Project Reference Number:
2021-1-FR01-KA220-HED-000032112

PR5

Interview report

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European University Foundation

2024

Erasmus +60

Co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union

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Introduction:

Rising life expectancy and a growing senior population have led to an increase in a new student cohort, which has traditionally not been considered in the development of higher education activities and programmes like Erasmus+: European citizens aged 60 and above. Older adults represent a growing and diverse demographic with immense potential to contribute to and benefit from educational environments. Higher education institutions (HEIs) can play an important role in providing lifelong learning opportunities for older adults, thus contributing to enabling a thriving and ageing society.

The Erasmus+60 Project sought to engage people aged 60 and above through international learning opportunities or mobility, online learning, and intergenerational learning, thus leading to inclusion and further cohesion and enhancing their sense of European citizenship.

The project consortium led by Université de Versailles—Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines (UVSQ) in France included partners from across Europe, including ELTE-Eötvös Loránd University (Hungary), the University of Latvia (Latvia), the University of Porto (Portugal), the University of Zurich (Switzerland), the University of Split (Croatia), Mendel University in Brno (Czechia), and the European University Foundation (Luxembourg).

One of the project's outputs is the development of a series of policy recommendations. These recommendations promote integrating learning opportunities for older adults as a standard practice within higher education institutions (HEIs). They aim to provide guidance for HEIs and policymakers on creating or enhancing learning opportunities for older adults, using intergenerational learning and online learning for older adults, and incorporating mobility exchanges.

The proposed learning opportunities should be inclusive, align with participants' interests, reflect the diversity within this demographic, and support active ageing. They should also foster civic engagement and promote European values, ensuring a meaningful and transformative learning experience for senior participants while leveraging the wealth of knowledge and experience older adults bring to the table and creating a more inclusive educational landscape.

Methodology

To develop robust and comprehensive policy recommendations, 11 key stakeholders in the field of senior learning were interviewed to ensure a diverse and high-quality foundation for the recommendations. Interviewees were selected due to their relevant expertise and experience and the value of their inputs, following a rigorous process that included a stakeholder mapping to identify relevant actors in the field.

The selected interviewees covered a broad base of profiles and included:

- A Member of the European Parliament (MEP), part of the Committee of Employment and Social Affairs (EMPL).
- Representatives from organisations and associations working on the topics of lifelong learning, adult education, and third-age education:
    - Lifelong Learning Platform (LLLP), which gathers over 40 European organisations active in the fields of education, training, and youth,
    - The European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) represents European organisations directly involved in adult learning.
    - The International Association of Universities in the Third Age (IAUTA) brings together third-age universities worldwide.
- Representatives from third age universities and associations providing learning opportunities for older adults:
    - Senior University in Latvia, where they provide learning opportunities for people over 55.
    - Senior School in Latvia, where they offer free learning courses for people who have retired.
- Academic experts from the University of Malta, University of Zurich and Dublin City University specialising in older adult learning, online learning later in life and intergenerational learning.
- Representatives from the University of Burgos (Spain) and Public Open University of Zagreb (Croatia) whose students at their third-age universities partook in mobility exchanges.

The interviews focused on several key areas: lifelong learning for older adults, intergenerational learning, online learning, and mobility exchanges. Questions were carefully tailored to align with each interviewee's expertise and experience in these topics.

The interviews were conducted between January and April 2024, utilising online and face-to-face formats. After the interviews took place, responses were analysed, and their key findings were extracted. This report summarises the insights gathered from these discussions, highlighting key perspectives on lifelong learning for older adults, intergenerational learning, online learning, and mobility exchanges from relevant stakeholders. It showcases the foundation underpinning the policy recommendations.

The document will be split into four sections focusing on four topics:

- Lifelong Learning for Older Adults
- Online Learning
- Intergenerational learning
- Mobility Exchanges

Each section of the report will contain an overview of the topic, followed by its related interview question responses.

Lifelong learning for Older Adults

Overview:

The European population is rapidly ageing. As of January 2023, people aged 65 and above represented 21.3% of the population (Eurostat, 2024). Meanwhile, the share of young people in the EU is decreasing. Between 2011 and 2021, the share of 15 to 29-year-olds fell from 18.1% to 16.3% (European Commission, 2023). Eurostat estimates that by 2100, the proportion of people aged 65 and over will be 32.5% of the entire population of the EU (Eurostat, 2024).

Demographic changes pose significant challenges and opportunities at both European and national levels across the EU on how to create environments in which older adults maintain a good quality of life for as long as possible to remain active and engaged citizens. According to Gierszewski & Kluzowicz (2021), this is where lifelong learning can play a role, as it is believed to promote positive outcomes in the health and well-being of older adults. Furthermore, it can allow older adults to play an active role in society by developing citizenship competencies, instrumental for democratic participation (European Commission, 2022).

Studies have shown that remaining active later in life allows older adults to maintain health and postpone or prevent disability and sensory dysfunctions that may occur with age (European Parliament, 2021). Moreover, according to Cebulla et al. (2020), civic participation is also associated with improved health outcomes, including better physical and mental health and lower cognitive decline risks. It also decreases loneliness, increases self-confidence, and may grant older adults the potential to impact democratic policymaking through socio-political involvement and activism.

The Commission defined lifelong learning as an all-purposeful learning activity undertaken on an ongoing basis with the objective of improving knowledge, skills, and competence throughout one's life course (European Commission, 2000 & 2022). It was also considered indispensable for promoting social cohesion, active citizenship, personal and professional fulfilment, and adaptability (Formosa, 2014).

Third age universities and lifelong learning:

One of the most successful institutions engaged in late lifelong learning is Third Age Universities. They are *"socio-cultural centres where older persons acquire new knowledge of significant issues, or validate the knowledge which they already possess, in an agreeable milieu and in accordance with easy and acceptable methods"* (Formosa, 2014, p.42).

Some key characteristics include the fact that they can take place at existing universities and on the initiative of non-governmental organisations (Gierszewski & Kluzowicz, 2021). They are organised and designed for older learners who are usually of retirement age. There are no entrance

qualifications; the only requirements are meeting a specific age criterion and having a desire to learn. Courses are either free or you just pay a nominal fee (Villar & Celdrán, 2012).

These programmes aim not to prepare learners for the labour market or to upskill their professional skills. Instead, they focus on improving the quality of life of older adults by enabling their intellectual and social development. These programs promote health, physical activity, socialisation, self-esteem, social reintegration, and a sense of competence from being part of the university community (Gierszewski & Kluzowicz, 2021).

Third-age universities have been associated with democratising lifelong learning by providing learning opportunities to a sector of the population that tends to be ignored in this topic. They aim to combat stereotypes that portray older adults as dependent and needy, and learning can be a platform for them to voice their opinions (Formosa, 2014).

Additionally, some studies suggest that third-age universities have direct health benefits for members, although no rigorous research has been carried out on the link between third-age university membership and improvement in physical and cognitive well-being. A recent study argued that participation in adult education classes was associated with lowering the risk of dementia later in life (Takeuchi & Kawashima, 2023), and there are numerous valid and reliable studies showing that continued mental stimulation in later life aids learners in maintaining their physical and cognitive health status (Formosa, 2014).

Although third-age universities are not without issues, as they keep attracting more students, finding venues large enough to accommodate them and enough staff to administer and run these courses is becoming more difficult. Volunteers run many of these programmes as they often do not possess sufficient funds to employ full-time administrative staff (Formosa, 2014). Lectures usually occur at university campuses far away from city centres, which may be inaccessible to many adults (Formosa, 2014).

Furthermore, according to Formosa (2014), in terms of participant demographics, most participants tend to be middle-class. Some of the causes behind this stem from how most adults with post-secondary qualifications are already convinced about the joy of learning. Therefore, they have a higher motivation to enrol. Additionally, older adults from lower socioeconomic backgrounds might be more interested in courses that teach more practical knowledge. They might feel that third-age university is not for them and that it is an elitist programme. Also, there tends to be a higher proportion of women enrolled in these programmes, and there is often a lack of ethnic minorities and fourth-agers[1].

Finally, while HEIs have significant assets that they can use to promote lifelong learning and can play a key role in encouraging new types of learning throughout all phases of life, according to a policy brief by UNESCO (2022) on the contribution of HEIs to lifelong learning, they are not living up to their potential. This is partly due to a lack of awareness in HEIs about how lifelong learning can better equip older adults to address current and future challenges.

[1] The fourth age is often situated and defined in between the active third age and the time of death (Kiuru & Valokivi, 2022); Kiuru, H., & Valokivi, H. (2022). “I do those things to pass the time.”: Active ageing during fourth age. *Journal of Aging Studies*, *61*(101037), 101037. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2022.101037

Many still prioritise younger students and academic excellence in teaching and research while paying less attention to widening access and providing lifelong learning opportunities for all. Moreover, even those institutions offering some learning opportunities for older learners are mainly employment-related. Ideally, HEIs should go beyond these programmes and offer educational options focusing on students' personal development (Formosa, 2014; UNESCO, 2022).

Barriers faced by older learners to access learning opportunities:

There are several barriers that older adults might face to partake in further learning; they include:

- Demographic barriers: These barriers relate to age itself (*Schiller, 2023*) and may include health, as older learners may suffer from a myriad of health problems, including cognitive health or physical limitations, which may affect their ability to concentrate and make it difficult to access educational settings (Kacetl & Klímová, 2021; Lakin et al, 2008).

  It also includes time-related issues, as older adults may still be working (Schiller, 2023) and have parental and caregiving responsibilities and other personal commitments, making it incredibly difficult for them to schedule time to attend.

- Attitudinal barriers: They relate to widespread ageist stereotypes, which argue that ageing has a negative impact on learning. Ageist attitudes can come from older adults themselves or other people. Learning new skills requires confidence and motivation. However, our own or others' preconceived beliefs about older adults' ability to learn can shake this (Van Kampen et al., 2023).

- Structural barriers: These may revolve around university student services not providing adequate support to cater to the needs of older learners, course loads, inflexible course schedules, or a lack of funding, as older adults might face severe financial limitations (Yin-Yin, 2011; Lakin et al., 2008), such as retirement budgets or fixed incomes, which can make education seem unaffordable.

  Finally, there are geographical issues; some older adults might live in rural areas, where these learning opportunities are not offered or in regions with bad transport connections (*Schiller, E., 2023*).

- Informational barriers: Relate to a failure to communicate where learning opportunities are available for older adults (Formosa, 2012).

- Technological barriers: There is still a wide disparity between younger and older generations regarding their IT skills and their use of online resources (Haase et al, 2024).

- Individual differences: Older adults are not a monolith and are far from being a homogenous group. They have varied motivations, learning interests, needs, abilities, and socioeconomic and educational backgrounds (Kacetl & Klímová, 2021).

Work done by the EU on lifelong learning for older adults:

The European Commission has featured lifelong learning for older adults in some of its policy documents. Including in 2006 in its policy document on Adult Learning: It is Never Too Late to Learn and in 2007 in its Action plan on adult learning (Formosa, M., 2014). More recently, in its Green Paper on ageing (2021), the European Skills Agenda (2020), its Council Resolution on the new European agenda for adult learning 2021-2030 (2021), a European Parliament Resolution on an old continent growing older –possibilities and challenges related to ageing policy post-2020 (2021) and a European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) opinion: European Strategy for Older persons (2023).

However, according to Formosa (2012), while EU policy posits the idea that lifelong learning can aid older adults in remaining active and finding new roles following retirement and independence of their children, thus helping in countering the negative stereotypes that later life is a period of decline and dependency (Sibai & Hachem, 2021), many of these policy documents approach lifelong learning in later life from an employment and economic perspective, where the focus is on providing training to older learners to keep up with changes in the labour market so they can keep working for longer (Formosa, 2012 & 2014).

For example, while many documents do mention a more holistic approach to later-life learning, such as the Parliament resolution calling for the establishment of learning opportunities for older people, whether they are still part of the labour market or already retired (European Parliament, 2021), most still heavily feature an employment component. The EESC opinion recommends that *"the current demographic challenge means that barriers must be removed and opportunities seized to enable the inclusion in the labour market of older people and of those who wish to work beyond their retirement age"* (EESC, 2023) and the policy document on Demographic change in Europe: a toolbox for action explicitly states that *"in an ageing society, it is crucial to empower older workers to remain active for longer"* (European Commission, 2023, p.13).

An ideal late lifelong learning policy for older adults should extend beyond remaining active till later in the workforce and focus on a humanistic learning context. Apart from refreshing technical skills, it is essential to foster an understanding of political developments and encourage civic engagement from older adults. This approach can help foster an understanding of political developments and achieve a more inclusive, tolerant, and democratic society (Formosa, 2012). While the Green Paper and recommendations to establish a European strategy for older people are a good first step towards developing such policy, the EU can still do more to produce concrete policies and strategies to address the needs of its older adult citizens, particularly in the realm of lifelong learning.

