

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34768/r1.2020.v46i.10>**Agnieszka Nowicka***

University of Wrocław

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0877-3174>e-mail: a-anowicka@wp.pl**Pavol Kopinec****

Comenius University in Bratislava

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0068-9090>e-mail: kopinec@fedu.uniba.sk

EDUCATION OF ELDERLY PEOPLE ON THE EXAMPLE OF STUDENTS OF THE THIRD AGE UNIVERSITIES IN POLAND AND SLOVAKIA

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Keywords: educational needs of elder people, University of the Third Age, educational programs for adults.

The increase in the number of advanced age people makes it necessary to pay more attention to the specific needs of the oldest generation, among which educational needs also play a significant role. Education in late adulthood is a predictor of successful aging, a factor constituting the quality of life, as well as the best prevention and gerontological rehabilitation. Its general goal is to include older people in the education system including lifelong learning, understood as a multidimensional process that gives meaning to life against the backdrop of civilization, social and cultural changes. It also helps in understanding life in a changing reality and in adapting to changes.

* **Agnieszka Nowicka** – Ph.D. in pedagogy; scientific interests: quality of life for seniors; inclusive education and integration in education for students with special educational needs.

** **Pavol Kopinec** – Ph.D. in social work; scientific interests: human rights.

Educational experiences of older people have developed on the basis of educational programs for adults, which over the years have been systematically modified and adapted according to the needs of recipients. The open educational system and the tendency to create integration facilities for seniors (especially Senior Clubs and Universities of the Third Age) are a token that civilized societies care for a good psychophysical condition and high quality of life of the oldest generation.

The purpose of this article is to present the history of the creation and functioning of the Universities of the Third Age in Poland and the Slovak Republic, as well as the benefits that education brings to the lives of elder people.

EDUKACJA OSÓB STARSZYCH NA PRZYKŁADZIE STUDENTÓW UNIwersytetów TRZECIEGO WIEKU W POLSCE I SŁOWACJI

Słowa kluczowe: potrzeby edukacyjne osób starszych, uniwersytet trzeciego wieku, programy edukacyjne dla dorosłych.

Wzrost liczby osób w starszym wieku powoduje konieczność zwrócenia większej uwagi na określone potrzeby starszego pokolenia, wśród którego potrzeby edukacyjne również odgrywają znaczącą rolę. Edukacja w okresie późnej dorosłości prognozuje szczęśliwe starzenie, jest czynnikiem tworzącym jakość życia, profilaktyką i rehabilitacją gerontologiczną. Jej prawdziwym celem jest włączanie starszych ludzi do systemu edukacyjnego oferującego możliwość uczenia się przez całe życie. System taki rozumiany jest jako wielowymiarowy proces nadający sens życiu w kontekście zmian cywilizacyjnych, społecznych i kulturowych. Pomaga on również zrozumieć życie w zmieniającej się rzeczywistości i przystosować do zmian.

Doświadczenia edukacyjne starszych ludzi rozwinęły się w oparciu o programy edukacyjne dla dorosłych, które z biegiem lat były systematycznie modyfikowane i przystosowywane zgodnie z potrzebami odbiorców. Otwarty system edukacyjny i tendencja tworzenia miejsc integracyjnych dla seniorów (w szczególności klubów seniora i uniwersytetów trzeciego wieku) są oznaką, że cywilizowane społeczeństwa dbają o dobrą kondycję psychofizyczną i dobrą jakość życia najstarszego pokolenia.

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie historii tworzenia i funkcjonowania uniwersytetów trzeciego wieku w Polsce i Słowacji oraz korzyści jakie edukacja wnosi w życie osób starszych.

Introduction

The aging of the world's population, especially of European societies, is a fact. At present, every fifth European citizen is at least 60 years old. In the group of the EU Member States, the largest elderly population currently lives in Greece and Italy (24%). According to demographic forecasts, the aging of European societies will continue in the coming years. It is estimated that by 2025 the proportion of seniors in the overall structure of these countries will have increased to 29%, and in 2050 every third European citizen will be an elderly person (<http://www.stat.gov.pl>).

