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Education

**ISEV - Inclusive Senior Education Through Virtual U3A**

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## **Introduction**

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This paper covers the situation of Adult Education and Lifelong Learning in Portugal, Czech Republic and Italy.

It is divided into seven parts, university's conception and senior education, how U3A works and educational offerings, use of information technology, measures adopted for an inclusive educational environment, methodology used in the study, results and conclusions.

A university of the third age (hereinafter as U3A) is the most known and spread educational possibility/activity for the senior age group. The objective of U3A is to guarantee seniors their right for learning and education at current scientific level. It is a way of acquiring new findings, knowledge as well as experience. It is also a possibility to establish social contacts with their peers. During studies, seniors meet students and postgraduate students, there are inter-generational relations.

## **Conception of Senior Education in the three Countries**

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In Portugal, the underlying policy for adult education can be summed up by Article 73 of the 1976 Portuguese Constitution, which establishes that everyone should have free access to education. This law encouraged the establishment of various forms of education (including formal and non-formal) and aimed to contribute in overcoming economic, social and cultural inequalities, including the personal and social development of citizens. It also aimed to promote a spirit of tolerance, mutual understanding, solidarity and responsibility. Over the last decades, Portugal has made a significant effort to increase the qualification level of the general adult population. However, the current reality is still far from the situation of many European Union and OECD countries as Portugal continues to have low

qualification levels, particularly in the older generations and young people.

In Czech Republic, the Czech Government approved the “National Action Plan for Positive Aging for the Period 2013-2017” (NAP), which states that although the Czech Republic has a well-established U3A system, the demand for the offered education still exceeds the offer. This type of senior education primarily focuses on interest education. Despite the fact that its outputs are not acceptable on the labour market, they have a positive benefit in personal development of seniors as well as increase their active participation in society. (Action Plan, 2012, p. 11) This NAP defined a strategic objective: Increasing the ratio of seniors engaged in interest education by means of U3A with respect to local accessibility. It also states: To update municipalities and regions on the benefits of U3A by dissemination and best-practice examples. (Action Plan 2012, p. 15) Universities of the Third Age are united in the U3A Association. The general assembly of the U3A Association members approved the “Long-Term Strategic Plan for Senior Education Development at universities in the Czech Republic in the period 2016-2020” which takes grounds in the “Long-Term Strategic Plan for Educational, Scientific Research, Development and Innovative, Artistic and Other Creative Activities in the Area of Tertiary Education for the Period 2016-2020” and other documents of the Government Legislative Council for seniors and aging population and from resolutions of the Government of the Czech Republic.

In Italy, at national level, the normative is characterized by the lack of a specific legislative framework. At the regional level, instead, we should highlight the effort to create a territorial system of orientation to the training.

In Italy, 1997 was an important year for the Adult Education because the Law n.59 of 15th March and the Ministerial Order n. 455 have been enacted establishing the Permanent Territorial Centres for Adult Education (CTP). During the year 2000 the State and the Regions signed an agreement concerning the reorganization and strengthening of adult permanent education. This document affirms that Adult Education is an integral part of the citizenship right and State and Regions have to work to create an integrated lifelong learning system in order to offer training opportunities to adults of all ages and conditions. After a first starting phase, through several projects assisted by the Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR) from the 1st September 2014, fifty-six CPIA were activated in eight Italian Regions, and today there are 126 CPIA on a national scale.

#### **Conditions of using the funds from the budget of the CR.**

A public university which receives the funds for the U3A operation (by using it) is obliged to comply with the duties of the state budget funds receiver. It is also obliged to keep internal records on U3A programme realisation. Its part is data identifying the participants in the programmes/courses (processed with a prior written informed consent of the participant), attendance sheets or other documents proving their attendance at individual presence educational activities realised within the U3A programme. Such documents must be archived by the university for the purposes of an inspection on the use of funds for at least three years after the end of the calendar year for which the public university was granted the funds by the Ministry's Decision. Condition of using the funds (incl. funds on U3A operation) and its financial settling follow legal provisions:

- 1) Law no. 111/1998 Coll., on universities and subsequent changes and amendments (law on universities), as amended;

- 2) Law no. 218/2000 Coll., on budget rules and changes of related laws (budget rules), as amended;
- 3) Regulation no. 52/2008 Coll., which defines principles and terms of financial settling of relations with the budget, state financial assets or the National fund;
- 4) Rules on granting provisions and subsidies to public universities by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, no. MŠMT-1325/2012-33 dated 17th January 2012;
- 5) Amendment no. 2 to the Rules for granting provisions and subsidies to public universities by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, specifying funding of programmes of senior lifelong education dated 10th September 2015;
- 6) Decision of the Ministry on granting the funds to a public university (for the respective year).