Interview Responses

In this section, we will analyse the interviewees' responses to questions addressing various aspects of lifelong learning. These questions were designed to thoroughly understand the interviewees' perspectives on lifelong learning and establish a foundation for exploring more specific topics related to this field. The focus will be on key areas, including the challenges older adults face in participating in lifelong learning, strategies for engaging potential learners from disadvantaged

backgrounds, effective outreach methods to attract learners, and the policy changes necessary to create an age-friendly environment that supports older adults in their learning journey.

Importance of lifelong learning and changing people's mentality on its value

Interviewees agreed it is important to start early with lifelong learning and changing people's mentality on its value. For instance, the representative of the European Parliament replied that it is necessary to bring the idea into people's minds from a very early age that one never stops learning and to give them the tools that will allow them to learn and think to adapt to the ever-changing world around us, namely problem-solving and critical thinking. This is particularly important with older adults, as many interactions are moving online, and lacking the necessary skills could lead to exclusion from citizenship. Therefore, it is key to focus on developing skills and make sure there are spaces for people to learn new skills and understand their new reality.

They added that the European Parliament (EP) could contribute to changing the mindset of institutions and policymakers on the importance of lifelong learning for senior citizens by trying to pass resolutions and initiative reports. These would aim to push the Commission to set guidelines and benchmark practices that can guide the Member States towards an educational system that is more and more based on critical thinking, on the idea of citizenship, education, and soft skills so that all of this is put together inside of educational systems.

The representative from the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) replied that what should be done from an early age is to make learning a positive experience; it should be joyful. A lot of older adult learners might not want to continue with learning due to negative experiences in their past and because they might not see the relevance, particularly if they are not working anymore and the learning is not for obtaining a better job.

As a solution, they propose adapting pedagogical approaches and making them more inclusive and appropriate for people's ages. According to them, the power of joy and learning can change people's lives. For people with a lower educational background, it can give them self-confidence, help them discover new hobbies, and develop new skills.

Convincing higher education institutions (HEIs) about the value of lifelong learning will depend on whether they are profit-oriented or not. There have been talks about whether to include measuring inclusiveness when devising university rankings and to be more open to the diversity of their student populations. This could motivate them to make changes towards being more inclusive of other student populations irrespective of age.

The representative from the University of Malta answered that many people do not understand the difference between learning and education; they conflate the two concepts. They feel that this causes people to not truly understand lifelong learning. Further issues with lifelong learning also stem from the concept being mentioned so often; people take it for granted, and it no longer interests them.

On how to encourage people to partake in lifelong learning, they replied that it would be useful if the topic of lifelong learning would feature in the news. Additionally, more funds and people

working in the field are needed, however there is often not enough. From their experience, countries have limited human resources and funds for lifelong learning unless this learning is skills-based and needed by employers. Overall, many of the lifelong learning policies in Europe are much more focused towards keeping people in employment for longer and increasing economic growth.

The representative from the Lifelong Learning Platform (LLLP) replied that changing HEIs' mindsets about the importance of lifelong learning is dependent on their social mission and on optimising their resources. Part of their social mission is to support cohesive societies and impact the community, region, and country they are in.

If a university has a social mission in its strategy, then it should be part of that mission to integrate, create or use the spaces that it owns to provide learning opportunities for older learners. They have the resources and educational infrastructure in place, but it is not being used to their full potential. For instance, during certain periods of the year, they have empty classrooms, which could be destined for lifelong learning for older people.

Also, older adults have a wealth of knowledge that universities can use to help them stay active in society in their old age. Therefore, providing lifelong learning for older adults could benefit HEIs in terms of their social mission and the best use of their resources.

To encourage older learners to participate in learning opportunities such as third-age universities, the interviewee from the LLLP says it would be important to design a more social and engaging learning offer and show them the impact that further learning could have on their health, well-being, society, our healthcare system, and everything else. It might also be important to offer some kind of financial compensation because otherwise, many older adults might not be able to access it.

Moreover, on a political level, the representative from the LLLP adds that what also matters is having a political will to support the right to lifelong learning. LLLP is currently advocating for lifelong learning rights to education; they are calling it lifelong learning entitlements, which would give a right to people and enable them through legal infrastructure the possibility to be supported and given opportunities for learning throughout life, a public service going beyond higher education.

This could be a political commitment that the Member States could have; it would support universities to do what they can and empower people to know that this is a right they also have and can use. It might motivate more older adults to take up lifelong learning. All in all, you need multiple pieces to come together, and these would include political commitment, universities optimising their resources and then incentivising older adults to partake in lifelong learning courses destined for them, such as third-age universities.

Finally, on this same issue, the representative from the International Association of Universities of the Third Age (IAUTA) replied that it is important to change the mindset of people about its importance as for older people, lifelong learning is an avenue to access more culture and for more practical learning such as foreign languages. Also, lifelong learning will be useful for older adults to learn about new technologies because while some might have become acquainted with computers at work, they might have outdated technological knowledge if they have not kept up with it.

Challenges faced by older adults to partake in lifelong learning:

The interviewee from the Senior School in Latvia replied that some of the challenges included changes in functional abilities associated with physical ageing, such as reduced hearing and vision, reduced speed of information perception, difficulties in remembering and recalling facts or less mobility. Older adults might suffer from psychological limitations such as a lack of confidence in one's abilities; they perceive themselves as people who have stopped developing and are unworthy of attention. Additionally, they face ageist prejudices and negative stereotypes manifested in relation to others, which may include ridicule or emotional abuse. Finally, another challenge is a lack of goals and an understanding of the importance and long-term benefits of engaging in learning.

The expert from the University of Malta also identified similar challenges, such as how some older adults' challenges stem from the fact that they now find themselves in a vulnerable role and do not know what to do as this is something new to them. However, in their view, despite all these challenges, older people have a right to learn, as learning is a human right, and this does not become obsolete with ageing. While older people might take longer to learn something, and even if they have dementia, are terminally ill or are bedbound, they all retain the ability to learn something new.

The representative from the Senior University in Latvia replied that, in their view, some of the challenges faced by older adults mostly revolved around finding out about the learning opportunities available to them. The communication channels used to target older adults might not be the most appropriate for them as many of these opportunities are advertised using digital channels, which many older adults might be less likely to use. They answered that we should switch towards other communication channels, such as local newspapers or send out notices.

Another challenge they alluded to is that older adults are a high social risk group due to low pensions and increasing expenses. Therefore, many of them at least in their experience in Latvia, might not be even able to pay the small symbolic often charged to learners to partake in these learning opportunities. The only way to provide these opportunities for free is through receiving external funding, such as from a project. The issue then becomes that if that funding stops being available, and they then must start charging for a service, many learners would stop coming as they were used to getting this service for free.

Further challenges the Senior University in Latvia representative has encountered include the fact that learning opportunities in Latvia have mainly taken place in closed groups within local communities. Once these groups are established, older adults are often very reticent to accept anyone new.

Another significant challenge they have faced is that while they have been able to secure coordinators to organise learning activities and obtain spaces to teach for free, they struggle to get teachers to teach the courses. They would have to do it for free, and delivering these courses for free does not endow them with additional advantages in their professional careers.

This is a major challenge, particularly if they wish to deliver high-quality courses, which is what their learners demand. One potential solution to overcome this barrier, apart from receiving more

funding from the government to pay these teachers, is to have these programmes be an internship opportunity for students training to become teachers.

The interviewee from the LLLP also raised these challenges, replying that one of the greatest difficulties is reaching out to older adults and making any learning opportunity accessible, as they tend to be less digitally native and more isolated. Financial issues related to an older person's socioeconomic background can also act as a barrier.

Another challenge they raised is the issue of course design. In some instances, courses are a bit too formal, when many older learners would prefer a type of learning that is more fun, social, and less formal. For them, it is important to socialise with others and learn new things, as well as to be able to share their knowledge. Learning opportunities must go beyond being like a simple university course and cater to their needs and interests.

The EAEA added that the challenges older adults face revolve around how, in most countries, education expenditures are geared towards younger people compared to older adults; therefore, they are a cohort that does not receive much support for learning.

The representative from AIUTA replied that one of the main challenges is opening the university to all older adults, even those who were unable to attend university in the past or those who live in rural areas. For that, they are developing online courses. Nevertheless, as will be discussed later, they are not without their own set of issues.

It is also challenging to involve people who are aged 75+ in lifelong learning, as many have mobility and other health-related issues. Another challenge is how to reach people who are also most likely to be isolated; for instance, they have a programme called AIUTA Insula, which seeks to provide lifelong learning to people living on islands who have never heard of it and look to introduce them to these learning opportunities. They have held seminars, for instance, on this in the Azores and Madeira Islands (Portugal).

Encourage the participation of older adults from lower socioeconomic backgrounds

On this issue, the interviewee from the Senior University in Latvia replied that they have offered these courses for free to learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. They believe that some sort of state funding for providers of senior education should be offered to sustain the running of these programmes and enable people who may not be able to afford the co-payment fee to attend.

This was similarly echoed by the representative from the Senior School in Latvia, who recommended offering services for people with lower incomes free of charge, at a nominal fee or at a discount at organisations or institutions providing learning for older adults. However, this would depend on the ability of the organisation to provide this differentiation of fees between students.

They also suggested that the European Parliament could adopt relevant legislation at the European level to encourage governments to support organisations and institutions involved in third-age education. In their view, it is necessary to help older adults overcome the barriers of ignorance, insecurity, negative stereotypes, and language barriers.

The representative from the EAEA suggested that in addition to targeted outreach campaigns, it would be interesting to investigate what topics older adults are interested in and combine them with practical skills training.

Finally, on how to encourage older people in rural areas or with a lower educational level to participate in learning opportunities, the representative from the EAEA replied that, for instance, in rural areas, you need to bring the educational offer closer to them. However, if this is not possible, you must make sure the university is accessible to them so they can take these courses.

There is also the question of how to motivate them to enrol as some older people were out of the educational system when they were very young and may be sceptical of the benefits of learning in their old age. According to the interviewee from the EAEA, It is key to find out how to communicate the value of learning without scaring them, as they might have the impression that since the courses are taking place in a university, they will have exams and they might find patronising the unilateral direction of knowledge. It is important to make them feel comfortable as the experience might initially intimidate them.

Outreach and communication strategies to attract senior learners.

Several respondents have reiterated across the interviews that one of the main challenges older adults face is that opportunities are not adequately communicated and that there is a need to re-evaluate outreach strategies.

The interviewee from AIUTA answered that in terms of outreach, there is a problem with gender imbalance as there are more women than men attending third-age universities. They seem more open to these learning opportunities; they like to attend them with friends even if they do not have post-secondary education. In their opinion, many men feel that they have nothing else to learn and are unaware of the benefits lifelong learning could bring them. It would be important to do research on strategies to encourage more participation of men in this type of learning.

The expert from the University of Malta offers a potential solution to the issue raised above by the respondent from AIUTA. They argue that the first thing that must be done is to analyse which kind of learners are not coming to these programmes, to think about what has not been done, and to consider where we have failed in attracting these potential learners. Some of the groups that might be less likely to attend are men, people from deprived areas, people who are working-class, or people who have disabilities.

They say that what they did was to open centres in working-class and deprived areas and offer courses in topics that might interest men, too, like marine biology or sports, for example. They have also created universities of the fourth age, where they deliver courses for people in care homes and for people with dementia, all carried out by people trained in the fields of gerontology, geriatrics, or adult education. The key to outreach is to figure out who is not coming and to go to them yourself.

Further outreach strategies suggested included having a lifelong learning week at institutions showcasing their learning offer; it could even entail inviting people for a coffee. The key is to have

an open way to inform people about what is on offer, as proposed by the representative of the EAEA.

Moreover, the interviewee from the EAEA suggested that a media campaign using innovative and alternative adverts could help bring attention to the learning offered at institutions. This could be done in cooperation with other associations, such as libraries, museums, or other adult education centres. It is also key that all these outreach efforts are part of a framework or programme within the institution; they should not just come from a person interested in the topic. This suggestion was also offered by the interviewee from the Senior School in Latvia; in their experience, such information spreads well from person to person, and when interesting learning opportunities appear, they quickly become known to a wide range of people from the same cohort.

Encouraging cooperation and exchange of best practices between institutions and Member States on third-age education

The representative from the EAEA suggested using the European Commission's adult learning working group on this topic. As part of the European Agenda for Adult Learning, national coordinators could organise certain events at the national level.

Similarly, the representative from the Senior School in Latvia also suggested it would also be useful to hold public events such as festivals with the participation of representatives of organisations, including higher education institutions, which provide educational services to older people, scientific conferences with the participation of researchers and representatives of governments of EU Member States. They also suggested adopting relevant legislation and promoting the exchange of best practices among Member States.

Policy changes are needed to create an age-friendly educational environment for older adults.

The respondent from the Senior School in Latvia argued that authorities should mainstream the topic of the ageing population and have formal discussions on reducing its impact and negative consequences. Governments should also adopt relevant legislation to provide targeted support to organisations or institutions that provide educational services to older people.

They also suggested requiring EU Member States to ensure that they develop educational opportunities for older people in HEIs. These would be accompanied by control mechanisms and a system of evaluation criteria, with the help of which it will be possible to monitor the implementation progress.