The increase in the number of advanced age people makes it necessary to pay more attention to the specific needs of the oldest generation, among whom educational needs also play a significant role. Education in late adulthood is a predictor of successful aging, a factor contributing to the quality of life, as well as the best prevention and gerontological rehabilitation. Its general goal is to “involve older people in the education system including lifelong learning, understood as a multidimensional process that gives meaning to life against the backdrop of civilization, social and cultural changes. It also helps in understanding life in a changing reality and adapting to changes” (Borczyk, Wnuk 2012, p. 76).

Educational experiences of older people have developed on the basis of educational programs for adults, which over the years have been systematically modified and adapted according to the needs of recipients. The open educational system and the tendency to create integration facilities for seniors (especially Senior Clubs and Universities of the Third Age) are a token that civilized societies care for a good psychophysical condition and high quality of life of the oldest generation.

The purpose of this article is to present the history of creating and functioning of the Universities of the Third Age in Poland and the Slovak Republic, as well as discuss the benefits that this education brings to the lives of older people.

History of establishing Universities of the Third Age

Education of the elderly is frequently associated with the activities of the University of the Third Age (commonly referred to as U3A). They are: “educational institutions that care for the development of the elderly, as well as an important link in permanent education, ensuring the continuity of human educational biography” (Konieczna-Woźniak 2001, p. 107).

The first U3A was established in 1973 in France. Its originator and founder was the French sociologist and lawyer Professor Pierre Vellas (1924-2005), who for many years conducted scientific research on issues related

to the needs, interests and aspirations of elderly people. He wanted the intellectual and administrative potential of universities to be accessible also to advanced age people who for various reasons could not be educated in their youth. Vellas wanted U3As to be places of intergenerational cultural exchange, and the scientists employed in them to undertake research on the aging process. He convinced the authorities of the University of Toulouse to create a facility developing interests and skills of seniors (Szatur-Jaworska i in. 2006, Nowicka 2012).

In the opinion of Pierre Vellas, the main goal of the U3A founded by him was to improve the quality of life of elderly people and to provide them with a proper and dignified place in the socio-political structures of the country and the world. The specific goals he postulated were: (1) enabling seniors to receive continuing education; (2) creating diverse educational and cultural offers for them in connection with people from other age groups; (3) developing scientific research on aging and old age by representatives of medical, legal and social sciences, and (4) promoting social policy as well as preparing for old age (Koniczna-Woźniak 2001, Lubryczyńska 2005).

The interest in U3A's activities in Toulouse was so great that between the years 1975–76 in Nice and Caen, at the initiative of Pierre Vellas, two more such establishments were created, and in the following years the number of French U3As increased to 40. At the same time, these types of facilities began to be launched in other European countries, among others in Switzerland and Belgium, and later also outside Europe (Marczuk 2006, Steuden 2011). At the end of the 20th century, there were over 2100 U3As around the world, which offered a wide range of classes for many thousands of elderly people (Szatur-Jaworska i in. 2006, p. 170). The intensive development of these institutions caused that in 1975, in Toulouse, the International Organization of the Third Age Universities (French: Association Internationale des Universités du Troisième Age – AIUTA) was created, associating U3As from all over the world.

Education of seniors in Poland

The first Polish U3A was established in 1975 at the Medical Postgraduate Education Center in Warsaw. Its initiator was the professor of medical sciences Halina Szwarz, the then head of the Gerontology Department of that institution (Nowicka 2012; Fabiś i in. 2019). The goals of the Warsaw U3A referred to the assumptions of Pierre Vellas and were based on: (1) inclusion of advanced age people in the permanent education system; (2) intellectual, physical and mental activation of listeners; (3) conducting observations and scientific research, and (4) developing methods for further education of

seniors and implementation of gerontological prevention (Pólturzycki 2012, p. 97).

Owing to the involvement of Halina Szwarz, similar establishments were created in Wrocław (1976), Opole (1977), Szczecin (1978), and next in other major Polish cities, i.e., Łódź, Kraków and Lublin (Marczuk 2006, pp. 331-332).