## **The educational offer for adults**

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### **In Portugal**

Despite the difficulties of involving older adults in mainstream policies of lifelong learning, the offer of educational programs for older students has increased dramatically in the last three decades. These learning opportunities have arisen in different settings and are sponsored by different institutions, including universities, senior centers and self-organized courses (Manheimer and Moskow-McKenzie 1995). The main concern is not to acquire work-oriented skills or qualifications, but for participants to socialize and remain active and to promote their personal development (Jamieson 2007). Universities have been particularly active in sponsoring non-formal courses for older people, the best examples being the Universities of the Third Age (in Europe) or the Institutes for Learning in Retirement (in

the United States) (Villar et al. 2010). In Portugal seven higher education institutions already offer formal education programs for senior students, an offer with a growing tendency in Portugal. In Portugal, the English model is the most used, an informal teaching response, without certification and practically free of charge for the population over 50 years old.

RUTIS President Luis Jacob underlined the great diversity of the various existing programs, an "enriching" experience that began to emerge in Portugal eight years ago and that the approximately 190 Third Age Universities existing in the country could benefit. In that sense, Luis Jacob announced that RUTIS will formally invite those institutions to become their associates as "observer members".

### **Senior education at the University of Ostrava within the Virtual University of the Third Age**

The Virtual University of the Third Age (hereinafter as VirtU3A) was established in 2008 as an output of project Grundtvig called SENIOR EDUCATION AND TRAINING INTERNET PLATFORM (Project number – 141981–LLP–1–2008–1–CZ–GRUNDTVIG–GMP). This project initialised a system of education, which was later developed and improved. It was financially supported by Development projects of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MEYS). Every year it significantly grew (i.e. enlarging the offer of educational activities and increasing the number of interested seniors), but it primarily improved pedagogical and didactical methods.

These days, we are able to offer three forms of studies: presence, combined, and distance and 6-10 courses from various areas in one semester. Each semester included two courses of Information and Communication Technology and two courses of English with courses from other areas. Since 2008, we have offered 80 different semester courses. The courses are usually attended by 200 seniors. A high percentage of seniors register 5

or more courses. We have contracts with c. 50 lecturers. It primarily concerns academics from the University of Ostrava, but they also come from other Czech universities, Academy of Science, museums, galleries, archives, etc. the most active seniors are those with more than 50+ passed courses. The seniors are also engaged in active organisation of educational activities. They have founded a community interest society University senior club. Within the club, they organise lectures, excursions, and other activities.

### **In Italy**

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines “adult education” as the entire body of organized educational processes, whatever the content, level and method, whether formal or otherwise, whether they prolong or replace initial education in schools, colleges and universities as well as in apprenticeship, whereby persons regarded as adult by the society to which they belong develop their abilities, enrich their knowledge, improve their technical or professional qualifications or turn them in a new direction and bring about changes in their attitudes or behaviour in the twofold perspective of full personal development and participation in balanced and independent social, economic and cultural development. Adult education, however, must not be considered as an entity in itself, it is a subdivision, and an integral part of, a global scheme for lifelong education and learning. Currently, Adult Education in Italy is developing and there is not yet a homogeneous educational offer at national level. Moreover, there are no educational models that are differentiated according to the ages so the category “adults” includes different generations.

## Use of information technology, SMART technology

The UN Literacy Decade has only just begun. Its success will depend on the mobilization of the best talents that can be brought to bear on worldwide literacy problems. The use – indeed the increased use – of effective and appropriate technologies can play a significant role in creating a more literate world. Conversely, the failure to take appropriate advantage of ICTs to help improve the lives of the poorest and least-schooled populations of the world make it all the more difficult to achieve the goals of the UN Decade, as well as the complementary goals of the EFA and the Millennium Development Goals initiatives. At the same time, it is essential to understand that neither more hardware nor more connectivity alone will positively impact the lives of poor people. At the policy level, without specific directives to the contrary, most ICT resources will end up where they are least likely to be effective for poor people. At the professional level, human resources (whether in content or in ICT design), as well as teacher training, remain heavily weighted towards the formal sector, where the vast majority of national budgets reside. This will need to change if literacy is to be increased. Furthermore, literacy and technology are becoming interdependent. Literacy and technology are ‘tools’ that have much in common. Neither is an end unto itself, but each can amplify human intelligence and human capability. Literacy education will need to take advantage of the power of technology, and work will require an ever more skilled population of producers and consumers.

