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# **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

## **A handbook to making the European Education Area age inclusive**

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# Introduction

## Overview of the Project

Rising life expectancy and an ageing population have substantially reshaped the composition and functioning of societal structures and highlighted the importance of lifelong learning towards active ageing. The WHO defines active ageing as *“the process of gaining access to the greatest possible variety of opportunities for health, participation and security with the goal of improving the quality of life in older adults”* (Zhang et al., 2022). The active ageing framework recognises lifelong learning as an important factor towards fulfilling its core objectives (Narushima et al., 2016).

Historically, education systems have focused predominantly on younger demographics, operating under the assumption that formal education is confined to the early stages of life. This approach has often ignored the evolving needs of older adults, who are living longer and remaining active contributors to society. Despite this shift, those aged 60+ have traditionally not been given enough consideration in the development of activities within higher education or programmes such as Erasmus+.

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).

## A Handbook to Making the European Education Area Age-Inclusive

This report proposes a range of actions that establish learning opportunities for older adults as standard practice within higher education institutions (HEIs). As stated, in an era of rapid societal change and increasing longevity, the need for lifelong learning has never been more critical. Older adults represent a growing and diverse demographic with immense potential to contribute to and benefit from educational environments, and HEIs can play an important role in providing lifelong learning opportunities for older adults, thus contributing to enabling a thriving and ageing society.

These recommendations aim to guide HEIs and policymakers in developing 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.

These recommendations were based on a combination of research on active ageing and lifelong learning for older adults, findings from the project outputs, and 11 interviews with key stakeholders, including MEPs, civil society organisations, and HEIs interested in or working in the field of lifelong learning for older adults.

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 will contain an overview of the topic, followed by its corresponding policy recommendations. These recommendations will then be split into those dedicated towards HEIs and those for national and European policymakers.

## Lifelong Learning for Older Adults

As of January 2023, individuals aged 65 years and over accounted for 21.3% of the European Union's population. By comparison, those aged 0 to 14 years comprised 14.9% of the population (Eurostat, 2024). According to Eurostat projections, by 2100, the proportion of people aged 65 and over is expected to increase by more than 50% to 32.5 % of the EU's total population (Eurostat, 2024).

These demographic changes present significant challenges and opportunities at both European and national levels. A key priority is to support older adults in maintaining a good quality of life for as long as possible, enabling them to remain active and engaged citizens. Studies have shown that remaining active later in life allows older adults to maintain health and postpone or even prevent disability and sensory dysfunctions that may occur with age (European Parliament, 2021). 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 (Cebulla et al., 2020).

Lifelong learning offers a potential solution, as it is believed to contribute to improved health and well-being among older adults (Gierszewski & Kluzowicz, 2021) and provide a way for older adults to play an active role in society by developing citizenship competencies, which are instrumental for democratic participation (European Commission, 2022).

The European Commission defines lifelong learning as any purposeful learning activity undertaken on an ongoing basis with the goal of enhancing knowledge, skills, and competencies throughout life (European Commission, 2000; European Commission, 2022). Lifelong learning is also an essential tool for fostering social cohesion, active citizenship, personal and professional development, and adaptability (Formosa, 2014).

### Initiatives by the EU on Lifelong Learning for Older Adults

The European Union has featured lifelong learning for older adults in some of its policy documents, including:

- [Action plan on adult learning \(2007\)](#): This plan aimed to help strengthen the adult learning sector so that it could use its full capacity. It focused on those disadvantaged because of their low literacy levels, inadequate work skills, and/or skills for successful integration into society, which could include older adults, depending on the Member State.
- [Adult Learning: It is Never Too Late to Learn Parliament Resolution \(2008\)](#): It highlighted how better adult learning can play a key role in the social inclusion of disadvantaged groups in the labour market, such as older adults. It stressed the importance of all citizens having access to and opportunities to participate in lifelong learning programmes and how older adults, being one of the groups potentially least likely to participate in these programs, should be offered different, suitable programmes and methods.
- [European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity Between Generations \(2012\)](#): It helped transmit a more positive image of the ageing population by highlighting their potential and promoting their active participation in society and the economy. It managed to mobilise

numerous governmental and nongovernmental actors, and many Member States and civil society organisations used the European Year as an opportunity to develop new initiatives or strengthen their existing ones (AGE: WISE Project, 2021).

