlighted that learners at all TAUs in the country actively participate in both classroom lectures and various practical activities (art studios, Nordic walks, etc.). The students of the Third Age University are also active in other leisure activities (travelling, participating in amateur ensembles).

Conclusions

Overall, it can be stated that in Lithuania Third Age Universities with their specificity of activities, target audience and peculiarities of organisation of activities are an effective channel for consistent and purposeful educational activities to ensure a healthy ageing. The involvement of older people in the activities of TAUs is steadily growing, creating favourable conditions for the implementation of educational activities.

Scientific literature, document analysis and secondary data analysis reveal that for construction of a learning society in Lithuania older people should be actively encouraged to join the learning process. The process is strongly influenced by previous their learning experiences and social environment. Research confirms that the learning of older people leads to personal growth, consolidation of their role in society, while at the same time the substructure for building a learning society in Lithuania materializes.

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