In Czech Republic, Virtual U3A is based on using ICT. All seniors who take active part in the VitrU3A are trained in the basis of using ICT and the Internet, OS Windows and MS Office as well as Moodle, which is used for studying in the virtual classroom. The lecturers also have to be familiar with this system as a virtual classroom is used for studies in all courses. The

lecturers are trained at activities which are enabled by role teacher, i.e. communication with students, grading activities as tests, assignments, etc., overview of students and their results as well as other activities for learning management. Most of lecturers also use a role of course creators, i.e. they can insert study materials and activities for students into the course. This is not a condition in case the lecturer does not want to create a course, but only use it for teaching. Those activities are then done by the course administrator. The seniors primarily use a virtual classroom for education, although communication between the senior is also very common, or between the seniors and the lecturer. A virtual classroom then serves as a discussion forum. Apart from such basic ICT knowledge, the seniors are regularly offered 2 – 3 semester courses focused on information and smart technologies. For instance, courses of video and photo editing, courses of work with multimedia data, geographic data, maps, courses of work with electronic sources, such as archives, registers, etc., work with programs for genealogy, social networks, etc. very favourite courses are those about the use of smartphones, navigations, and other mobile applications. The seniors are regularly updated on news which is in, i.e. specialised ICT and smart courses stemming from the needs and wishes of the seniors. This is the area where we see a great opportunity for intergenerational dialogue, i.e. engagement of the young generation, primarily students, into the education in a role of assistants. Some experiments were carried out within project Grundtvig. However, engaging students has not become a common practice.

## Measures leading to inclusive educational environment based on experience of a given institution

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In Portugal inclusion is recognized as a complex process, involving several spheres of personal and of institutional lives. An inclusive society is defined as a society where everyone shares fully the condition of citizenship and is offered opportunities for social participation and access to continuous learning, as a way of fostering individual development, social progress and a more democratic society (UNESCO/European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, nd). Participation is considered a keystone for driving the change of attitudes in society, to ensure equal opportunities and rights. For persons with special needs, it is about achieving equal status to the other members of the community (DGIDC, 2009). In order to achieve that aim Inclusive Education is enshrined in law (Law on Special Needs Education - Decree-Law 3/2008) seeking educational equity, in terms of both access and outcomes. In Portugal inclusive education refers, thus, to the process of fostering participation of all children, supporting not only those with disabilities or developmental delays, but also all groups of vulnerable and marginalized children, namely because of their cultural and social backgrounds.

So the civil society had to organize itself to create a way to involve adult learners, even if they are informal learners, in this way have appeared the Senior Universities, which the main objective is fight the social isolation, by integrating persons who are in need of socialization.

They consider an inclusive educational environment primarily in removing barriers of senior education caused by their age, health condition, social and economic situation. It also concerns, among others, architectural and information barriers, barriers given by the financial situation of seniors, their difficult

possibility of commuting, lowered communication ability given by, for example, health disabilities, etc.

They consider the following as an effective tool for removing barriers:

- Modification of lecturing rooms, including facilities, so that seniors with movement problems could easily take part in the education. The UO disposes of two lecture rooms reserved for the VirtU3A which are fully barrier-free. The rooms also have social facilities and space for refreshments.
- Modification of educational method to consider more frequent absence in the presence part of the education. This requirement is effectively solved by the virtual classroom. The virtual classroom contains all study materials for the seniors, including presence lecturers, as well as activities for the seniors to do at home. Those seniors who cannot take part in the presence part of the education due to their health condition can still be in contact with the teachers and classmates and they also have the possibility to study the subject matter from materials on the Internet – virtual classroom. All seniors attending the VirtU3A have access to the virtual classroom from their homes. They are helpful to solve possible technical issues in order to prevent information barrier.
- The fee for VirtU3A courses is symbolic, which means that there is no financial barrier. They can afford it due to the financial help of the MEYS, which subsidises U3A activities in the Czech Republic. The received subsidy enables to realise educational activities, thus the fee is really symbolic and it has rather a motivational role.
- The seniors appreciate communication with the surroundings. Of course, face-to-face communication is

irreplaceable. However, there are situations when a senior cannot attend the school for a longer period. This is looked after by various discussion groups in the virtual classroom. The seniors can not only take part in existing groups, but they can also create new discussion topics. Sometimes, it is difficult to engage the seniors in discussions. It can be caused by their mentality, which hampers it. Thus, it is important to regularly address the seniors with news, updates, and to activate their attention. This is a task for the teachers as well as the organisers of the educational activities as well.