It is also important to consider funding sources to cover the costs of HEIs interested in establishing training programs for older people. This will be instrumental for EU Member States with lower living standards and fewer funds to ensure people from low socio-economic backgrounds can participate.

Moreover, they also responded that at the EU level, it would be helpful to adopt the forthcoming European Strategy for Older Persons currently under development; one of its strategic objectives includes requiring all participating countries to adopt a national strategy for older people and the ageing society (EESC, 2023). The EU is calling for a paradigm shift towards reducing ageism and improving the perception and image of older people.

Another suggestion by the interviewee from the Senior University of Latvia is to adopt a regulation defining third-age universities. In their view, if there was a European regulation that would encourage Member States to integrate third-age learning into lifelong learning, then, for instance, their home country of Latvia would have to do so, as their government does not currently contemplate this.

The representative from the LLLP said that the European Pillar of Social Rights, which focuses mainly on the working population, should be extended and that there should be more training opportunities for older adults because it benefits them. They also advocate for broadening the scope of individual learning accounts[2] to include older adults in third-age universities and the working population. Third-age universities can position themselves to provide learning opportunities for these learning accounts to be used.

They also talked about how demographic issues pose a chance for the EU to do something to provide more learning opportunities for older adults. They saw that after COVID-19, it became clear that this was an important issue. However, no concrete action has yet been taken on this issue, not even from HEIs. Despite this, their influence could carry much weight in encouraging the creation of policies to benefit this prospective group of learners.

To get universities more involved, what could work is for those with successful programmes to share more broadly what they are already doing, act like role models and share experiences so other universities would be interested. Also, political pressure is necessary, and it must come from multiple areas, such as employment, as this issue cannot be fixed only through education; it needs higher multi-governmental political commitment.

Positioning the issue of lifelong education for older adults in front of policymakers:

On this issue, the respondent from the European Parliament suggested it is essential to ensure policymakers understand the benefits of investing in strategies supporting active ageing and their benefits regarding cost efficiency. Preventive measures promoting active ageing, such as learning, can help people combat isolation, improve their mental health, and give them the tools to be active citizens aware of the changes around us, which can benefit the system.

In their view, we must guarantee these benefits. Additionally, we should mainstream active ageing strategies into the development of ageing policies, as they can potentially lower healthcare costs and tackle threats to democracy. Explaining how these benefits can be cost-beneficial can help raise awareness, particularly regarding budget issues.

[2] https://year-of-skills.europa.eu/news/individual-learning-accounts-where-are-we-now-2023-11-21_en

On how the EP could assess the impact and benefits of learning opportunities for senior citizens, the interviewee from the Senior School in Latvia proposes using empirical data from scientific research. Ideally, this data would be derived from comparative information across Member States, for which it would be necessary to finance cooperation between researchers across Member States.

They also provided sample questions for conducting sociological research among senior learners to evaluate the benefits of learning opportunities. These included: 1) the degree of satisfaction with the content and quality of the taught material; 2) the level of general well-being according to self-assessment; 3) how participation in educational programs of older people affects (improves/worsens) their physical health; 4) how during participation in educational programs their healthy lifestyle practices have changed, e.g. physical activity, anxiety level, insomnia, need for medication.

According to them, similar studies had been conducted in Portugal on their senior education programmes, and the results had shown lower levels of stress and depression among respondents compared to national averages, higher levels of physical activity, and greater satisfaction with life in general.

Also, the representative from the EAEA acknowledged that the Commission's current focus on lifelong learning is on employability and is more labour market-oriented. While the European agenda is open to all learners and needs more advocating, it is important to work with MEPs who are interested in the topic of lifelong learning for all and not just geared towards employability.

The demographic change argument might be the strongest for this. As mentioned at the beginning of this section, they say there is evidence that learning can help prevent many health problems related to this cohort, which would save Member States money on healthcare in the long run.

Intergenerational learning

Overview

Intergenerational learning (IGL) emerged in the second half of the 20th century, spurred by demographic changes, including the relocation of families searching for better work opportunities, the transformation of the traditional family and a rapidly ageing population. An increasing socio-cultural distance between generations characterised these changes; intergenerational programmes were designed to overcome them (Schiller, 2023; Kolland, 2008).

There is no strict definition of intergenerational learning; however, at its core, it is learning opportunities that *"may arise in any range of contexts in which young people and elderly people come together in a shared activity"* (Newman & Hatton-Yeo, 2008, p.32). The overall aim is to enhance cooperation and the exchange of knowledge, experience, and skills between learners of two or more generations (Schiller, 2023).

It can occur in various contexts and settings, including the workplace, community centres, public spaces, and educational settings such as higher education institutions. However, it is not the standard in educational institutions' educational work (3S et al, 2012).

Benefits:

Intergenerational learning has been found to have several benefits for learners of all ages and even for institutions themselves. For older learners, some benefits include positive effects on cognitive development; it can also contribute to overall health, well-being, self-confidence, and self-efficacy (Corrigan, 2012; Pstross, et al., 2017).

Further benefits include acquiring new skills and new ways of learning, changing the attitudes older adults might have toward younger people; it can help with alleviating loneliness, social isolation, boredom, and depression by assisting them to expand their social networks through interacting with other people whilst participating in meaningful activities and feeling more involved in society (Pstross, et al., 2017; Urbanovic, et al., 2023; Linking Generations, 2017).

Finally, intergenerational learning can act as a non-threatening first step to further learning, particularly for those who perceive learning as irrelevant or have had humiliating experiences. It also creates learning opportunities and activities relevant to the learner (ENIL, 2011), and if they have a good experience, it opens them up to new learning opportunities.

For younger learners, it can help them develop positive attitudes towards older adults and ageing, develop self-confidence by imparting knowledge which is beneficial to others and helpful and generate an enhancement of knowledge, skills, and competencies (Pstross, et al., 2017; Urbanovic, et al., 2023) which will be helpful in their future careers. Also, seeing older learners participate in learning opportunities for the love of learning can be motivational to them as they can see that learning is not just for landing a good job after university and can offer a broader conceptualisation of education as their interest in learning goes beyond the vocational (Corrigan, 2012).

In terms of benefits for higher education institutions, according to Corrigan (2012), older learners' personal and professional experiences can be used in multidisciplinary dimensions across all faculties in higher education. They have a wealth of knowledge and experiences that can be extremely useful for HEIs and that should not be lost or discarded; they can contribute towards rich and deep learning across all disciplines).

Intergenerational learning can also provide a forum to build relationships and social networks between generations and bridge cultural and generational barriers, making older learners more visible to younger learners and university staff, demonstrating that institutions value the role of older learners in higher education (Pstross, M. et al., 2017) and that learning is lifelong. Finally, it facilitates knowledge transfer and skills between generations, building social capital and more cohesive communities and promoting active and healthy living for all ages (Linking Generations, 2017; 3S et al, 2012).

Challenges:

However, intergenerational learning is not without its share of issues, such as intergenerational learning not being an established concept supported by coherent national policies integrated at the policy level (AGE: WISE Project, 2021; ENIL, 2011). European networks on projects working on it often have a short lifetime, which prevents them from having any significant impact and affecting the development of further intergenerational learning programmes (AGE: WISE Project, 2021). They need a stable source of funding that can enable the sustainable development and continuity of intergenerational learning programmes (Corrigan, 2012) and help them achieve the benefits of this programme.

Issues related to ensuring skilled staff can deliver and support intergenerational learning may also exist. Regarding participants' negative perceptions of each other, challenges might be brought on by participants' motivation to participate in this type of learning and their confidence in the skills they are able to contribute to the learning (3S et al, 2012).

Intergenerational learning programmes also struggle with logistical issues related to where and when they can occur on campus so that they are not disruptive to participants’ lives, finding where intergenerational programmes fit within the institution's structure (3S et al, 2012; Corrigan, 2012).

Additionally, further research is needed on its tangible educational benefits, and finally, some programmes may lack appropriate course design and quality control. Simply bringing different groups into contact with one another does not guarantee positive results. Some projects have led to a preponderance of negative outcomes-stereotypes or biases were confirmed rather than overcome (Corrigan, 2012).

Work done by the EU on Intergenerational learning:

At a European level, there has been a growing interest in this topic since the 90s; numerous campaigns and declarations have encouraged policymakers to place intergenerational learning issues higher on the agenda. Some examples include:

- Learning for Active Ageing and Intergenerational learning—Final report (2012): This EU-funded study sought to improve and extend knowledge about learning for active ageing and the role of intergenerational learning in active ageing (3S et al, 2012).

- Council Resolution on New European Agenda for Adult Learning 2021-2030: In its priority areas of Quality, equity, inclusion, and success in adult learning, the European Council directly mentions intergenerational learning and how it can promote well-being and active, autonomous, and healthy ageing (European Council, 2021).

- Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe (EPALE): This network platform is part of the EU's strategy to promote more and better adult learning opportunities. Thus, it allows members to connect and provides visibility to projects and articles related to adult education, including learning experiences based on intergenerational learning (AGE: WISE Project, 2021; EPALE, 2024).

- Erasmus + and Grundtvig Projects: Several EU-funded projects have focused on INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING. The ADD LIFE Grundtvig project (2006–2008) developed INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING opportunities in higher education and explored various INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING models (Kolland, F.; 2008). The European Network for Intergenerational learning (ENIL, 2012–2014) analysed INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING's impact on diverse target groups, promoted expertise exchange, and aimed to influence policy (AGE: WISE Project, 2021). The Generations in Interaction as a Constructor of Identity and Culture project (2018–2020) worked to enhance competencies in applying INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING (Ge & I, 2025).

Across European Union Member States, intergenerational learning is usually implemented to address specific issues and has clearly defined objectives (ENIL, 2011), for example, fighting disinformation and enhancing computer literacy. They tend to be organised in non-formal settings such as associations, non-profit organisations, and formal, public, or private settings such as schools, universities, and elderly homes. Its teaching-learning practices are predominantly organised in a one-way direction from younger people to older adults or older adults to younger people; reciprocal practices are still rare (AGE: WISE Project, 2021).

However, the adoption of intergenerational learning across Europe has been mixed with countries such as Germany, the UK, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, and Finland, which have a longer tradition of delivering intergenerational learning activities through numerous channels (ENIL, 2011). Others, such as Italy, have a lack of national and local intergenerational programmes; those implemented there so far are mostly run on a volunteer basis and within the framework of projects such as Erasmus + (AGE: WISE Project, 2021).

Responses by interviewees

During the interviews, participants shared their insights on the topic, with a particularly in-depth discussion from an expert from the Intergenerational Programme at Dublin City University (DCU). Given their expertise in developing intergenerational learning as a high-quality pedagogical practice in higher education, their responses are especially relevant for shaping policy recommendations. The following section presents a summary of their insights and perspectives from other interviewees.

The value of developing intergenerational learning programmes

Interviewees agreed on the positive benefits of intergenerational learning programmes and support their development. The respondent from the EAEA argues that intergenerational learning has gotten stuck on the traditional idea that the younger generation will teach the older one about technology, whereas the older one will teach the younger one about more cultural topics. They argue that intergenerational learning is still a source of untapped potential. Further examples of what can be done with intergenerational learning include shared living spaces between students and seniors or older employees mentoring younger ones in companies.

At the 2023 Citizens' Panel on Learning Mobility, intergenerational mobility was discussed, including ideas like a grandmother and granddaughter participating in mobility exchanges together. This was recommendation number 5, which recommended that the EU create a pilot program allowing multiple family members to participate in mobility together (European Commission, 2023).

The interviewee from the European Parliament considers intergenerational learning programmes to be an added value in many aspects of society, not just education. They cite Portugal, for example, as a country where programmes address senior loneliness and youth housing issues through shared housing, an example that the representative from the EAEA cited previously.

They also highlight how intergenerational learning programmes can enable older adults to gain new skills, and competencies via different pedagogies. Intergenerational learning can also help strengthen the social tissue and encourage social cohesion by enabling younger people to understand the past from the people who experienced it, to build a better society in the future and understand the importance of values that are taken for granted, such as the principles of democracy and freedom.

Similarly, the interviewee from the University of Malta sees intergenerational learning as key to a society for all ages but acknowledges that older people may hesitate to participate in intergenerational learning programmes due to past negative education experiences. As reiterated in the previous section on lifelong learning, outreach is essential to raise awareness about the learning opportunities available, highlight their benefits, and make people feel comfortable participating. Simply offering a programme does not guarantee interest. Emphasise that it is non-formal learning, with no assessments, designed for enjoyment. Additionally, policies should address the unique needs of older learners.

The representative from AIUTA noted that third-age universities were not originally intergenerational per se, as learners were mainly in a class with other learners of their own age.

However, they are now evolving and have started to develop intergenerational learning programmes. In their view, younger people teaching older adults ICT skills, for example, works better than the reverse, with older adults teaching younger people about the past, for example, because, in their experience, young people were not interested in that. However, they believe the Erasmus+60 intergenerational learning model of co-management and project-based learning approach might work. They also pointed out how younger staff often lead third-age university programs, which could be seen as a type of intergenerational cooperation.