The analysis of the data from the U3A nationwide research conducted by the Central Statistical Office shows that in the academic year 2014/2015 there were already 464 such institutions in Poland. Over half of them were run by associations and foundations (57.3%), and nearly 1 by universities (23.5%). Other U3A organizational entities were also: cultural centers and libraries (16.4%), social assistance institutions or other units appointed by the city or municipality office (2.4%), as well as other entities (0.4%). 96 370 seniors took advantage of the educational offer of these institutions, i.e., 95.7% of those who expressed their willingness to participate in classes, and over 2,000 people could not participate because of the lack of places (ZOOM na UTW 2015, <http://www.zoomnautw.pl>).

An analysis of 40 years of the activity of U3As in Poland (1975-2015) shows a clear tendency to systematically increase the number of these educational institutions, which testifies to the great interest of seniors in their activity, with the largest number of U3As created between 2006-2010 (44%) and 2011-2015 (31%) [see table 1].

Table 1

Share of U3As according to years of activity

Year of establishment	U3As percentage [%]
1975-1985	2,0
1986-1995	2,0
1996-2005	21,0
2006-2010	44,0
2011-2015	31,0
Total	100,0

Source: ZOOM report on UTW 2015, <http://www.zoomnautw.pl>.

According to the data presented in the GUS (Statistics Poland) report, in academic year 2014/2015, the majority of U3As were located in the following voivodeships of Poland: Mazowieckie (55), Kujawsko-Pomorskie and Śląskie (49), Dolnośląskie (42) and Wielkopolskie (41). By contrast, the lowest number of the institutions was located in the voivodeships: Opolskie

(17 institutions) and Lubelskie (15), Podkarpackie (13), Podlaskie (11), and Świętokrzyskie (6). Thus, the availability of U3As varies depending on the part of Poland.

Activities of these institutions are financed from many sources. A dominant majority of the U3As that were involved in the GUS research were at least partially financed from the fees paid by the listeners (77.6%). Many institutions also benefit from grants from municipal funds (64.9%) and from membership contributions (53.4%) (ZOOM na UTW 2015, <http://www.zoomnautw.pl>).

The most common motivations that encourage Polish seniors to enter these institutions are: curiosity, desire to spend leisure time in an effective way, as well as the wish to overcome the feeling of loneliness that accompanies them, or the ability to meet new and interesting people. On the other hand, less frequent reasons are: the need or desire to develop their interests, acquire knowledge and new skills, or to maintain a good psychophysical condition (Nowicka 2012).

U3As offer a rich range of educational courses for elderly people in the form of lectures on the most popular topic in the fields of: (1) health and medicine, (2) diet, (3) general history and history of Poland, (4) religion, (5) psychology and psychoeducation, (6) literature and art, (7) European education, (8) tourism and geography, (9) local history and culture, (10) law, (11) sciences, (12) sociology, (13) philosophy, (14) politics, and (15) fashion and beauty. Besides lectures, these institutions offer optional activities in the so-called sections, during which seniors can acquire new skills. The main areas of interest are: computer courses, lectures, various types of working and sports, artistic activities, etc. (Nowicka, Majdan 2008; Nowicka 2012; ZOOM na UTW 2015, <http://www.zoomnautw.pl>).

U3A listeners admit that they benefit from participation in the activities organized at these institutions, i.e., they: (1) develop passions and interests, (2) enjoy life, (3) improve physical and mental well-being, (4) establish new social contacts, (5) conduct a healthier lifestyle, (6) acquire new knowledge and skills (Nowicka 2012).

Education of seniors in Slovakia

The main question in the context of Slovak demographics is how to fulfill the idea of active aging. Another important task is to determine the status which Slovak seniors hold currently. According to Slovak Statistical Office, in 2019, Slovakia had 5 450 421 inhabitants. The Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of SR estimates in the document entitled *National priorities for the development of social services for 2015-2020* that, for the first time

ever, since 2018 there have been more seniors than children in Slovakia and this trend will hold until 2030. The population of Slovakia over the age of 62 was almost 932,000 people last year. By 2025, it will have been 1.27 million people. According to Mačkinová (2011), these demographic data are like a raised finger against a relatively passive attitude to the issue of aging civilization. A key concept for the adaptation of the elderly to living in society is the social environment.