- Regular meetings at school serve to presence educational activities: lecturers, seminars, etc. Nevertheless, in order to remove communication and social barriers, it is necessary to organise informal meetings as well. At the UO, they organise joint meetings twice a year, usually with a short lecture followed by an informal discussion and a cultural programme. They have positive experience with outdoor education, which means a four-day excursion related to the topic of a selected course.
- The seniors like to meet young people. A system of regular joint activities of seniors and the youth is not, unfortunately, developed so we do not organise these activities regularly. Therefore, they promise that the ISEV project will help them partially eliminate this imperfection.

## Methodology

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### Methods used in Portugal

The methods used in Portugal for initial data collecting were surveys, informal interviews and observation. These research methods are qualitative and intended to explore interesting topics for these research and advance a holistic understanding of the participant. Surveys were used with older people; informal interviews for the younger group; observations of both groups were registered during the intergenerational learning activities. Surveys were applied prior to the courses, when the older participants made their registration in the project, and were used for assemble personal data, levels of technology practice and the importance of intergenerational activities for them. The interviews were conducted in order to gather information regarding attitudes, opinions and feelings related to ICT, intergenerational learning and solidarity and active ageing. In the informal interviews we try to guide it to get to know what they think about intergenerational learning and solidarity. In the Surveys we try to identify the motivation and importance to use ICT in everyday situations; identify approaches that facilitate intergenerational learning with ICT; Identify attitudes that can be improved through active ageing and solidarity between generations and identify preferences concerning to subjects to be learned. The observation during the sessions enabled to distinguish behaviours and attitudes of participants regarding intergenerational learning with ICT.

### Czech Republic

The state of the educational programmes for U3A in the Czech Republic was analysed as a quantitative research, questionnaire technique, which included 11 questions (4 dichotomic, 3

trichotomic, 2 enumerative, 2 open questions). The research was carried out in the period from 9 November 2017 to 5 December 2017.

In the Czech Republic, there are 23 universities that joined the U3A. CR had 42 subjects that replied because U3A is organised either centrally, e.g. Tomas Bata University in Zlín, or at faculties, e.g. Technical University of Ostrava, Charles University, or University of Ostrava. They addressed 42 faculties of universities in the Czech Republic and they had 34 subjects that replied, i.e. 81% (see Appendix 2), some of them replied only partially. U3A in the Czech Republic does not have a uniform organisation at universities.

## Results

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We had the same answers from the 3 countries (Portugal, Italy and Czech Republic) to the questions. Regarding the question “Gender” most of the respondents are females. The question “Do you feel excluded from the society?” all of them said they don’t miss anything. The question “Have you ever attended courses where students assisted you?” they answered no. To the question “How do you evaluate the possibility to study in U3A for your quality of life?” they responded that is very important.

Portugal and Czech Republic had the same answers to the questions, “Age” the seniors are between the ages of 70 to 75. The question “Do you have an opportunity to meet other seniors?” they responded yes. And to the question “Can you imagine that you would actively participate in education?” the seniors said no. In Italy the answers to these questions were, age 60 to 65, and yes they imagine how to participate actively in education.

Czech Republic and Italy had the same answers to the questions, “Would you prefer a course where students would be engaged?” the seniors said yes. To the question “Would you like to improve your work with a PC and Internet?” they responded yes. And, to the question “What is important for you when choosing a U3A course?” they responded that is their interests. To this same questions Portugal answered, they do not prefer a course where students would be engaged, they do not want to improve their work with PC and Internet and, the importance to choose a U3A is meeting new people.

To the question “what is your education?” the Portuguese responded primary school and the Czechs responded secondary school.

For the question “where do you live?” most of the responders of Portugal said they live in a village and the responders of Czech Republic said in a big city.

To the question “what type of activities do you miss?” Portugal answered they miss special cultural events, Italy answered senior club’s and Czech Republic answered they don’t miss anything.

To the question “do you master work with a pc and the net?” the Portuguese seniors answered that they have almost no experience with computers and internet, the Italian seniors have some difficulties and the Czechs work good with computers and internet.

For the question “what are the reasons that you want to learn something new” the Portuguese said that learning makes they feel satisfied , the Italian answered they want to be in touch with and the Czechs responded when they are interested in the topic.