According to the respondent from the LLLP, intergenerational learning has always been part of the LLLP platform and has gained importance after COVID-19. They see intergenerational learning as valuable because they believe that learning is not just about knowledge acquisition; it's about knowledge creation, which can only happen if every individual's knowledge is captured in a classroom or learning environment. This is why they want to see classrooms with different age groups come together.

The interviewee from the LLLP believes generations should learn from each other to create a more stable society. Connecting generations through learning helps prevent past mistakes. They cited an example of how one of their members investigated how history is taught from one generation to another, as this is important for building peace and reconciling societies. Moreover, they added how intergenerational learning is also seen in digital and green transitions. Younger people teach digital skills to older generations, while older people share knowledge on sustainable living.

Positive impacts of Intergenerational learning:

According to the expert from Dublin City University, intergenerational learning offers various benefits besides what participants are learning about. These include physical advantages such as staying active, feeling energised in the morning, and having a sense of purpose through interactions with younger students.

Another impact is cognitive stimulation. Partaking in intergenerational learning enables older adults to keep their minds active as it gives them something else to talk about and stimulates their minds in terms of how feedback is structured. Finally, there is social engagement whereby, participating together in an activity, older and younger people get to know each other, and after spending time together, they realise that the differences between them are not as vast as they believed them to be; they can find common ground and communicate between each other.

Best practices encountered for intergenerational learning:

In terms of best practices the respondent from Dublin City University emphasised the importance of careful planning and organisation in intergenerational learning programs. They also highlighted how important it is to be able to operate efficiently within structured spaces and their regulations when designing a programme. Programmes should also be well-structured while allowing informal spaces for younger and older learners to interact, such as over tea or coffee breaks.

A key practice is fostering reciprocal learning, where lecturers, younger students, and older adults are treated as equals, recognising that each has something valuable to contribute to the learning space. Scheduling must also be convenient for all; in their case, intergenerational learning programmes took place on Saturday morning because that was the most suitable for their university students. It was also when the university was less busy, so there were more car parking spaces available, too.

Further examples of best practices include asking older adults what they want to learn instead of assuming. For instance, some of the older adult learners at their institution said they had never studied science at school and wished to know more about science and technology today.

The respondent then explained how they developed an 8-week course focused on science in participants' daily lives in a user-friendly way for older adult learners and delivered in a non-patronising manner. As they had a heterogeneous student cohort with some having to leave school at age 14 and others with a higher education degree.

It was taught by one of their science lecturers, who made the concept of science accessible to both older and younger students by using examples of actions they do in their daily lives, such as waking up and boiling a kettle to make a cup of tea. This led to talking about the topic of electricity and showing how science is taking place all around us without even realising it. The lecturer also used digital tools like Padlet to answer questions.

Older adult learners enjoyed the course because the lecturer valued their input rather than just delivering a one-way lecture. He encouraged all questions, creating a supportive atmosphere, especially for those with negative school experiences. Learning materials were provided both in print and online for accessibility.

Even those who did not fully understand the course still found it enjoyable. Without the pressure of assessments, they could learn for the sake of learning and appreciate the chance to engage with others in the classroom.

Good practices include designing courses based on learners' interests, making learning engaging and relevant to their lives, and creating a welcoming space where questions are encouraged and that it is a space where it is alright not to understand everything. Social aspects, like post-class coffee meetups, also help maintain engagement. However, the interviewee acknowledged that not all lecturers may have time to develop such programs.

Effective pedagogical approaches for intergenerational learning

In terms of effective pedagogical approaches, the Dublin City University expert recommended using various approaches because young people and older adults can be very different in the way they want to learn, and no pedagogy fits all. What underpins everything is that you want to create a safe space, an educational space, and an entertaining space for older and younger learners, and to do that, you need a variety of pedagogies.

Also, it is important to understand that in intergenerational spaces, some pedagogies allow themselves to work together while others that you thought might work well together do not. They

tried to introduce creative writing as an intergenerational activity because they thought young people might come to listen to what older adults had to say; however, older adult learners preferred this not to be an intergenerational activity.

The interviewee responded that they felt that the co-management and project-based learning approach presented in the toolkit designed as part of the Erasmus+60 project was a good idea. It can allow young and older adult learners to work as a group, embrace dialogue, find a space for both cohorts to share their stories, and find a commonality.

Topics that resonate well with learners

One topic that did quite well was law and government. For the younger lecturers delivering the course, the intergenerational learning element of the course was their favourite because while a lot of the older adults had not studied politics, they had lived through very important events, and they could share their experiences, like, for instance, the economic situation post WWII.

They also enjoyed that they had no problem sharing their opinions as sometimes younger students might be shyer, and the older adult learners were also interested in the points of view of the younger lecturers. Another topic that did well was health and well-being and media studies. They wanted to learn more about how older adults are represented in the media.

Meeting the preferences of older learners

In terms of what HEIs should do to ensure the suitability of intergenerational learning courses to meet the preferences of older learners, the respondent from Dublin City University acknowledged this is very difficult to get right. What they feel works is to have a dedicated space and person within the university who can look after the intergenerational programmes, who could be sat in student support services or in a specific faculty like health. However, this often requires some form of funding for the role of the person in charge of them.

Further aspects that need to be considered are whether intergenerational learning programmes will be newly created for older learners who come to campus or whether they will be blended into already existing programmes. Also, how can these programmes be introduced in a user-friendly way that enables them to become embedded within universities.

Additionally, it is important to ask older learners who sign up for the courses in a confidential space about their own needs. For instance, if they are hearing impaired, the university needs to investigate the audio supports available, and if they have a physical disability, they might have issues with parking or moving around campus. Furthermore, there is the issue of making the university a welcome space for older learners; for some, coming to university can be an experience that generates fear and anxiety.

All in all, it is important to ensure that the university is a user-friendly space. Encouraging older learners to attend intergenerational learning programmes would be pointless if they do not have adequate facilities or a welcoming environment. This will only cause them to feel disappointed and discouraged.

Involving learners in choosing the topics they wish to learn about

The representative from Dublin City University answered that they do try to get learners involved in deciding what they wish to learn. For instance, in September, they hold an open day where they invite older people from both the local and wider community to get a taste of the courses on offer. At the end of the day, they ask them what modules they would like to be involved in.

One way to attract prospective learners is to work with active organisations of retired people; this could entail academics attending these organisations and giving talks. The advantage of this is that the people of the organisations are very vocal about telling you about what they want and what they do not want, and you can reach a lot of older people this way. However, one of the main issues with this approach is that these welcome days require funding to organise them and bring prospective learners, particularly those who are alone and do not participate in any association.

The expert from the University of Malta also responded that they involve learners in what they wish to learn. They have an information meeting where they negotiate the timings for the courses and the curriculum, as sometimes learners ask for courses that they might not be able to provide. Nevertheless, they said 80-85% of the older adult learners' requests are met.

Guaranteeing quality control of intergenerational learning programmes

To ensure quality control, it is important to have buy-in from faculty and lecturers willing to participate. Initially, when they pitched their intergenerational learning project at their institution, the university expressed some reluctance, as they felt lecturers might not be interested in it. However, that was not the case; lecturers were very interested in the topic and would also promote this opportunity to colleagues who would then like to be involved in the following year.

Ideally, for quality control, it would be useful to have a day where the head of faculty, deans and lecturers get together to agree on the criteria for these programmes and courses. Some of the main criteria for these courses are that they should be presented by lecturers; many of the materials used are like those used for their modules with younger students, which are likely to have gone through their own quality control, and the people delivering them are experts in their field. The content should be made user-friendly but not in a way that is overly simplified, assuming that learners might not be able to understand the content due to not having attended university. They should not forget that these courses are informal and that the learning is carried out for the love of learning.

One extra element that might work to ensure quality is to encourage input from younger students by having a credit element built into the programme. An example cited by the representative from Dublin City University comes from the Business School, where they had an intergenerational learning programme revolving around budgeting in retirement. To encourage quality input from the younger students, they built in an assessment for them, which counted 10% towards their grade; the assessment was that they had to write a reflection on their engagement and input. According to them, in the end, the students said that while at the beginning they were looking for extra credit, in

the end, that did not matter to them as the best part of the programme was engaging with older people and the life experience they learned from them.

Encouraging participation in intergenerational learning programmes

The university must understand the purpose and value of intergenerational learning programmes. It is essential to have buy-in from them. If older learners are brought in and they do not feel welcome, there is no point in the programmes.

Staff involved in the programmes should do it because they recognise older people have much knowledge and valuable experience to impart to younger generations, not just because it is maybe the right thing to do, or it is good for career progression as that can easily come across as patronising. Ideally, the university should have its commitment to intergenerational learning made part of the values of ethos so that learners can see and reinforce that they are welcome and that the university wants them to be part of the university experience.

It is then important to organise an induction day, create a space where you invite older learners, talk to them about why you would want them to be involved, explain the benefits, and even introduce them to people at the university.

The interviewee from the EAEA reiterated that to encourage participation, it is necessary to promote a learner-centred approach. In this approach, you talk with participants and ask them what they wish to learn. Then, you build a curriculum that makes the learning relevant to their lives.

Encouraging participation from learners from disadvantaged backgrounds or rural areas

For Dublin City University's representative, this goes back to the organisation, the structure within the university, and the staff who are organising intergenerational learning programmes. They must make sure that in the promotional material and campaigns, they highlight that it is inclusive and that they welcome everyone. Apart from doing this campaign through the Internet, it might also be useful to produce leaflets and hand them out, for instance, in housing schemes for older people.

It would also be important to build rapport with prospective older adult learners to determine their interests. The interviewee cited as an example how they had a man who left school at 14 years of age. His interest in later life was beekeeping, and they got him to present about beekeeping. People were blown away by the experience, and he felt good because he was sharing this experience. The key thing is to emphasise that they are welcome.

Transport can be a huge issue for learners in rural areas who want to reach the university campus. If travelling is a problem, then you must go to them and give them talks and presentations. This is not only applicable to intergenerational learning programmes but also to third-age programmes. The aim is to make them understand that there is a place for them at university, too.

Gender breakdown in intergenerational learning programmes

In terms of the gender breakdown in their intergenerational learning programmes, the majority are women; 60% are women, and 40% are men. The interviewee from Dublin City University explained that they initially did an intergenerational learning programme in secondary schools, which men did not want to get involved in. However, the moment the programme started taking place at the university, more men decided to sign up for it.

One of the reasons for this change was that they loved the idea of going to university and then going back to their families and telling them about what they had learned at the university. Many men back in the 50s, 60s, and 70s in Ireland did not have the chance to go to university, and they relish the opportunity to attend it.

Although most of these men were recruited from men´s groups where they did a targeted campaign, men coming out of their own volition did not have that many. They said this topic can be a research study on itself as to why men are less inclined to join these spaces compared to women. They cited Men's Sheds[3] as a successful example of an organisation that has looked to help men socialise and that aims to improve their health and well-being.

Challenges Intergenerational learning programmes face in higher Education

The respondent from Dublin City University identified several challenges in intergenerational learning, including university attitudes toward ageing, funding to set up and sustain the programmes, space availability to run the programmes, and insurance concerns for older learners in case they fall on campus. A key issue is ensuring program sustainability when passionate leaders who set up the programme leave.

One solution proposed is more research to highlight the benefits of intergenerational learning. If this kind of research is made more visible, it could contribute to supporting the rationale for developing intergenerational learning programmes and spaces. Another suggestion was to make intergenerational learning a priority in Erasmus+ and Horizon projects. Also, ensure that a budget is put aside for intergenerational learning programmes, even if it is just a small amount.

Another major challenge in adult education is inconsistency—programs often start under one government but are discontinued by the next and might then be revived by another a few years later. This instability frustrates staff and limits long-term progress, as staff feel they are working on something worthy and valuable only for the government to say that it does not have value.

The interviewee from the University of Malta stressed that intergenerational programmes are more complex than what some people expect them to be. True intergenerational learning is more than just younger people teaching older people ICT, which is traditionally cited as an example of intergenerational learning; it requires both groups to learn from each other in a meaningful way. Designing such programs takes time, effort, sufficient staff, and funding, which some institutions

[3] https://menssheds.org.uk/

may not prioritise as third-age education traditionally does not generate profit. This can impact convincing HEIs about the value of these programmes and hiring enough people to work on them.

The representative from the LLLP viewed cultural barriers as a challenge. Some societies view going back to university as an older adult negatively. Moreover, policies also tend to separate people by age, making it harder to create intergenerational spaces. Communication gaps between generations can further hinder dialogue. Successful programs require skilled facilitators who have the skills to facilitate a dialogue between the two generations so that it does not become a patronising exercise for the adults or infantilising for the young.

Also, if governments are to promote intergenerational learning activities, they would need a multi-governmental or whole-government approach. This approach is challenging and requires strong political will and incentives at a high level, but European institutions could help.