Before answers to our questions are provided, we need to reflect on the diversity of seniors as individuals and a social group, including their community life and self-interest. This also includes diversity in their family background, educational attainment, work and skills, financial capacities, as well as mental and physical performance and health status. Finally, most seniors in Slovakia are no longer professionally active. As stated by Mačkinová (2017), there are many factors that should be taken into account regarding seniors, and one of them is education with its impact on the quality of life in older age.

From a global perspective, one can describe two basic orientations in the education of seniors (Hrapková 2010). The first one is the segregation model in which seniors are educated separately from younger, full-time students, and there is no link between the generations. This form of education focuses on a non-professional, interest-based formula that does not offer the possibility to increase qualifications. The second model in use at some universities is the integration model which offers education to older students along with young day listeners. It is provided in two ways, either as full-time courses that give qualification certificates or as interest-based courses for seniors who integrate with young people, but does not increase qualifications. The advantage of the second model is the interconnection between generations. It gives young students the opportunity to make use of and build on life experiences of older students, and both generations can confront each other's views and experiences in education.

Education for seniors falls into three groups: informal, casual, and formal. Informal education of the elderly is independent of any organizations and takes place through the acquisition and execution of various life roles, enriching and shaping a person's life experiences. Casual education is provided in the leisure time of seniors, based on their interests and needs. This type of education takes place in various educational, cultural, religious, and similar organizations. Formal education refers to institutional educational activity at universities or third-age academies and in various courses (Határ 2008).

The most challenging way of education for seniors are Universities of the Third Age. They operate at the highest levels of the education system. This context enables them to organize a diverse range of training cycles, which usually last for 4-6 semesters at the level of college work. Today, U3As operate as separate departments at almost all Slovak universities. They have a long tradition. In the past, some elements of education for seniors were organized by, for example, the Czechoslovak Red Cross, Socialist Academy, educational discussions and cultural houses. The number of U3As has increased since 1989, and now they exist in all major Slovak cities. They are very popular among seniors and provide elderly students not only with an offer of trendy topics, but also with the opportunity to extend their field knowledge and the space for maintaining interpersonal relationships (Haškovcová 2010). Another educational institution for seniors in Slovakia is the organization of Third-Age Academies. Their educational offer varies, including: either multi-term courses similar to those at Third Age Universities, or a range of short-term lecture cycles, discussion clubs, social skills trainings, language courses, or health exercises. The content focus of educational cycles at Third-Age Academies is broadly addressed by Petřková (2004) and Čornaničová (2007), who describe major field areas and topics within them as follows: (1) medical-gerontological orientation concentrating on: knowledge of healthy aging and diet, prevention of diseases, organization of physical activity of seniors; (2) civic-social education (initiated by senior organizations such as the Slovak Pensioners Union) promoting better social understanding of seniors and their active participation in social change; (3) socio-scientific orientation focusing on culture, history, literature, art, ecology, and “hobby activities” based on the interests of the elderly, such as gardening, photography, numismatics, etc.; (4) “Preparation for elder age”, which is a separate cycle particularly suitable for the younger among the elderly; finally, (5) movement training cycle – a separate cycle focusing on reconditioning, sport or yoga.

In Slovakia, also seniors’ clubs are very popular. They provide education and are advertised as voluntary groupings of people with common interests. Currently, they are the most common form of social life for older people. They are well known as active age clubs. The activity of such clubs is based on the interests of their members, so they can have a wide range of focus, such as, educational, cultural, recreational, sports, etc. Seniors’ clubs in Slovakia are associated around two large organizations, namely the Slovak Pensioners Union and the Association of Christian Seniors. The Slovak Pensioners Union has been a civil association since 1990, involving approximately 75 000 members in 860 organizations. The Association of Christian

Seniors was also established in 1990, and it is associates approximately 4 500 members in 75 clubs around Slovakia.