- [Green Paper on Ageing \(2021\)](#): It launched a public consultation to stimulate a broad public debate on Europe's challenges and opportunities. Respondents strongly urged more significant investment in lifelong learning at all stages of life. They highlighted that adult learning is essential to keeping people at work and allowing them to work longer.
- [European Skills Agenda \(2020\)](#): A five-year plan to help individuals and businesses develop and use better skills. Action 8, which focuses on skills for life, mentions how the new priorities for the European Agenda for Adult Learning will reach out to older adults and those most in need of access to learning, including online learning. It prioritises non-formal, lifelong, intergenerational, intercultural and community learning.
- [Council Resolution on New European Agenda for Adult Learning 2021-2030 \(2021\)](#): This resolution mentions how the impacts of demographic changes and green and digital transitions require new approaches to facilitate the participation of those aged 65+ in adult learning to support their full integration and participation in society.
- [European Parliament Resolution on an Old Continent Growing Older –possibilities and Challenges Related to Ageing Policy post-2020 \(2021\)](#): This resolution emphasises the importance of creating and implementing age-appropriate lifelong learning opportunities to enhance social and economic sustainability and personal welfare. It urges Member States to invest in skills and education to develop formal, non-formal and informal educational, training, and lifelong learning projects. It also provides opportunities for older adults, including online learning, whether working or retired.
- [European Economic Social Committee \(EESC\) opinion on a European Strategy for Older persons \(2023\)](#): Among its recommendations, it mentioned how lifelong learning could be one of the policies it should contain to prepare for, prevent and anticipate the consequences of ageing, and active citizenship.

Many policy documents of the EU on lifelong later in life primarily adopt an employment and economic perspective, emphasising training older learners to adapt to changes in the labour market and prolonging their working lives beyond retirement (Foster, 2012; Formosa, 2012). While some documents advocate a more holistic approach—such as the European Parliament resolution encouraging learning opportunities for older adults regardless of their employment status (European Parliament, 2021)—the employment component remains dominant. For instance, the EESC opinion highlights the need to remove barriers and create opportunities for older adults to remain in or rejoin the labour market (EESC, 2023), and the policy document Demographic Change in Europe: A Toolbox for Action underscores the importance of empowering older workers to stay active longer in an ageing society (European Commission, 2023).

An ideal lifelong learning policy for older adults should extend beyond workforce participation and embrace a holistic approach. It should also encourage civic engagement among older adults, thus fostering an understanding of political developments and contributing to a more inclusive, tolerant, and democratic society.

## The role of HEIs is Lifelong Learning for Older Adults:

In recent years, higher education institutions (HEIs) have expanded their traditional teaching and research roles to include a 'third mission' which entails contributing towards societal development. Through this mission, HEIs foster social, economic, and cultural growth in the communities and regions they serve (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020). This is achieved by transferring knowledge and technologies to industry and society following the integration of societal and entrepreneurial activities into their operations (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020; Schnurbus & Edvardsson, 2022).

One form of this knowledge transfer and contribution towards their communities and regions can be lifelong learning. As per Istance (2020), HEIs can contribute towards lifelong learning for older adults in the following three ways:

- Source of provision: HEIs can provide programmes targeted towards senior learners, such as intergenerational learning programmes. Thus, HEIs can address the changing demographics of their population by integrating approaches that will allow older adults to benefit from higher education opportunities, too. Further, they can provide professional learning opportunities for staff involved or who would like to work with senior learners.
- Partner in policy and community action: HEIs, with their strong position and prestige as hubs of knowledge and agents of societal change, are well-placed to take on leadership roles in partnership with others in developing policies and lifelong learning programmes for older adults. By collaborating with local and national authorities, HEIs can shape initiatives promoting active ageing. Additionally, they can enhance the capacity of other organisations and institutions working with older adults to deliver lifelong learning programs, even if the HEIs themselves do not directly provide these services.
- Research: Develop research which builds up an evidence base on different aspects of lifelong learning for older adults. This can include the benefits of lifelong learning and other interrelated tools and initiatives, such as the ones presented in this project (online learning, intergenerational learning, mobility exchanges), on older adults' physical and psychological well-being and its potential for civic engagement and societal cohesion. Interviewees highlighted how research can contribute vis a vis policymakers towards justifying the rationale for developing more lifelong learning or IGL programmes for older adults and would be essential to demonstrate the links between how lifelong learning can contribute to a more active and healthy society, leading to lower healthcare costs.