Sustainability of intergenerational learning programmes

Sustaining intergenerational learning requires institutional commitment, supportive policies, and dedicated funding. HEIs must see themselves as part of the wider community, with senior management backing these programmes. Advocacy is needed to integrate intergenerational learning into national education policies, especially given its health benefits. Research demonstrating its impact should inform policy to ensure long-term viability, as intergenerational learning programmes cannot just be happening at the grassroots level, it is not sustainable.

These programs can help both generations combat loneliness and foster belonging, as seen in an example cited by the respondent from Dublin City University, where a bereaved participant of their intergenerational learning programme found comfort through engagement with younger learners. Ultimately, sustainability depends on securing stable funding and institutional belief in the program's value.

Moreover, the EAEA respondent suggests moving away from having most intergenerational learning initiatives run by volunteers and integrating intergenerational learning into a member state's lifelong learning policies for retirees. They call for national governments to link policies on ageing and lifelong learning. Additionally, they advocate for stable funding and moving away from short-term project-based support, which can cause insecurity because, after the project finishes, there is often no guarantee that its results will be used or disappear.

The representative from the European Parliament stresses that lifelong learning is key to social engagement and political participation. Without it, we risk increasing people's disengagement and disenchantment with society, not only from their political participation but also from their community involvement, especially as they become more frustrated with the system. Despite budget constraints, they call for the European Commission and Member States to prioritise and sustain funding for intergenerational learning.

Metrics to measure the effectiveness of intergenerational learning programmes

According to the expert from Dublin City University vidence-based research is necessary, albeit this poses challenges as well. Sometimes, this cannot be easily quantified as the data is qualitative; it relies on people telling researchers about what the benefits are for these programmes; it is also not easy to come up with adequate indicators to evaluate their long-term effectiveness, they might not be able to reach former participants to interview them on their long term benefits, and there can be a lack of staff and funding to be involved in evidence-based research projects.

Horizon projects were considered useful because they would allow partnerships with diverse voices and expertise, such as health professionals. Particularly as there has been an increase in social prescriptions[4] yet the most they can prescribe to patients is to tell them to get involved in activities, more links between the health and education sectors are needed.

Looking at the benefits of intergenerational learning will require thorough research on the topic and quantitative and qualitative data from healthcare professionals, the education sector, the people themselves, the students, and the older adults partaking in the programmes. Getting back to younger students involved in intergenerational learning programmes and seeing the benefits would be invaluable. For instance, an interviewee responded that some of the students involved in their intergenerational learning programmes told them it helped them secure a job as their prospective employers have been very interested in their involvement in these programmes.

Support needed at an institutional, national, or European level

In terms of what kind of support Dublin City University would need at an institutional, national, or European level to implement intergenerational learning programmes, they believe coming together as partners interested in the issues and looking for partnerships across Europe is necessary. As previously reiterated, funding is essential; it could be from Horizon or Erasmus+ funds and building strong connections with other institutions, policymakers, and organisations which recognise the value of intergenerational learning and its future potential, particularly with an ageing population that wants to continue to be active, valued and to be able to contribute to younger people.

On what the EU can do to create common standards and encourage the development of intergenerational learning programmes, the EAEA interviewee suggests as a basis to create these common standards the LifeComp framework[5] designed by the Joint Research Centre (JRC), which could act as a basis for building a framework or curriculum.

Another thing that can be done is to do a European-wide lifelong learning campaign with also a focus on older learners; the EAEA respondent suggestion is one on a learning Europe, create awareness that we all need to learn about different topics, like for example, if we wish to have any form of sustainable Europe, we should all understand what that entails and how it can be accomplished. A lot can be done at the European level by creating awareness, working with Member States, adding it to the European Semester and using all kinds of other instruments.

[4] https://www.england.nhs.uk/personalisedcare/social-prescribing/
[5] https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/lifecomp_en

On how the European institutions could support intergenerational learning programmes, the European Parliament respondent suggested using the Erasmus+ programme by encouraging intergenerational mobility by putting young people in contact with older people from other countries and vice versa. The projects could help other citizens develop a better sense of what it is to be European and what it is like to be involved in part of a bigger political project, and this helps contribute towards the construction of the EU. The Commission could try to develop pilot projects in this area so that intergenerational learning exchange and mobility can be done via Erasmus. The European Solidarity Corps could also be a valuable scheme for this too.

Online Learning:

Overview

Online learning makes use of electronic technologies via the Internet to engage with learners and thus facilitate their learning (Sunal & Wright, 2012). It is not a new concept. Nevertheless, its use accelerated after COVID-19, and third-age universities are no exception to its use. It was initially set up to reach older adults who could not join other learners in a classroom setting. With improving internet connections and the Web 2.0 internet revolution, it became a reliable and valid learning experience, bringing interactive learning to previously unimaginable levels (Formosa, 2021).

Benefits

This type of learning has been found to deliver significant benefits such as enabling institutions to reach people in rural areas or where there is no similar educational offer, helping combat the isolation of those living in rural areas and cities, and providing flexibility and convenience (Formosa, M., 2021). Asynchronous learning allows learners to learn at their own pace and to juggle jobs, family caregiving, physical activity and learning schedules without conflicting timings. Also, to have the opportunity to reread or rewatch a lecture and take more time for information to sink in before moving on (Formosa, 2021; Bulbul, 2022).

It can also provide anonymity where discriminating factors such as age, physical appearance, disability, and gender become primarily absent. Instead, the focus of attention was clearly on the content of the study unit and the individual's ability to contribute thoughtfully to the material at hand (Formosa, 2021).

It also helps older adults acquire digital competencies, such as understanding how the internet works, email communication, and online learning platforms. This boosts self-esteem and autonomy by giving older adults a new sense of purpose and excitement. It can also help bridge the digital divide by motivating older adults to reach better levels of digital competency and use the internet for more things. This might increase the integration of older adults into a changing society (Formosa, 2021; Pappas et al., 2019).

Furthermore, if courses are live or there is a forum function, it can help older adults maintain social relationships with other learners, which tends to foster a sense of belonging to a group and help address isolation and solitude (Formosa, 2021; Bulbul, 2022).

Finally, it can provide up-to-date and constantly available learning, make educational offers less expensive and provide more individualised learning (Pappas et al., 2019).

Issues

On the other hand, online learning is not without its issues, either. Some older adult learners find online learning an impersonal learning experience, it can make it challenging to maintain

relationships with other learners and cause a loss of classroom interactivity, particularly if courses have only one-way channels of online transmission and lecturers cannot interact with learners. Additionally, lacking a physical classroom means no opportunities to greet and catch up with friends, making it difficult to maintain and build new social connections(Formosa, 2021).

Learners might have connectivity issues and a lack of adequate equipment. Also, there is the issue of the digital divide, which describes the gap between age groups in terms of their access to and use of modern information and communications technologies (ICTs) **(**Eurostat, 2020**).** The use of ICTs among older adults is steadily increasing; nevertheless, there is still a share of those who do not use and adopt new technologies. Older men tend to be more likely than older women to use digital technologies; this may be linked to older men having been more exposed to new technologies in the workplace. According to Eurostat, in 2023, only 28 % of people aged 65-74 possessed at least basic digital skills (Eurostat, 2020 & 2024).

Then, there are issues related to age, such as cognitive and visual decline. The learning speed of older adults is changing, demanding enough time to learn, which is why appropriate platforms and course design are necessary (Bulbul, 2022). However, it can be the case that the platform where courses are hosted is not accessible or challenging to use.

According to Formosa (2021), there is varying course quality in E-learning, as some tutors may lack adequate training in online delivery and methodologies, resulting in lectures that are not well-suited for the virtual medium. Additionally, not all subjects are easily adaptable to online learning. Certain topics require instructional methods that a virtual environment cannot fully support. While it is technologically possible to simulate physical learning experiences, this does not guarantee that learning objectives and outcomes will be equally achieved. A single curriculum cannot effectively serve both physical and virtual settings, as success in one does not always translate to the other(Formosa, 2021).

Finally, it is not easy to advertise courses to older adult learners in more rural or remote areas (Swindell, 2002). This is a big issue as these learners would benefit the most from online learning, and we cannot reach them.

Work done by the EU

In terms of what the EU has said about online learning for older adults in a resolution by the European Parliament on challenges related to ageing policy, it stresses developing a series of online learning options for older adults and strengthening the skills of older people so they can benefit from online learning(European Parliament, 2021).

Additionally, according to an opinion by the EESC on a strategy for older persons, the opportunities offered by digital learning tools, including massive online learning courses, should be fully exploited (EESC, 2023).

Also, in September 2020, the European Commission launched the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-20278 (DEAP). One of its main priorities was to enhance digital skills and competencies for the

digital age, although the current DEAP does not feature any actions that address their specific needs (Ruseva, 2021).

Responses by interviewees

This section summarises the interviewees' responses, focusing on insights from a project partner at the University of Zurich. The discussion explores key considerations and challenges in designing online learning courses for seniors. The expert interviewed is a researcher specialising in online learning for older adults and is involved in developing a platform that offers both e-learning and blended learning opportunities for senior learners.

Views on online learning for older adults

Opinions on online learning for older adults were mixed among interviewees. The expert from the University of Zurich highlighted its advantages, such as its flexibility, enabling learners to take the course anywhere and anytime; its diversity, as it could potentially allow people to take courses on a wide range of topics from institutions located around the world and its potential for digital skills development.

According to the representative from the EAEA, it can also help those unable to attend in-person classes due to distance, disabilities, or worry about being judged by others. However, they argue that a hybrid format would be preferable for fostering social connections. Concerns were raised about the availability of courses in different languages.

The interviewee from the European Parliament answered that online learning can bridge and eliminate many inequalities because it allows people to access learning that they might not be able to participate in in any other way and can enable social interactions. However, they recognised the need for digital competency training for older adults to take full advantage of online learning. Therefore, investment must be made in training older adults in digital competencies and media literacy, which could be provided in informal learning spaces or HEIs. This can also work as a measure to encourage active ageing, and combat isolation by making older learners get out of their homes.

Other interviewees were more sceptical, questioning the effectiveness of online learning for older adults. The representative from IAUTA remarked how, from their experiences, many initiatives supposedly seeking to provide lifelong learning for seniors via online learning they have been approached about seemed more focused on selling products than addressing learners' actual needs.

The representative from LLLP argued that online learning primarily benefits those with existing digital competencies, potentially excluding those without internet access or basic ICT skills. Although they did agree, it is true that online learning could help democratise learning opportunities and allow people who cannot attend courses in person to partake in learning as they

can now easily access them from home. Nevertheless, without meeting some basic requirements such as having an Internet connection, having a computer, knowing how to use it and safely so that they do not give away sensitive data, online learning risks becoming another opportunity limited to a privileged few rather than a truly inclusive solution.

Designing courses adapted to the needs and interests of older learners

According to the expert from the University of Zurich, it is necessary to have enough funding and a good team to develop and update online courses. However, this is often not easy as universities prioritise younger students in formal education.

Sustainable IT support is essential to dealing with any technical issues that may arise. The University of Zurich offers a helpline (phone and email) that functions five days a week. They also develop and implement workshops with older adults to showcase the platform to them and support them with onboarding and using it.

Also, they need to be able to talk to potential older adult learners to understand their needs. Perhaps most importantly, it is necessary to combat institutional resistance to change and technological innovations in education for older learners.

Co-development is necessary when designing courses for older adults. This entails onboarding older adults from the start and developing the topics to be taught together. To enable co-development, focus groups made up of older adults of diverse profiles must be set up, open discussions must be facilitated, and groups must be formed where they can meet regularly to develop course content.

Following this, usability testing should be carried out; it consists of sitting with them and watching them take the course online to gather direct feedback from them. Another thing that can be done is to carry out real-life experimental design studies, where they take the courses under different conditions and collect data. Finally, you must interview the test participants about their experience and what they like or do not like.

Following this, it is necessary to address the heterogeneity of older adult learners by, for example, adding additional materials for those who wish to delve deeper into a topic. Finally, social elements are crucial to enabling learners to socialise with others and create social belongingness. Additionally, it is necessary to ensure that the platform where the course is hosted is accessible, user-friendly, and addresses any security concerns regarding data.

Keeping learners engaged during learning

For this, it is necessary to add social elements such as group work, tandem partnerships—and quizzes to test their knowledge. Also, make sure that there is a course organiser that learners can talk to in case they need extra support that looks out for them and have a helpline for the issues highlighted before and any technical issues that could arise.

Maintaining quality control and basic quality standards

The interviewee from the University of Zurich responded that it is essential for the courses to be developed by top-notch scholars at universities; they should be user-friendly and age-friendly, and have technical quality by guaranteeing support from the university's media department. Additionally, you must verify everything, and it is important to maintain a continuous feedback loop from senior learners.

Regarding whether the EU could develop a framework to ensure the quality and sustainability of these courses, they suggested enhancing and enlarging the lifelong learning framework and community and building new research and innovation funding schemes.

Subjects that can be best delivered online

One of the issues with online learning mentioned in the previous section was that not all fields lend themselves well to online learning. In the opinion of the expert from the University of Zurich, the subjects that work best are theoretical courses like the History of Switzerland, for example, whereas those that require creativity, reflection, or deep analysis should be done face-to-face.