### **Expectations of seniors**

The preferences of the seniors have changed. In 2009, the first place was taken by work with a computer, informatics, and use

of the Internet, mobile phones, new banking, mail services, and communication. There were also topics that are now gone: detergents for households, nuclear power stations and their safety, biotechnology. Topics which can be found in our research from 2017/2018 remain in long term. The interest in health topics is new.

They would like to improve work with photographs, everything, work with videos, creation and editing web pages, work with multimedia, presentations, work with e-mail, creation of tables, work with maps, work with the Internet, and work with Word in general.

## **Recommendations**

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This document shows some examples of good practices in the field of adult education, especially regarding to senior citizens. The institutions mentioned have several years of experience in the area and are now in a position to nominate some recommendations in the matter due to their positive feedback in working with this target group. We are talking of 4 different institutions in 3 different countries that work with the senior population, using different approaches, but with positive outcomes in all of them. Bellow we state some of the recommendations:

- Using an informal teaching approach, known as the English model, in which seniors can continue their education in a non-formal setting and with no certification. With this model they have the opportunity to choose disciplines in accordance with their needs and passions and have an active position in society.
- Within a more formal approach it is important the creation of a vast number of courses per semester

complemented with a social component, like for example, a senior club in which they can have the opportunity to travel.

- Create an adequate environment for seniors to attend the courses; abolish physical barriers for those who have mobility problems.
- Create a pedagogical syllabus in accordance with the senior population and not one more suitable for the teacher. The syllabus should be prepared in accordance with the target group.
- Using a virtual environment for classrooms makes it financially possible for almost everyone to attend.
- Intergenerational activities are an added value and very appreciated by the older people.

For Bates (2004), best practices in education are associated with the use of innovative methods, respond to experiences planned beforehand and are carried out in a systematic manner. Salinas (2004) considers that the vertebral axes of educational innovation are linked directly with the planning, with the praxis of improvement actions and with the incorporation of ICT. In this sense, it is understood that the use of digital resources as tools of learning can be a catalyst for educational transformation (Ricoy; Seviliano; Happy 2011; Yang, 2012).

In fact, at present, the education professionals are aware of the repercussions that has the application of technological equipment practices in educational levels regulated and also in the areas of non-formal education.

## Conclusions

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Education provides an opportunity for older people to continue learning and to share their knowledge and experience, while also offering the opportunity to engage with other generations. This study illustrates how non-formal learning opportunities by

intergenerational activities can contribute to outcome measures of wellbeing, to help assess life experiences and skills, increase comprehension between generations and have an impact positively on intergenerational relationships. Intergenerational programs constitute social vehicles that create purposeful and on-going exchange of resources and learning among older and younger generations. In a nutshell, it is about 'intergenerational engagement' – the full range of ways in which young people and older adults. Let's interact, support, and provide care for one another (Kaplan, 2002).

So, it is necessary to foster the necessary conditions so that all people, throughout their existence, can embark on learning paths that allow them to permanently develop their physical, cognitive and social skills and abilities. Those who attend senior universities perceive aging in a more positive and optimistic way, are aware of their "weaknesses" (especially physical), but also of their potentialities. According to Martín (2007: 67), "education should serve to make the transition to this new state or situation easier", that is, the natural process of aging can be successful through the learning paths adopted throughout life. In this sense, professionals who exercise (directly or indirectly) their activity among seniors should value their well-being (physical, cognitive, social, among other aspects) and the positive occupation of free time, looking at them as active individuals, with constant goals and lifelong projects. Nonetheless, is it possible for the senior population to discover different ways of occupying time and contact with new experiences, not only through senior universities, but also of other entities, such as the so-called "old age" homes or day centres? Will the activities and learning acquired at senior universities not be able to align with the day care centre's competencies (for example), creating and empowering institutions that meet the expectations, interests and needs of the

entire senior population, regardless of your educational level and / or economic and social condition?

In Italy senior education and lifelong learning has become an established reality, a pathway to continually adapt to the requirements and face the challenges of changing society. The role of no-profit associations, seniors centres and Universities of the Third Age have been constantly increased in this respect and the intergenerational learning model has become always more used across the whole country.

### Abbreviations

abbreviation	meaning
CR	Czech Republic
CU	Charles University
DOD	Day of Open Door
MEYS	Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports
NAP	National Action Plan
UO	University of Ostrava
SW	Software
U3A	University of the Third Age
GA	General Assembly

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