## Policy Recommendations

### Lifelong Learning for Older Adults-How To?

- Lifelong learning for older adults should be part of HEIs' third mission, which also includes supporting cohesive societies and impacting the community, region, and country. Developing lifelong learning opportunities for older adults, such as intergenerational programmes or online learning courses, requires time and careful planning. Institutions

should provide sufficient funding and resources to develop and organise lifelong learning programmes for older adults. These funds should also be used to retain and train staff who can deliver this type of learning.

- During the development of lifelong learning programmes and activities for older adults, their sustainability must be considered. Strong institutional commitment is deemed essential, while stable funding sources may be required to ensure adequate resources are available for developing adequate pedagogical offers.
- Remove financial obstacles to participation in lifelong learning or offer funding opportunities for older adults to participate in learning opportunities. When fees are expected, this may limit the participation of older adults, not least among those receiving very low pensions. In such cases, institutions should offer some form of scholarship or funding to enable them to participate.
- Encourage disadvantaged or vulnerable older adults to engage in lifelong learning by showing them that HEIs are inclusive spaces for all. Partnering with local councils, libraries, or organisations working directly with older adults can help identify their interests and develop tailored courses. Hosting open days for older adults to explore course offerings and share their preferences can further foster inclusion. Targeted outreach is key to dispelling the misconception that universities are an elitist environment and creating a welcoming environment for all, irrespective of age and background.
- Learning opportunities should be made available to older adults in all settings, including rural settings or even care homes. This will entail bringing the educational offer to them, which can be done in cooperation with local authorities and civil society organisations.
- Carry out further research on the benefits of learning for older adults. This research could investigate how these strategies can potentially lead to lower healthcare costs and tackle the threats to democracy. Demonstrating how these findings can be cost-beneficial could help raise awareness and encourage Member States to fund more learning opportunities for older adults.

## Promoting Lifelong Learning for Older Adults at the EU and National Level

- At the national, European, and institutional levels, strong emphasis should be placed on the importance of lifelong learning. It should start at an early age, where learning is portrayed as a positive experience so people will be willing to continue learning in their later years.
- Member States should adopt relevant legislation to support organisations or institutions that provide educational services to older adults.
- Local actors and authorities should contribute to the outreach efforts of HEIs that have successfully deployed learning opportunities for senior citizens. These HEIs can act as role models and share their experiences so that other universities would be interested in



implementing similar programmes. Outreach efforts should be part of a framework or programme within HEIs that delivers the learning programme for older adults.

- The EU should:
  - Facilitate best practice exchanges among Member States on education for older adults.
  - Advocate for integrating senior education into lifelong learning policies by promoting European regulation on it.
  - Adopt the [European Strategy for Older Persons](#), as proposed by the EESC. One of its strategic objectives requires all participating countries to develop national plans for older adults and an ageing society. It includes mentions of using the opportunities provided by digital learning tools and offering older adults learning mobility opportunities.
- Lifelong learning opportunities should extend beyond employability. While current policies often emphasise keeping workers employed longer, a more holistic approach is needed—one that also supports retirees seeking personal growth and mental stimulation through continued learning.

# Intergenerational Learning

## Overview

There is no strict definition as to what intergenerational learning (IGL) entails; however, at its core, they are learning opportunities that *“may arise in any range of contexts in which young people and elderly people come together in a shared activity”* (Newman, S. & Hatton-Yeo, 2008, p.32). Their overall aim is to enhance cooperation and 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 HEIs.

There are multiple forms in which IGL programmes can be delivered. As part of the Erasmus60+ project, we developed a toolkit on how to organise IGL activities. The pedagogical approach for IGL by the toolkit involved using project-based learning<sup>1</sup> in conjunction with the principle of co-management<sup>2</sup>. Through this approach, participants work together to accomplish an objective while sharing tasks and responsibilities. This methodology worked quite well when the toolkit was tested with a group of older adults and higher education students at three consortium partner institutions: ELTE, Split University and Mendel University (Gulyas & Kovacs, 2023).

## Benefits for Older Adults

Some of the positive benefits of IGL highlighted during the interviews and the elaboration of the toolkit included physical benefits; participating in an IGL activity forces older adults to go out and be active, and it can also make older adults energised by taking part in a meaningful activity working together with another generation. There is also cognitive stimulation, as participating in IGL activities enables older adults to keep their minds active and contributes towards improving their self-confidence.