In terms of the subjects that tend to be popular with their older adult learners, they replied that learners are interested in anything and everything, although health and medicine are not very popular topics for them. In a national survey in Switzerland for third-age universities, the most popular topics were history, culture, society and politics, arts and humanities, science, tech, and nature, and the least popular were sports and exercise.

Dissemination strategies for online learning courses

The interviewee from the University of Zurich responded that they have gone to other universities of the third age, set up stands on-site, and met prospective learners face to face. Other dissemination methods can include flyers, Facebook groups, and targeted ads at libraries, senior cafes, and general venues where older adults congregate. Regarding what governments can do to raise awareness of these programmes and encourage participation, they suggested that they do this similarly through campaigns and marketing.

In terms of what can be done at a European level to promote online learning opportunities to older adults, the representative from the EAEA talked about how there is currently a pilot project for an adult learning electronic platform, although it is currently more geared towards educators. They also talked about how they feel unsure about taking a course that says it is for older adults, as they would not like to be considered as old. This is something to consider as some older learners might be turned off by certain learning offers if they say they are for older adult learners and they do not see themselves as old.

Measuring the effectiveness of online learning courses

The expert from the University of Zurich proposed the following metrics to measure best the effectiveness of online learning courses at the national or institutional level:

- Number of users/learners
- Number of courses developed.
- Number of courses taken/learned.
- Number of partners/institutions on board per country or globally
- Quality measurement for the courses

These results can be gathered through surveys collecting data on older adults' learning experiences, performance, and outcomes.

Challenges with online learning

According to the interviewee from the University of Zurich, older adults face several challenges with online learning, including ageist attitudes, a lack of user-friendly platforms as they may be too complicated to use and not accessible, data privacy concerns, and a lack of senior-oriented courses.

Additionally, institutional interest is limited, and changing perceptions require continuous advocacy and networking at an institutional, European, or national level through campaigns, writing fundraising proposals, and attending events and conferences to promote the topic of online learning for seniors or find like-minded people. Recruiting learners is also difficult, requiring volunteer ambassadors to spread the word about its advantages, create incentives to encourage participation, and build community.

Developing online courses faces hurdles such as a lack of academics to deliver them. They often have limited time to do this as they must handle their workload, lack of incentives for professors to create the courses, slow progress due to scarce resources, and finding sustainable business models. More funding and permanent staff are needed to maintain and update courses.

For the interviewee from the EAEA, the digital divide remains a major barrier despite EU efforts such as the Digital Education Action Plan. Solutions to overcome this divide include simplifying platforms, which big tech companies are now working towards. Additionally, using a computer remains difficult for people who have never used one before. They argue that there should be a more individualised approach towards supporting people to acquire the necessary digital skills. One way could be organising, for instance, courses with small groups where you could receive much more personal support, which could be helpful.

There are also issues with the quality of internet connections and the cost of equipment, such as laptops. One way to overcome the latter is to subsidise laptops for older learners or libraries; other education institutions could allow people to use them or borrow them.

The representative of the LLLP replied that there are already initiatives looking to provide basic digital skills for seniors. There are several initiatives within Erasmus +, and it is a horizontal objective in the European Social Funds. Whilst these initiatives are not necessarily geared towards

an educational purpose but to access social services, this shows there is a political will to empower seniors with digital skills.

They might also need more financial support from the EU and Member States. Also, to motivate senior learners to take advantage of these opportunities, there is again the issue of motivation. The online learning courses must be designed to cater to their needs, and it is necessary to explain to them the value of learning and what can be done with it, that it is an opportunity to learn from the comfort of your home and to socialise with other people.

On the challenges they faced with online learning, the expert from the University of Malta replied that there are three types of older people: those who are digitally competent[6], those who are digitally literate[7] and then those who are not digitally competent or literate nor have the right kind of hardware. On average, most people need to be trained in digital competency. However, many courses train you in digital literacy, not digital competency. Another issue is that they might learn some basic ICT skills, but if they do not use them, they forget them. During COVID-19, they were surprised that around 20% of their older adult learners did not own a laptop or had one that was very old and could barely work.

Finally, another important challenge was that, in their view, third-age learning cannot take place online unless there is no other option. This is because learning for older adults has a very significant emotional and social component. Older adults attend courses to meet other people in person, develop new friendships and build a sense of community. Social interaction is much more difficult to replicate online. In fact, when the COVID-19 lockdown eased, they received feedback that learners did not want to go back fully online.

On this issue, the expert from the University of Zurich responded that this is why they emphasise the use of social elements on the platform, such as creating profiles, chat functions, using humour elements, organising Zoom cafes, and forum discussions. Another thing they do is blended learning, allowing for both online alone time and social gatherings with discussion sessions and group work.

However, the expert from the University of Malta recognised that if a person lives far away, has a disability, or is sick and missed a lesson, then online learning is a good option for them, but it will depend on the circumstances. Most people who can attend the university will attend face-to-face courses.

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[6] Digital competence involves the confident, critical and responsible use of, and engagement with, digital technologies for learning, at work, and for participation in society. It includes information and data literacy, communication and collaboration, media literacy, digital content creation (including programming), safety (including digital well-being and competences related to cybersecurity), intellectual property related questions, problem solving and critical thinking. (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, *Key competences for lifelong learning*, Publications Office, 2019, **https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/569540**)

[7] Digital literacy is the ability to access, manage, understand, integrate, communicate, evaluate and create information safely and appropriately through digital technologies for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship. It includes competences that are variously referred to as computer literacy, ICT literacy, information literacy and media literacy. (**A global framework of reference on digital literacy skills for indicator 4.4.2**)
https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000265403.locale=en

Mobility Exchanges:

Overview

In the current Erasmus+ programme (2021-2027), learners in third-age education can now participate in mobility exchanges within the mobility action for learners and staff in adult education. Before the current programme, adult education student and staff mobility was possible through the Grundtvig programme between 2007 and 2013. Then, only adult education staff mobility was possible during the 2014 and 2020 Erasmus + programme (European Commission, 2023).

Additionally, in an opinion by, the EESC, on developing a European Strategy for older persons, it recommended to *"promote and improve accessibility to Erasmus+ and educational technology programmes for older people, making full use of their intergenerational outreach, offering older people learning and academic mobility opportunities, including in places where it is difficult to access education, such as long-term care facilities."* (EESC, 2023)

This current action includes all forms of non-vocational adult education, whether formal, non-formal or informal. It is open to various organisations involved in adult education and other adult education providers that wish to organise learning mobility activities for adult learners and staff. A wide array of opportunities is supported, including individual and group mobility of adult learners and staff, and funding can be applied for short-term and accredited projects (European Commission, 2025).

Eligible participants, as per the 2025 Erasmus programme guide, can include, within the context of formal and non-formal adult education, "*any persons benefitting from activities (including guidance and counselling services, or similar support) provided by organisations active in adult education (such as libraries, life-long learning centres, community centres, etc.) if those organisations and their activities are recognised as eligible in their national context."* (European Commission, 2025, p.127) Also, the guide states that organisations must aim for an inclusive and balanced mix of participant profiles and a significant involvement of participants with fewer opportunities.

Benefits for older adult learners

Mobility exchanges for older adults offer many advantages, such as the opportunity to develop interpersonal competencies. It can also train in many life skills that can be useful post-mobility, such as communication skills, problem-solving skills, and team building. Mobility can also help develop empathy and tolerance and help promote European values and democracy (EAEA, 2022).

Mobility can promote physical health, as participants in mobility actions are also more physically mobile at the place of learning. Learning itself can also promote mental health and active ageing. Mobility enables participants to meet new people and enjoy new experiences, as it offers them a unique opportunity to visit another country and participate in non-formal learning opportunities unavailable in their countries or regions. It helps convey that learning can be enjoyable and encourages them to continue learning (EAEA, 2022).

Finally, learners will be multipliers of the learning experience and skills acquired. They often champion learning in their communities and inspire others to participate in learning (EAEA, 2022).

This last point relates to some of the recommendations developed during the citizens' panel on learning mobility (2024), where several recommendations on mobility featured direct mentions of the older adult population. These included:

- Recommendation 11 advocates for creating an ambassador programme in each EU country. The ambassador's role would be to publicise and promote existing learning mobility programmes to all target groups, including older adults, and in all types of organisations like universities.
- Recommendation 12 recommends setting up a network of tutors to welcome and help integrate people into their mobility destination.
- Recommendation number 17 involved targeted information campaigns for two different groups: teenagers/students and adults. This campaign could involve ambassadors with previous learning mobility experience sharing their success stories.

Issues

Still, mobility exchanges are not devoid of issues; much like their younger cohort, they also do not receive enough funds for going on mobility (European Commission, 2023). Some HEIs might not prioritise mobility for adult education and do not provide adequate support for it (European Commission, 2023). It can be challenging to find the right mobility window as some learners will still be working or have caregiving responsibilities, meaning it is hard for them to find the hard time on which to go on mobility, and they would not be able to do so for an extended period (European Commission, 2023).

Language skills are also a significant barrier; English might be required for mobilities. In 2016, more than half (55.1 %) of the 55–64 age group declared they knew at least one foreign language (Eurostat, 2016). Then, there are age-related health issues, a lack of accessibility, and potential ageist attitudes.

Responses by Interviewees

During the interviews, interviewees were also asked about mobility exchanges for third-age learners. Of note were the interviews carried out with representatives from the University of Burgos (UBU) in Spain and the Public Open University Zagreb (POUZ) in Croatia; both institutions have sent out groups of learners from their third-age universities on international mobility under the mobility action for learners in adult education. Their responses allowed us to compare the experiences of two institutions sending their learner cohorts abroad and learn about the challenges and best practices they acquired during their experiences.

Views on providing mobility exchanges for older adults

On enabling mobility exchanges for older adults, the interviewee from the EAEA argues that they want all learners, irrespective of their age, to be able to partake in mobility, as it can be incredibly fulfilling. During Grundtvig, there was study and volunteering mobility for older adults, and the feedback was very positive. Participants were very thankful to have been given this opportunity and held a very positive view of the EU because of that.

The representative from IAUTA replied that older adult learners from their organisation members will be partaking in mobility. They also said that they think it would be good to associate mobility with a project which will generate a series of outputs they can then disseminate, something like an applied research programme with mobility. One example they gave was how at IAUTA, they have a programme on the rights of older adults and how when older adult learners go on mobility, they could share where they faced difficulties, and after that, they could share their findings with other partners and seek to improve the Erasmus programme for older adults.

The interviewee from the LLLP replied that they have been pushing for mobility to be a right for older adult learners, and they have also advocated for older adults to be able to participate in traineeships. While there is interest and funds are available, these are not being properly utilised; this possibility is still not being properly communicated, and whether this mobility happens depends a lot on the university.

The interviewee from the European Parliament responded that there is much value for older adults to be able to go on mobility and believes that strategies need to be created to incentivise and allow older adults to be part of Erasmus+ mobility programmes and of the European Solidarity Corps.

Mobility experiences of University of Burgos (UBU) and Public Open University Zagreb (POUZ):

Overview of both institutions

The University of Burgos (UBU) is a young public university offering about 30 different undergraduate degrees, more than 20 different PhD programmes and a variety of master's and other graduate courses[8]. The university also has a third-age university through which they impart their Interuniversity programme of the Experience, whose aim is to bring closer to people over 50 years old culture and science, promote social relations across generations and encourage learning and personal development[9].

The Public Open University Zagreb (POUZ) is Croatia's largest non-profit adult education institution. It offers formal education programmes for adults and training and retraining courses oriented towards vocational adult education for the labour market. They also have Third-Age University, which specialises in non-formal education for older adults, offering an array of courses in foreign languages and IT skills, as well as lectures and workshops on history, art, health, etc[10].

[8] https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/university-burgos

[9] https://www.ubu.es/ubuabierta-cursos-de-extension-universitaria/formacion-de-mayores/programa-interuniversitario-de-la-experiencia-primero-segundo-tercero-y-graduados

[10] https://www.pou.hr/en/o-ucilistu/o-nama

Motivation to apply for mobility exchanges project

UBU decided to apply for a short-term mobility project because their third-age university learners had been asking for the opportunity, and it was not fair that only young people had the chance to go on mobility. Once it became possible in 2021, they decided to provide this opportunity to their third-age learners.

POUZ obtained accreditation because they believe the Erasmus+ programme is a great programme. As an institution that focuses on adult education, it is very important for them to connect with different organisations across Europe that focus on adult education. The programme is one way to become internationally visible and create international projects that deal with the development of adult education projects and programmes, including those focusing on third-age education.

Mobility destinations

UBU organised three mobilities to Slovakia, Finland, and Portugal and sent eight learners and three staff members to Univerzita Mateja Bela (Slovakia)[11] and the University of Jyväskylä (Finland)[12] and four learners and two staff members to Lisbon in Portugal, where Rede de Universidades Seniores (RUTIS-Portuguese network of third-age universities) organised various visits to different third-age universities in the city[13].