From the legislative and conventional point of view, the National Active Aging Program 2014-2020 is particularly notable. This program results directly from the Program Declaration of the Government of the Slovak Republic for the years 2012-2016, where the government undertook "... to develop a new National Program to Support and Protect Elderly People..." (<https://www.employment.gov.sk>). The above-mentioned declaration consists of 7 chapters, and Lifelong Learning for Older People occupies an important position in it. Particularly interesting is Chapter 6 entitled Employment and Employability of Older People. This chapter defines the objectives of employment policy towards the elderly, based on their needs. The needs and requirements of older people were defined in the material presented by representatives of the Senior Committee, currently transformed into the Government Council for Senior Citizens. Thus, there are 6 basic objectives: (1) Creating new and developing the already existing opportunities to educate older people in order to support their active life and better employability. The umbrella objective of which is to improve the quality of elderly life; (2) Legislative anchoring of various types and forms of education for elderly people in the educational system of the Slovak Republic; (3) Financial covering of different education types and forms for the elderly; (4) At the stage of setting a new programming period, defining indicators to enhance the digital literacy of older people; (5) Implementing programs to improve financial literacy among older people; (6) Strengthening and developing the quality of specialized trainings for career advisers who work with older people.

The first University of the Third Age in Slovakia was founded and inaugurated with the participation of government representatives on October 15, 1990, in the auditorium of Comenius University in Bratislava. At that time, it had 235 listeners. Today the U3A at Comenius University offers over 35 study fields. The teaching staff includes a majority of teachers and researchers from Comenius University in Bratislava, participating universities, practitioners or lecturers from abroad.

Studies at the U3A at Comenius University in Bratislava are interest-based and do not provide any qualification certificate. In the first year, its students attend general lectures that are introductory lectures into various study fields. In the 2nd and 3rd grades, the students study selected fields. Lectures are given every 14 days, with one thematic two-hour lecture, and take place on working days according to the schedule of individual departments. After completing three-year studies, senior graduates get a certificate

of interest from the U3A. To become a student of the U3A at Comenius University in Bratislava, a person has to be over 50 and to be a secondary school graduate with final exams. Admission exams are not held at the U3A, and listeners are accepted based solely on the order of enrolment. Today, the U3A at Comenius University in Bratislava is attended by more than 1,800 listeners, and other 200 are associated around the U3A Club (<https://cdv.uniba.sk/univerzita-tretieho-veku/>).

Currently, most of the Slovak Universities comprise a University of the Third Age. In 1994, The Association of Third Age Universities in Slovakia was established on initiative of various universities and colleges. It is a voluntary and independent interest association of U3As. Subsequently, other universities joined this initiative, and other U3As were opened in Martin, Nitra and Banská Bystrica. Today, out of the total of 1 million retirees in Slovakia, 7200 persons are involved in continuing education; among them 6,186 are women, who constitute 85.8% of all the senior students (<https://asutv.sk/>).

Table 2

Number of students at U3As in the academic year 2014/2015

University	Number of senior students
Banská Bystrica UMB	829
Bratislava UK	2059
Bratislava STU	716
Bratislava PEVŠ	17
Bratislavská bussiness school	50
Dubnickı technologickı inštitút	46
Košice TU	526
Liptovskı Mikuláš AOS	133
Nitra SPU	141
Nitra UKF	612
Prešov PU	271
Ružomberok KU	121
Trenčín TUAD	128
Trnavská univerzita	623
Zvolen TU	447
Žilina ŽU	479
Total	7198

Source: Report on the Activities of the Slovak Third Age Universities and their Association in Slovakia

Today, seniors can choose this form of education at 16 U3A centers in Slovakia. Representatives of every U3A meet regularly twice a year at the Association's meetings, where they jointly deal with the issues of U3A legislation, methodology of training, preparation of professional meetings, projects for seniors, and exchange experience. Since 2000, the Slovak Association is a member of the International Association of U3As – AIUTA (Association Internationale des Universités du Troisième Âge) working at the University of Capitoul 1 in Toulouse: www.aiu3a.com.

The U3A at Comenius University in Bratislava, for example, offers the following subjects in a 3-year study program for seniors: (1) archeology, (2) astronomy, (3) humans and nature, (4) monuments in Bratislava and northern Slovakia, (5) the theatre, (6) history of religion, (7) Slovak history, (8) general history, (9) art and fine arts, (10) theater and music over time, (11) emphatic assertiveness in current times, (12) ethnology and cultural anthropology, (13) European Union, (14) philosophy, (15) gerontology, (16) history and culture of Austria, (17) yoga, (18) balneology, (19) medicinal and aromatic plants, (20) medicinal products and health, (21) Latin and culture of Antient Rome, (22) museology and cultural heritage, (23) computers and company information, (24) law, (25) psychology, (26) regeneration of psychophysical strength in seniors, (27) seven wonders of Slovakia, (28) ballroom dancing, (29) the opera world, (30) world religions, (31) the world's antique heritage, (32) art therapies in life, (33) UNESCO, (34) words in the great world, (35) gardening.