Further benefits include acquiring new skills and new ways of learning (Pstross et al., 2017). It can also help alleviate loneliness, social isolation, boredom, and depression by helping older adults expand their social networks by interacting with others while participating in purposeful activities and feeling more involved in society (Urbanovic et al., 2023; Linking Generations, 2017).

It can also help combat structural ageism, described as *“a form of systematic stereotyping and can be defined as how society and its institutions sustain ageist attitudes, actions or language in laws, policies, practices or culture”* (AGE Platform, 2016, p.1). At the EU level, more than 4 in 10 people believe that age discrimination is widespread in their country. Studies have shown that society has assumptions about senior’s behaviour and capacity (van Kampen et al., 2023; EU Science Hub, 2024). Ageism can result in feelings of social rejection, leading to lower civic participation from older adults as they may feel their skills and expertise are undervalued or irrelevant (von Humboldt et al., 2024).

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<sup>1</sup> Problem-based learning (PBL) is a participant-driven approach in which individuals or groups focus on solving a self-identified problem and engaging in various educational activities. PBL projects typically span a longer duration and culminate in an end product, with teaching staff serving in an advisory capacity throughout the process (Gulyas, B. & Kovacs, Z.; 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Co-management is when participants work together as a group and share responsibilities and tasks among themselves (Gulyas, B. & Kovacs, Z.; 2023).

IGL can help younger and older generations overcome ageist biases by fostering mutual understanding and meaningful connections. By engaging with one another, both groups recognise the valuable knowledge and skills they must share. IGL promotes the transfer of knowledge and skills across generations, strengthens social capital, builds more cohesive communities, and encourages active, healthy living for people of all ages (Linking Generations, 2017; 3S et al., 2012).

However, during the toolkit's testing, it was noted that occasionally, there were communication issues and disagreements across generations. Different attitudes, ways of living, and previous experiences would cause conflict and misunderstanding (Gulyas & Kovacs, 2023). Therefore, those organising IGL activities must be ready to consider and tackle these issues.

IGL can act as a non-threatening first step to further learning, particularly for those who perceive learning to be irrelevant or who have had humiliating experiences in the past. 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.

In terms of benefits for HEIs, 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 (Corrigan, 2012). Additionally, IGL can serve as a conduit for carrying out activities related to civic engagement and the spread of European and democratic values, leading to a more united society.

### Examples of IGL Practice within Higher Education Institutions:

IGL is not a new practice within higher education, and in some areas it is rather well established. For instance, MBA programmes often resort to industry experts as a way to transmit learned knowledge and social capital to learners. While this is an imperfect example of what IGL has to offer, as the exchange of knowledge that tends to occur in these settings remains largely unidirectional, albeit it helps paint a practical picture of IGL's untapped potential and of its multiple uses and applications.

The roll-out of IGL learning opportunities has been discussed at length among the consortium partners, where some examples of successful IGL practice can be found. One such example can be found at Mendel University in Czechia, which has an Intergenerational University. This programme promotes intergenerational family ties between grandparents and grandchildren using a mix of teaching, practical exercises and field trips covering a variety of topics. Its activities were viewed positively by participants, making it clear participants appreciated the opportunity to spend time together and get to know each other from a different perspective and in different types of activities from what they are used to in a familial context. The programme also delivered benefits for the parental generation, such as increased satisfaction with family ties and a sense of generations coming together meaningfully (Gulyas & Kovacs, 2023).

Another example can be found at ELTE University in Hungary, where a pilot project was launched within their University of Third Age, comprising biweekly seminars providing active and

participatory learning opportunities for older adults while exploring a particular topic in depth. Student teachers delivered these seminars; this was an opportunity to prepare them professionally for their future teaching careers. Older adults participating in the programme said the seminars helped them develop positive attitudes toward learning at this later stage of life, supported them in understanding and accepting different points of view and helped them work with different preconceptions related to the topics discussed (Gulyas & Kovacs, 2023).

## Intergenerational Learning Initiatives at the EU Level

At the member state level, the picture is very mixed, with some countries having a long-standing tradition of IGL, whereas others do not (ENIL, 2011). However, at the EU level, 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](#): It 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. It allows members to connect and provides visibility to articles and projects related to adult education, including learning experiences based on IGL (AGE: WISE Project, 2021; EPALE, 2024).
- Erasmus + and Grundtvig Projects: Several EU-funded projects have focused on IGL. The ADD LIFE Grundtvig project (2006–2008) developed IGL opportunities in higher education and explored various IGL models (Kolland, F.; 2008). The European Network for Intergenerational Learning (ENIL, 2012–2014) analysed IGL'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 IGL (Ge & I, 2025).