POUZ sent five learners and one staff member to the Third-Age University in Bratislava (Slovakia); in May of 2024, they will send five learners to Third-Age University Ljubljana (Slovenia), and at the end of June 2024, five learners will go to the University of Ulm (Germany).

Type of mobility

Both organisations participated in group mobility projects for adult learners. However, one of the big differences between the two was that POUZ has an accreditation for adult education, as it is an adult education institution. With accreditation, organisations can regularly receive funds for mobility projects.

Whereas UBU sent out their group of learners under a short-term mobility project to test out how it would work and how much demand there might be for it. Under a short-term project, organisations can organise mobility activities over a 6-to-18-month period and are considered by the official

[11] https://www.ubu.es/noticias/los-primeros-mayores-espanoles-erasmus-hacen-realidad-su-sueno-gracias-al-programa-interuniversitario-de-la-experiencia-de-la-ubu
[12] https://www.diariodeburgos.es/noticia/z808b1a02-071a-7ef2-e40a4b89b4b90a3a/202311/una-estancia-erasmus-inolvidable
[13] https://www.ubu.es/noticias/destino-portugal-tercera-movilidad-del-alumnado-del-programa-interuniversitario-de-la-experiencia-de-la-universidad-de-burgos

Erasmus + guide a good choice for an organisation applying for Erasmus + the for the first time, or that wishes to organise only a limited number of activities (European Commission, 2024).

However, they said that they might apply for accreditation this year as the mobility participants have come back talking about how their mobility experience was worth it, and they expect demand for this type of mobility to increase in the future because of this.

Duration of mobility

Mobility exchanges lasted for a week for both organisations, accounting for two days of travelling to and from their mobility destination. Under the current programme, group mobilities can last between 2 days to 30 days. UBU said that as it was the first time they were organising a mobility programme, they felt a shorter one would be easier to manage, and as they had to be accompanied by at least a professor from the programme, it was harder for them to find someone to cover their classes for more than a week. They are open to longer mobilities in the future if there are people interested.

POUZ also said they would be open to longer mobilities in the future, but for now, seven days in total is much more comfortable and easier to manage.

Selecting mobility destinations

When asked how they found their mobility destination, UBU replied that to find partners, they searched via the International Association of Universities of the Third Age[14] for universities with a third-age education programme and that they also ideally offered a degree in Spanish so they could potentially help with translation.

They then sent a mass message about the group mobility project they were going to apply for and if anyone would be interested in participating. They did say many universities did not get back to them. In the end, they partnered with Slovakia because both institutions had collaborated in the past and because both the Finnish and Slovak institutions worked with the topic of service learning, which was one of the elements they had included in their project application, for the Portuguese mobility they partnered with the association of third age universities in Portugal.

They said that partnering with these institutions and networks was valuable because it allowed them to compare study plans, observe how they organised their own, and acquire new ideas about how to improve their programmes.

Regarding POUZ, they decided to go to Slovakia, too, because they are part of a network of educational institutions that also focus on later life learning called the Danet network[15]. The Third Age University of Bratislava is part of that network. They have a close relationship with the institution in the network and do projects together. Having their learners participate in mobility

[14] https://www.aiu3a.org/v2/index-en.html
[15] https://en.danube-networkers.eu/who-we-are/

also allows them to visit their network partners, establish a closer partnership, and discuss future cooperation on projects. Apart from selecting partner institutions to establish close ties for future cooperation, they also searched for institutions with a structured third-age university programme as they wished to visit this institution to learn as much about their work and activities as possible.

The application process

UBU said that they did not have much of a problem with the administrative process as the interviewee was experienced in evaluating Erasmus+ projects for the Spanish national agency, so they understood the process and what to do for the project to be funded. The biggest problem was the bureaucracy within the institution, where they had to publish and resolve the selection of learners that would partake in mobility and further required paperwork that took a significant amount of time and effort.

POUZ also said they did not have issues with the application as the institution has experience applying for Erasmus + projects, and they find the Erasmus+ programme to be very well organised, though they did agree that applying for mobility projects was challenging during COVID-19.

Promoting and disseminating mobility opportunities

In terms of promoting mobility opportunities, UBU promoted them via the WhatsApp groups that they have with their third-age university learners, their virtual study portal, and via email.

POUZ promoted their opportunities during class and via a class newsletter, sending information on mobility before the summer holidays and then once again when the university starts again in the middle of August. After the first mobility, a few participants did a brief segment on local TV talking about their experience, and in their newspaper on third age called “Third Youth”, they will publish a series of articles on their mobility experience.

Criteria to select participants

Both interviewees were also asked whether they used any criteria to select their participants. At UBU, they did a public call within the institution; during the design of the mobility project, they wanted to ensure that it would favour learners in their rural campuses. Apart from the main campus in Burgos, there are three others in rural areas: Miranda de Ebro, Aranda de Duero, and Villarcayo. They tried to make sure that members from each campus could participate in each mobility so that not all participants came from Burgos, the biggest campus and the capital of the province.

They also considered income levels and the short-term project was geared towards learners with lower qualifications. However, only 15% of their learners fall within the lower qualifications criteria. Therefore, for learners with other profiles to be able to participate, they organised alternative group mobility for learners to go as staff partaking in job shadowing. These learners were meant to

be class representatives or belonged to student associations; the aim was for them to learn about new ideas and ways in which they could, for instance, foster intergenerational relationships, learning, improve services, and organise innovative activities. Learners that fit both categories could choose either type of call or destination.

For both Slovakia and Finland UBU sent four learners with lower income levels and four learners for job shadowing; for Portugal, all learners had lower qualifications.

The definition of eligible students has changed since 2022, when their mobility project was approved. At that time, the definition was *"adult learners with fewer opportunities, in particular low-skilled adult learners. Participating learners must be enrolled in an adult education programme at the sending organisation" (European Commission, 2022, p.118).*

Since 2023 the definition of eligible students is the following *"learners benefitting from adult education programmes or activities at the sending organisation"* and *"when selecting participants, all projects should aim for an inclusive and balanced mix of participant profiles and significant involvement of participants with fewer opportunities, in line with the objectives of the action" (European Commission, 2025, p.127).*

When asked what they thought of this change, they did agree with it, as many learners who sign up to adult education courses or language schools tend to be educated. However, there was confusion as to what we consider low skilled, and there was dissonance with the reality and the requirements from the commission.

Regarding this change, the representative from EAEA agreed with it, too; according to them, the Commission realised that participants did not want to be part of a disadvantaged group, and this was seen by some as discriminatory. This view was reflected in a statement by the EAEA on adult education mobility, where they highlighted some of the challenges of the definition of eligible participants, including how participants are reluctant to be labelled as 'disadvantaged' and 'low-skilled' due to fears of stigmatisation (EAEA, 2022).

In their view, if the EU wants to encourage people from disadvantaged backgrounds to participate, it can do this by establishing certain criteria at the national level. The Commission's report on mobility confirms that the focus on lower-skilled adults or adult learners with fewer possibilities resulted in a lower take-up than expected and did not correspond with the increased budget; thus, eligibility criteria were expanded in some contexts (European Commission, 2023).

POUZ's criteria included availability to participate in the mobility during the specified dates, knowledge of English as a foreign language, willingness to travel and participate in potentially tiring activities, and interest in the environment, as the activities during the mobility would revolve around that topic.

When asked if they took into consideration if participants were from a lower socioeconomic background, they replied that it was not a criterion for selecting participants and that their participants had a high educational attainment level. They said that while the first cohort of participating students had a high level of English and did not need any additional pre-departure

language support, this is something they are considering providing for the next cohort if needed, and they have enough personnel to do this.

UBU were also queried about the knowledge of a foreign language by the participating students; while they were given a short English course ahead of mobility, one of the support staff that accompanied them on the trip was a student intern from the Department of Pedagogy who spoke English and acted as translator. Additionally, in Slovakia they got two students from a neighbouring university studying Spanish to translate into Slovak whenever any of the courses were not in English or Spanish. Similarly, in Finland, they got a university professor and student to accompany them and act as a translator from Finnish to Spanish.

This is one approach to overcome the language barrier and ensure that third-age education participants who may not speak English as a foreign language can participate in mobility. However, it is likely that this translator approach might only work with languages with many speakers and learners, such as Spanish, French, German or Portuguese, whereas it might be more difficult to find translators for languages with a smaller number of speakers, such as Hungarian to Lithuanian or vice versa meaning some mobility combinations with this approach might be harder to organise.

When asked by other interviewees how they would overcome this language barrier, the interviewee from the EAEA suggested giving students an introductory course on basic notions so that they could get around. In some circumstances, online translation devices could be useful; however, they also agreed that some combinations might be more complicated. Nevertheless, in their view, the younger generations that will retire in the future speak more foreign languages, so this might be less of a problem further down the line.

Administrative support provided to students

UBU created specific WhatsApp groups for participants to ask any questions they might have. To help participants fill out the paperwork, they also set up a series of office hours. They also had the support of the international office to handle the administrative support of mobility. The students at no point had to deal directly with the international office; the staff from the third-age university dealt with the international office.

At POUZ, the office in charge of EU projects was involved in the administration of the mobilities; they prepared everything for them regarding documents, travel, accommodation, and insurance. The students only had to come to meetings regarding the organisation of the mobility; they gave them the documents and helped them fill them out step by step. They ensured that students dealt with the administration as little as possible so that they did not have to worry about it.

Support provided by the host institution

Both were very happy with the support they received at the host institutions. They were attentive and offered them all the support and resources they needed. For instance, UBU mentioned they needed certificates to prove that they had participated in mobility, and the institution had no issue

providing them. Also, during tours and activities, they always had someone from the institution accompanying them.

Accommodation

The partner institutions helped them find accommodation during their stay. For UBU in Finland, they received hotel suggestions, and in Slovakia, they were able to stay at a student residence. They also helped them with how to best get to their destinations. For POUZ, the Third Age University of Bratislava also arranged for accommodation in a hotel.

Erasmus + grant

Both institutions said the funds were, for the most part, enough to cover the costs of the mobility. However, UBU did admit that the mobility to Finland was more expensive due to the higher cost of living because they were staying in a hotel. Some of the students had to cover some of the costs with their own money, which could pose a problem for those students who are unable to do this.

POUZ recognised that they had to be creative in their use of the money for the grant to cover costs. According to the study by the Commission on Mobility and the EAEA, one of the challenges faced by students on adult education mobility was lower individual funding compared to adult staff; the per day individual funding is too low to cover the main costs such as accommodation and transportation with co-finance by the learner or the institution not always being possible (European Commission, 2023).

Study programmes during mobility

The study programmes during their study visit of UBU students in Slovakia included talks about the university, Slovakia, and the Slovak language, as one of the objectives of the mobility was to get to know a new country and language. They also attended astronomy classes from their third age university programme and mingled with Slovak students. They also visited the department in charge of the programme of service learning. Finally, they attended cultural visits and concerts. In Finland, it was similar. They got to know the university, including its library, attended classes with Finnish third-age education learners and made cultural visits.

The mobility was also an opportunity for the professors accompanying their learners to see other teaching methodologies and other kinds of materials and for them, as programme managers, to see how courses are organised, how teaching staff is selected for the programme, how they sign up learners, how campus spaces are, how they get on with the university, and see the whole context of the programme.

For POUZ, the study programme was similar. They went to classes at the third-age university in Bratislava, which focused on the environment and other green topics; they had external activities in nature and with crafts. They also learned about the art and history of Slovakia and went on a

walking tour. The classes were in Slovak but translated to English by a teacher; for the participating learners, it was an opportunity to test their language skills.

For the other upcoming mobilities in Ljubljana and Ulm, they were preparing the study programme, which would include participating in their third-age university programmes, and the staff accompanying them will have their own set of activities too, which include seeing how their host institution administers the programmes, their marketing and dissemination among others. At Ulm the learners are expected to partake in the Danube festival, where the university will organise activities connected to third-age topics during the festival.

The gender breakdown of mobility participants

When asked about the gender breakdown of the participants in the mobility, UBU responded that for Slovakia, there were seven female learners and one male; for Finland, there were four of each; and for Portugal, all four were women. Their programme itself has 60% female learners and 40% male learners. For POUZ, the learner participants in the mobility were all female, whereas for their programme, they have around 50% male learners and 50% female learners, but the proportion of women is slightly bigger.

Receiving incoming learners

Neither of the universities received learners from other third-age universities to partake in mobility. However, as part of the project, UBU received a visit from two experts from the partner institutions in Finland and Portugal to get to know their institutions and programmes and to foster closer ties with them so that they could collaborate on further projects in the future[16]. POUZ said they would like to host third-age learners either this year or the next.

Challenges encountered

Some of the difficulties UBU faced included finding teaching staff that would accompany the learners. This is due to professors having their own teaching load, and participating in these programmes does not provide any academic merits that can be used for later accreditations or to further their teaching careers. They are aware that accompanying learners is a very big responsibility as they are responsible for their well-being while abroad, and thus, they struggled to find people who want to support mobilities by accompanying outgoing learners willingly.