The mission of the Third Age University is to: (1) contribute to ensuring the right of older people to education; (2) create a new and high-quality senior life program; (3) contribute to the quality of leisure; (4) contribute to broadening their horizons, raising knowledge, clarifying unknown facts and providing the latest information on science and society; (5) help integrate into society in new conditions that arise during retirement and retirement periods, and (5) contribute to improving the psychophysical condition of seniors and slowing down aging.

According to Selecký survey (2014), the main reason and motivation for entering U3A in Slovakia was in the case of 64% of respondents the need to expand knowledge, and only 2% of respondents declared that it was to escape loneliness. For 15% of respondents, it was the wish to establish new contacts. Other answers involved overcoming feelings of inferiority and deepening their knowledge or other interests.

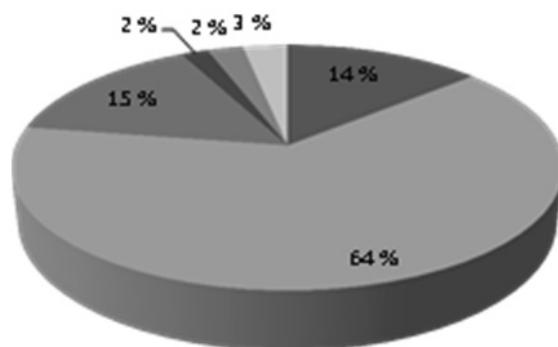


Figure 1. Motivation for entering U3A in Slovakia.

Source: Selecký survey (2014)

The basic mission of the U3As in Slovakia is to improve the quality of seniors' life through their educational activities. In recent years, emphasis has been placed on the prevention of intolerance between the younger and the older generations (ageism). The aim is therefore to create a meaningful intergenerational dialogue based on mutual exchange of experiences (Mühlpachr 2004). U3As mainly combine social, educational, health, economic, psychological, scientific-research, work and philosophical functions: factors that are indicators of the quality of life of the elderly population in Slovakia. For the planning of the policy regarding seniors in the future, more detailed statistical data, surveys and research are needed focusing on the achievements of U3A programs and their impact on seniors in Slovakia.

Conclusions

Currently, the concept of lifelong learning is widespread in science; it is also being practically implemented in relation to and by elderly people (Dubas 2007, Czerniawska 2011). The process of education of advanced age people has its specificity, resulting from both their psychophysical properties (longer response time to stimuli, limited attention, deterioration of some memory functions and formal and logical thinking, difficulties with abstraction and generalization, reduced vision and hearing efficiency), as well as environmental conditions (stereotypical perception of the elderly as incapable and not interested in acquiring new messages and skills, or their discrimination on grounds of age) (Fabiš i in. 2019). The main goal of education for older people is to help them gain independence, emancipation and support their constant development, so that the elderly would be able

to fully control their lives and derive joy and satisfaction from it (Skibińska 2008).

Education for seniors can take many forms: formal, informal and non-formal. The presented study focuses mainly on formal education, consisting in the organization of educational projects by the U3As in Poland and Slovakia. Poland, in comparison with Slovakia, has a definitely richer, nearly 45-year-old tradition of creating this type of educational institutions for seniors. It also has a much larger number of U3As, which also results from a larger number of people in the post-working age. In both countries, these institutions are very popular among the oldest generations. In the Slovak Republic, U3As are organized almost exclusively within the structures of universities, while in Poland, these facilities can additionally be created by other institutions, i.e., culture centers, libraries, institutions of social assistance or other units appointed by the city / commune office, as well as non-governmental organizations (associations and foundations). Both in Poland and Slovakia, U3A offers to its listeners a rich and varied range of educational activities. Their activities aim at similar objectives, i.e., integrating elderly people, improving the quality of life of older people, promoting gerontological prevention, implementing the idea of lifelong learning, and conducting interdisciplinary research on ageing and old age.

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