## Policy Recommendations

### Intergenerational Learning-How To?

- IGL programmes should go beyond simple unidirectional learning where one generation teaches another; rather, both generations should learn from each other. One suggestion from the Erasmus60+ project was to use project-based learning in conjunction with co-

management. Through this framework, participants work together to accomplish an objective and share tasks and responsibilities.

- HEIs should create an age-friendly space and atmosphere so that older learners feel welcome and encouraged to participate in IGL activities. For some learners, coming to university can be an experience that generates fear and anxiety. It would be pointless to encourage older students to attend intergenerational learning programmes, yet they do not have adequate facilities in place, or it is not a welcoming environment. This is only going to cause a sense of disappointment and discourage them.
- HEIs should dedicate space to IGL activities. They should also expand their staff capacity and have staff within the university who can manage intergenerational programmes.
- When developing IGL programmes, it is essential to find a suitable date and time for these programmes to take place to bring together older and younger learners.
- HEIs should consider identifying where in existing programmes they could embed IGL learning opportunities. This would contribute to the sustainability and scalability of IGL programmes and enable IGL to become part of the institution's culture. Especially with falling student populations, HEIs should open themselves to more senior learners.
- When developing IGL programmes, consider students' interests and ask them what they wish to learn. To encourage participation, it is necessary to promote a learner-centred approach. Talk with participants and ask them what they want to learn. Then, build a curriculum that makes the learning relevant to their lives.
- Participants' motivation to participate in IGL programmes is not necessarily intrinsic. Appropriate methods will be required to motivate them to join the programme, such as offering students extra credits and emphasising the benefits of IGL programmes for active ageing.

## Promoting Intergenerational Learning for Older Adults at the EU and National Level

- Enshrine intergenerational learning within educational policies at a European and national level. Intergenerational learning could be a stronger priority of the Erasmus+ programme. It can help mainstream IGL activities, encourage skill-sharing and cultural exchanges across generations, foster social cohesion, and help develop innovative and inclusive solutions to societal challenges.

## Online Learning

Online learning 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 valid learning experience and allowed interactive learning to previously unimaginable levels (Formosa, 2021).

### Benefits for Older Adults

Online learning can offer significant advantages. It has the potential to bring together learners who may not be able to attend classes in person due to living far away or having disabilities and worrying about being judged by others. Online learning might provide them with anonymity.

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

They offer flexibility and convenience, allowing learners to complete courses at their own pace, anywhere and anytime. Through online learning, older adults can access courses on different topics developed by institutions worldwide. It can provide up-to-date and constantly available learning, make educational offers less expensive and provide more individualised learning (Pappas et al., 2019).

Participating in online learning can help older adults improve or develop their digital skills, boosting their self-esteem and autonomy. It provides a renewed sense of purpose and excitement while bridging the digital divide by motivating older adults to achieve higher levels of digital competency. This enables them to use the Internet more effectively for various purposes and fosters greater social integration with the rest of society (Formosa, 2021; Pappas, et al., 2019).

### Issues

Nevertheless, online learning is not without its issues. As gathered from the interviews, learning for older adults has a powerful social component; many older adults sign up for these programmes not just for learning but to meet people their age and make new friends. While in online learning, social features can be incorporated to replicate this social element; they will never be able to match the experience of making social connections in person. Overall, online learning should not replace in-person programmes; instead, it should complement them and enable people who cannot readily access these opportunities to participate in them.

Learners might have a connectivity issue 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). Older adults are generally closing the digital divide but remain relatively slow to adopt new technologies.

According to Eurostat, in 2023, only 28 % of people aged 65-74 possessed at least basic digital skills (Eurostat, 2024). This means online learning opportunities would remain out of reach for big groups of prospective learners, and rather than democratising access to learning, it leads to further exclusion from learning.

## 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 the need to develop a series of educational opportunities for older adults online education options and strengthen the skills so they can benefit from online education (European Parliament, 2021).

Additionally, according to the EESC's opinion 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 2021-2027 (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).

Nevertheless, several initiatives within Erasmus+ exist, and it is a horizontal objective in the European Social Funds (ESF+, 2023). In some countries, there are learning spaces for older adults at the municipal level where they receive digital skills training. This shows there is a political will to empower older adults with digital skills. These initiatives might need more funds.