They hope to find a formula that would make partaking in mobility attractive or that the university could provide a certificate of sorts so that their participation can be valued vis a vis their academic career. In the mobility report by the Commission, it was highlighted how lecturers might experience difficulties going abroad, with focus group participants affirming that they felt if their employers

[16] https://www.ubu.es/noticias/dos-expertos-de-portugal-y-finlandia-visitan-la-ubu-para-conocer-el-programa-interuniversitario-de-la-experiencia

knew of the benefits of partaking in mobility and the competencies that can be gained, they might be more supportive in enabling them to go on mobility (European Commission, 2023).

Additionally, the contract of the administrative staff members from the Department of Internationalisation who helped them organise mobility has expired. If this post is not covered, they will struggle to provide administrative support to deal with the paperwork generated by mobility. At the time of the interview, the mobility for Portugal had not taken place yet.

Moreover, they struggled to find partners for mobility as some institutions would reply and then not get back to them again, or they would not reply at all. UBU also stated that when they went to Slovakia, the person responsible for the third-age education programme there wanted to apply for a mobility project but was confused about how to apply for it because it was a new addition to the Erasmus + programme. This issue is highlighted in the commission's mobility report. In it, they cite that an obstacle to mobility in adult education is a lack of awareness and access to information; some are unsure whether these opportunities are even for them, making it more difficult to find suitable organisational partners (European Commission, 2023).

Another issue they faced was that, similarly to their younger student cohorts, they did not receive the Erasmus grant until one week before the mobility began. Therefore, the organiser had to use their own funds to pay for flight and accommodation in advance; learners then refunded them, and finally, the university paid them the Erasmus grant. On the other hand, this was not an issue that POUZ faced as they received their funds in advance.

The delay in funds is also another issue higher education learners face when going on mobility. According to a survey report by the MEGA project, many students experienced delays in receiving their grants; some waited up to two months or more and had to pay for accommodation and expenses in advance (Kala, 2023)

In terms of challenges faced, POUZ mentioned that right before the mobility started, two of their learners were unable to participate due to medical issues. So, they selected learners from the waiting list to replace them.

Feedback on the mobility experience

In both institutions, the feedback received from learners was overwhelmingly positive, and the value of the experience for learners was also very positive. At UBU, participants felt they had been supported during their experience; they felt empowered by their experience as they were also able to get around on their own. They also felt very proud to partake in the opportunity and to be a part of the Erasmus+ programme. The student reps came up with many ideas for development; for example, they wanted to organise library reading sessions and improve their environment overall. Also, in terms of getting around in a foreign language, learners also came back really motivated because they could get around even if they only knew a little bit of English, and some of them have decided to either sign up for English classes or continue with them.

Measures at the European, national or institutional level to support and encourage mobility

Both interviewees were asked about what could be done at the European, national, or even institutional levels to support and encourage learners' mobility. POUZ responded that we must discover the most appropriate communication channels for reaching older learners and explaining to older adults that it is very important for them to be involved in mobility activities. That this would be beneficial for social inclusion and for them to be more involved with what is happening in Europe.

UBU replied that at a regional level, they would benefit from greater funding, as it has been reduced over the years. Because of this, they struggle to find teachers who might wish to come and teach in the rural campuses, which are 80-90 km away from the capital, and personnel to support the elaboration of Erasmus + project applications. For many, the money and the time spent getting there are not worth it.

At an institutional level, they would need universities to value their third-age university programme and their learners. While their third-age university programme was considered a pioneering programme a couple of years ago with over 1000 learners, it is not considered profitable, and it often struggles to find spaces to deliver the courses. They would truly welcome a stronger commitment from the institution and the regional government.

At a national level, they would welcome more financing, which would enable organisations to apply for mobility projects. Many do not have the resources and time to prepare and submit a mobility project proposal.

This difficulty has been highlighted by the commission in their report about mobility. In it, they mention how many adult education organisations often lack internal capacity due to being underfunded and understaffed and must rely on voluntary staff, which can prevent them from applying to projects, navigating the application process, and thus completing successful applications for Erasmus + (European Commission, 2023).

At a European level, more flexibility is needed. The change in the definition of eligible students is a good step towards that as it limited the type of students they could send on mobility. Also, to facilitate contacts between institutions to partake in mobility projects, they do understand that, as it is a significant undertaking to organise and administer mobility, some institutions might not want to or be able to partake in them.

In terms of what Member States do to promote and support mobility exchanges for older learners, the interviewee from the EAEA proposes they must properly advertise and communicate the availability of this new opportunity for learners. For instance, there could be a one-stop shop for information on mobility exchanges for older learners, which would require setting aside more funds.

In terms of what the EU can do to promote mobility for this cohort, the interviewee from the European Parliament suggests involving the Committee of the Regions as the local dimension is very important in many cases for older adult citizens. We need strong local partners to promote the

programmes in Europe and encourage older adult citizens to participate in them. For this, it would be necessary to involve municipalities and local authorities in creating communication strategies to involve and engage with citizens. In their view, the local dimension is more important than the national level for this kind of initiative.

Additionally, on a general European level, the Commission and the Parliaments can develop further communication strategies targeting older people that focus on the opportunities available and their benefits. These strategies could focus more on active ageing and community involvement.

The representative from the LLLP responded that the EU could do more to promote this opportunity, and once again, political will is needed, and institutions need to take up this opportunity for their older adult learners. Now, the EU is not promoting this opportunity as widely because they do not know how to promote it as they do not know how to reach older adult learners best. Also, in their opinion, they are afraid that promoting it too much will just show that these funds are not working because they are afraid that there is insufficient demand. Moreover, in education, they rely on Member States or universities to do their job.

However, it is true that they can do more to communicate better that mobility programmes are for all, not just for the young. As mentioned by the representative of the EAEA at the Citizens Panel on study mobility, there was a recommendation for intergenerational learning mobility between family members; the EU is aware that citizens want mobility for older adults, too. Civil society organisations can help promote these mobility programmes to ensure institutions are taking advantage of these opportunities.

Adapting the Erasmus + programme to the needs of older learners

On how the Erasmus programme could be adapted to the needs of older learners, UBU said that potential physical issues might need to be considered. One recommendation is to carefully plan travel to make sure if there are changes between modes of transportation to be done that there is enough time to make them, reduce the number of changes needed and give them enough time to be able to move from one building to another if needed during classes.

POUZ talked about how the Erasmus+ programme could potentially have a dedicated programme for older adults, too, and that more funds could be allocated to third-age education. We must be aware that the European population is ageing, and they will become a significant student cohort in the future.

On what the EU could do to accommodate the needs of older adult learners to ensure mobility is a reality for all, the interviewee from the European Parliament answered that it is necessary to diversify the way programmes for older adults are created. Additionally, they recognise that it is currently very difficult to ensure an increase in Erasmus funds, and it would be very difficult to convince people to move funds away from younger people to older people. What could be done is to use part of the financing that currently exists also to include older adult citizens.

Support and services they would like to have for future mobilities

In terms of what kind of services or support they think would have been useful, too, UBU would like more extensive linguistic preparation and a dossier with information about what to expect at their host destination. The issue with organising a pre-departure language course is that it would have to be online, as their learners are across four campuses. Plus, they would welcome more support to handle the administrative processes and paperwork to prepare another project application.

POUZ mentioned they would like one or two more staff members focused exclusively on mobilities so they can organise mobilities more often, as they see them as crucial for the institution's development.

Encouraging participation from learners from disadvantaged backgrounds

When queried on what else could be done to encourage learners from disadvanteaged backgrounds, UBU suggested designing a mobility project just for them, more outreach to the rural campuses they have and doing sessions where they inform learners about the opportunity to encourage them to partake in mobility without fear. POUZ proposed to give more visibility to the opportunities available and, similarly to UBU, more outreach towards the rural areas. It would be necessary to look for the most suitable communication channels to reach this segment of potential participants.

Good practices

In terms of good practices developed, UBU said one of them is to clarify the academic staff who participate in the mobility to accompany the learners or to have a group of people willing to participate. Also, for the next round of project applications, they have also discussed being supported by student interns and even student reps from the third-age university to elaborate a new project proposal.

POUZ said that in terms of best practices, they learned to always have a reserve list of participants because things might happen right before the mobility begins, much like it happened to them. Also, each mobility must be planned carefully to ensure you have everything on time. For them, each mobility required 4-5 months of planning, keeping in regular contact with the host institution between one to two times a week. During the mobility, you must also be easily reachable. This will help institutions and participants prepare for unforeseen circumstances that might arise. Additionally, they find months in advance staff willing to accompany learners so that they can organise their workload and other personal matters, albeit they did not have that many issues finding staff willing to go on mobility with learners.

Benefits of mobility to the institution and learners

When asked what kind of benefits mobility brought to learners and the institution, UBU mentioned how learners had truly felt a much more European spirit. They lost the fear of travelling abroad and felt like higher education students. They saw that older people could be active leaders of different volunteering projects and felt truly empowered despite their age and education attainment levels. It also provided them with tools to then put into practice in other areas of their lives.

For the institution, it gave them more visibility and relevance by being pioneers in sending third-university learners abroad; their learner's experience showed up in the press, they published a research article, and they have become one of the references on a regional level in terms of third age university mobility exchanges and feel they can provide support to other institutions on how to organise their own mobility too. However, they admitted that this visibility has not yet translated to further institutional support for organising further mobilities. In the Erasmus mobility report, a barrier that is mentioned as well is how internationalisation is currently a low priority within organisational and national levels in the realm of adult education, where older adult mobility will fall into (European Commission, 2023).

For POUZ, regarding the benefits it brought to the institution and learners, they talked about how this was an opportunity to see how other institutions operate and help them develop new approaches, new methodologies, and new activities at their institution and to plan new projects with other institutions. They feel that you need to be involved at an international level to improve your institution. Regarding participants, it was also very beneficial to them as the learners that participated all became close friends after the mobility, they picked up a bit of Slovak due to its closeness to Croatian.

Moreover, mobility projects are important for fostering social inclusion and introducing learners to new experiences. POUZ has ambitions to organise in the future a mobility exchange every two months. Nevertheless, they acknowledged they do not have staff capacity yet to organise so many mobilities. They also talked about how the institution is very committed to mobility for their third-age university learners and they are Erasmus+ ambassadors in Croatia for adult education.

Conclusion:

The Erasmus+60 Project has proven the immense value of lifelong learning, intergenerational learning, online learning, and mobility exchanges for older adults. The insights gathered in this interview report from an array of stakeholders underline both the advantages and the obstacles encountered in implementing such programs, emphasising the need for strategic enhancements at the institutional, national, and European levels.

One of the key findings from the project is the significant benefits of lifelong learning for older adults. Engaging in learning opportunities contributes to their personal growth, enhances both mental and physical well-being, and fosters greater social participation. Intergenerational learning has also been recognised as valuable, but it requires careful planning to ensure that both younger and older learners derive mutual benefits.

However, while online learning for older adults also offers benefits such as learning flexibility and allowing learners who cannot attend classes in person to partake in learning, it faces challenges, particularly in terms of digital accessibility, the lack of social interaction, and varying levels of digital literacy, all of which hinder the effective delivery of education in digital spaces. Mobility programmes, on the other hand, offer older adults valuable opportunities for social inclusion through international exchanges.

Yet issues such as financial constraints, administrative complexities, and language barriers persist, making it difficult for many to fully take advantage of these opportunities. Additionally, the report highlights the need for more policy and institutional support for learning opportunities for older adults. There is a clear call for increased awareness and advocacy to integrate senior education into mainstream higher education policies and funding structures across Europe.

Several recommendations have been proposed to address these challenges. First, dedicated funding streams for older adult learners should be developed within Erasmus+ to ensure the sustainability and accessibility of such programs. National governments should be encouraged to incorporate lifelong learning for older adults into broader education and ageing policies. Advocacy efforts should be directed at policy changes that recognise and support third-age universities throughout Europe.

Furthermore, expanding intergenerational learning initiatives beyond traditional models is essential to fostering reciprocal knowledge exchange between generations. It is also crucial to offer a variety of flexible learning formats, including in-person, blended, and online courses, tailored to the needs of older learners. Additionally, online learning strategies should integrate digital literacy training and foster social engagement.

In terms of mobility, administrative processes for mobility applications should be simplified, and financial support for older adult learners needs to be increased. Tailored language and cultural preparation programs can help older adults navigate international exchanges, also being cognizant of the differences between organising mobility exchanges for older learners and younger students, as they require special considerations. Strengthening institutional commitment is also necessary, in addition to extensive communication about the existence of mobility opportunities for older adults.

Universities should create dedicated units or staff positions to support older adult learners and mobility programs. Partnerships with older adult organisations and community centres should be fostered to enhance outreach and participation. Awareness campaigns are also needed to highlight the benefits of lifelong learning and intergenerational education.

By acting on these recommendations, HEIs and policymakers can create a more inclusive and dynamic learning environment. This would empower older adults, promote intergenerational solidarity, and enhance European citizenship. The Erasmus+60 Project has provided a solid foundation for these initiatives, and with continued dedication, lifelong learning for older adults can become an accessible and enriching component of education systems across Europe.

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