## Policy Recommendations

### Online Learning for Older Adults-How To?

- Online learning platforms for older adults must always have some social element, as learning later in life has a significant social and emotional component. Some social elements may include creating profiles, chat functions, organising Zoom cafes, and forum discussions. Another option could be to offer blended learning courses, allowing for online alone time and social gatherings with discussion sessions and group work.
- HEIs should provide academics with adequate support for developing online learning courses. This should extend to developing Open Educational Resources (OER) for senior courses. OERs would help lower the production costs of these costly and time-consuming courses.
- Designing online learning opportunities that suit senior learners' unique needs and interests requires a co-development approach. This means involving senior learners directly in the



course creation process and collaborating closely with course developers to ensure the content is relevant, accessible, and engaging.

- The platform on which the online learning course is hosted must be user-friendly, easy to use, and accessible to older adults, even if they do not have advanced digital skills. It should also have different language options for easy navigation and accessibility measures for visually impaired and hard-of-hearing learners.
- Learning platforms should offer multilingual courses. HEIs should explore the potential of automated or AI-powered translation for this. Learning in their native language would enable more older adults to access and sign up for online learning courses, thus enhancing accessibility and re-usability.
- Sustainable IT support must be in place to maintain and resolve any technical issues that may arise in the online learning platform. Workshops on onboarding older adults and using the platform should also be offered.

### Promoting Online Learning for Older Adults at the EU and National Level

- To make online learning accessible to older adults, efforts should comprise enhancing their digital skills at both the European and national levels. They need to meet basic requirements, such as having internet access, a computer, and knowledge of safe usage to protect personal data. Without meeting these requirements, online learning risks excluding older adults who lack access to online educational opportunities.
- Raise awareness of online learning courses on offer through outreach campaigns with civil organisations and local/national authorities.
- Access to information about course availability. Build dedicated course catalogues at the local, regional, national, or even European levels to provide visibility to courses offered to older adults.



# Erasmus+ is not just for the young: Mobility Exchanges for Older Adults

## Overview

In the 2021-2027 Erasmus programme, learners engaged in third-age education activities can participate in student mobility within the KA1 mobility action for learners and staff in adult education. This mobility action is open to a wide range of adult education providers and other organisations active in adult education, including those working with senior citizens (European Commission, 2025). During these learning mobility opportunities, older adults experience how third-age education is delivered in other countries and the culture of another country.

Prior to the current programme, adult education student and staff mobility was possible through the Grundtvig programme between 2007 and 2013. However, mobility was only possible for adult education staff during the 2014-2020 Erasmus + programme (European Commission, 2023).

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.

Adult education mobility is offered in the following formats:

- Group mobility of adult learners
- Short-term learning mobility of adult learners
- Long-term mobility of adult learners

## Benefits for Older Adults

Learning mobility offers a wide array of benefits for older adults. Some benefits include improved physical health, as older adults will be moving around more at their host destinations to go from one activity to another. It can also help them develop interpersonal competencies such as language and communication skills, empathy, tolerance of ambiguity, and teamwork (EAEA, 2022).

Mobility exchanges can help develop social connections and combat isolation. They are a unique opportunity to visit another country and expose learners to transformative experiences (EAEA, 2022) that can empower them, as they can get around a foreign country in a foreign language and shed fears of travelling abroad.

Additionally, it can help older adults realise how they can remain active and engaged regardless of age or educational background, thus combating ageist attitudes they might have internalised and giving them fresh ideas for enhancing their learning experience and environment. It can enable

them to discover how learning can be enjoyable and have an opportunity to practice foreign language skills. From the interviews, we found out how some of the students who participated decided to start learning a new language or continue doing so to build on their newfound confidence.

Furthermore, it can bring them pride in partaking in the Erasmus+ programmes like their children and thus develop a European spirit. During the interviews, this was a view that was expressed by several of the mobility participants to the organisers of their mobility, how this was a valuable opportunity to feel more European.

## Benefits for HEIs

It can benefit HEIs by fostering inter-institutional partnerships and creating opportunities for collaboration on future projects. These partnerships can also facilitate the exchange of best practices in third-age learning.

Mobility exchanges allow accompanying staff involved in third-age education to observe how similar programs are delivered at other institutions. This will enable them to adopt new approaches, methodologies, and activities in their programs.

It can also expand the societal impact of its activities while making learning mobility more inclusive and creating links with its lifelong learning activities. As mentioned earlier, lifelong learning should be part of HEIs' third mission, and providing learning mobility for older adults can contribute to their mission of supporting the development of societal cohesion and thus strengthening local communities.

Finally, it promotes active ageing and European values. Learning mobility creates awareness about the benefits of the European integration project while strengthening cooperation and solidarity.

## Why should the EU and Member States Facilitate Mobility Exchanges for Older Adults?

Learning mobility can be both an opportunity and a solution to address and overcome the challenges of an ageing society. Apart from the apparent benefits towards active ageing highlighted above, learning mobility can help older adults remain engaged members of society and keep European values alive and relevant to older generations.

Europe is currently undergoing a crisis in trust of both EU and national institutions. These changes in the level of trust are unevenly distributed across socio-demographic groups. In a recent survey by Eurofund on Living, working and COVID-19, the student group had a higher level of trust in the EU and national government (trust rating out of 10 of 6.64 and 4.51, respectively) compared to those who were retired (trust rating of 4.85 and 3.9 respectively) (Eurofund, 2024).

This erosion in trust can result in an increasingly fragmented society, which can severely undermine the stability and functioning of our society and the common European project. A lower level of trust in the EU translates to votes for parties opposing European integration.

According to a report by the European Commission on the factors affecting the vote for parties opposed to European integration, in urban areas, people over 65 are more likely to vote for Eurosceptic parties. In contrast, younger people are more likely to vote for more pro-EU parties. One explanation in the report is *“that they may perceive more directly the advantages of EU integration”* through, for instance, student study exchange programmes (European Commission, 2020, p.13).

An impact study by the Commission on Erasmus+ for higher education found that Erasmus+ mobility contributed to creating a stronger European identity. Mobility helped stimulate a European identity for those who did not exhibit a high European identity prior to their mobility, and those who were mainly pro-European became even more so during their mobility (European Commission, 2018).

The Erasmus+ programme is by far the most successful EU programme and, for 30 years, has helped with the spread of European values. Therefore, the EU should encourage further participation from older adults in the programme. The Council recommendation of Europe on the Move- learning mobility opportunities for everyone from May of this year is a good first step as it seeks to enable mobility and lifelong learning to learners for all, irrespective of age, thus making mobility more inclusive.

By making mobility truly for all, we can increase its number of participants, and by allowing older adults to participate, we can create links with other lifelong learning activities, promote the civic engagement and active citizenship of older adults and ensure they can see what the EU does for them. In fact, we could go beyond and categorise mobility for older adults as not simply learning mobility but as civic mobility where the focus is not just on cultural and educational exchange but instead on fostering a shared European identity amongst senior participants, which will contribute to a more inclusive and cohesive Europe.

In the section below, we will provide recommendations for HEIs on how to organise learning mobility for older adults and policy recommendations to national and EU policymakers on how to promote learning mobility for older adults.

## Policy Recommendations

### Learning Mobility for Older Adults– How To?

- Commit your institution to developing mobility exchanges for senior learners. Institutional support is paramount for organising these exchanges. HEIs must recognise the value of mobility programmes for this cohort and enshrine their support for facilitating mobility opportunities for older learners.
- Apply for short-term mobility projects to test mobility exchanges with your senior students and assess your capacity to organise student exchanges effectively. This can help institutions determine whether they have the necessary resources and infrastructure while gauging the

actual demand and the number of senior students interested in participating in mobility programs.

- HEIs looking to apply for mobility projects under adult education must check with their national agency if HEIs are listed as eligible institutions for KA1 in adult education.
- Third-age universities that are not integrated within the structure of an HEI and thus have a separate legal identity must apply for KA1 adult education mobility or accreditation, as they are the ones delivering the learning opportunities.
- Be aware that organising learning mobilities for older adults is not the same as organising learning mobilities for younger students. Organising learning mobilities for older adults requires special consideration of their physical and cognitive needs. Travel, accommodation, and the learning programme/activities should be planned accordingly. Sending institutions should hold pre-departure sessions, provide an informational dossier about what to expect at the host destination, offer basic language lessons, and simplify paperwork so learners must deal with it as little as possible. Additionally, maintaining a reserve list of participants is recommended.
- Mobility exchanges should ideally be group mobility. This type of mobility can act as a safe space for older adults to experience the host country. Learners can feel reassured that they are not going alone. Moreover, staff from their institution will accompany them and be there to help them should any problem arise.
- Learning mobilities should last at least seven days, allowing two days for travel and at least five days for activities and exploration. The planning of such activities, including their duration, should consider the needs of participants, and accompanying staff may have to arrange for work cover or caretaking responsibilities.
- Provide extensive language support to enable learners who might not speak other foreign languages to participate in mobility and use creative approaches. Staff accompanying learners must also be able to speak English and at least act as translators.
- Planning learning mobility may require 4-5 months of work, with recommended weekly contact between institutions. During mobility, both parties should remain reachable for emergencies, and host institutions should offer firm support. This support should include assistance with accommodation and accompanying learners during activities.
- Consider expanding the international office's capacity. More administrative support will be necessary to manage the administrative load generated by mobility and to support applications for mobility projects. Additionally, staff training should be provided to implement this type of mobility effectively.
- Use targeted outreach to inform a broad range of students about mobility opportunities, including those in rural areas.

- Identify and confirm staff available to accompany students well in advance, allowing them to prepare and manage their workload. The involvement of such staff should be given formal recognition to mitigate the risk that such activities are not deemed useful for their career progression, which could hamper their scalability.
- Explore alternative mobility formats for older adults. These could include intergenerational learning opportunities, where senior learners join local students in the host institutions and participate in activities together. Another option is multilateral group mobilities, where groups of older adults from different institutions participate in learning mobility at the same host institution.

### Promoting Learning Mobility for Older Adults at the EU and National Level

- Eligible institutions that already hold an ECHE for organising higher education mobilities should be automatically eligible for organising adult education mobilities.
- Promote the availability of learning mobility opportunities for older adults. European, national, and regional policymakers involved in learning mobility should launch a comprehensive communications campaign to raise awareness among prospective participants and HEIs about the existence of learning mobility opportunities for older adults.
- Policy documents more explicitly mention the existence of learning mobility opportunities for older adults. The European Commission and national policymakers should explicitly highlight the availability of learning mobility opportunities for older adults in their papers on lifelong learning, learning mobility, and ageing strategies. Explicit, specific references to these opportunities can enhance clarity, relevance, and impact and strengthen authorities' commitment and political will to support older adults' learning mobility.
- Ensure senior participants are from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. National Agencies should provide clear criteria regarding who is considered a disadvantaged student.
- Member States should provide HEIs with adequate funding to support the participation of a broad range of learners.
- Grants should be paid on time and adequately cover mobility costs. For some senior students, especially retirees on small pensions, mobility costs may be too high. Accommodation and transport must be booked in advance, and grants may fall short, particularly in countries with high living costs. Timely and sufficient grants would encourage more older adults to participate in mobility without financial worries.
- To cover the foreign language needs of mobility participants, an extra lump cost grant could be granted to the host institution to provide live translation needs on the spot.

## Conclusion

The Erasmus 60+ Project highlighted the transformative potential of lifelong learning, IGL, online learning, and learning mobility for older adults. As the European population ages, it becomes increasingly crucial to embrace policies that recognise the value of senior citizens as active participants in higher education and society.

The recommendations outlined in this document aim to inspire policymakers, HEIs, and other actors to work together to foster learning opportunities for older adults. By investing in a holistic, inclusive, sustainable, well-supported approach and accessible learning opportunities, we can empower older adults to remain engaged, develop digital and social skills, and contribute to a more inclusive and democratic society.

Furthermore, integrating these initiatives with European values of solidarity and cohesion can enhance the sense of European citizenship among older generations. Whether through IGL, online learning, or mobility exchanges, these efforts can bridge generational gaps, combat social isolation, and foster a more united Europe.

To achieve these goals, policymakers and HEIs should emphasise accessibility, robust institutional commitment, adequate funding, targeted outreach, and co-creation of learning activities to fulfil the unique needs of older learners. Robust research will ensure these initiatives are impactful and sustainable. By embedding these policies at national and European levels, we can create inclusive learning opportunities that significantly enrich the lives of older adults, encourage civic involvement, and promote European values.

By prioritising older adults' inclusion in educational programs, we affirm their vital role in shaping a vibrant, diverse, and resilient European community. It is now up to policymakers, HEIs, and other stakeholders to take these recommendations forward and ensure that lifelong learning becomes a reality for everyone, regardless of age.

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