

ACTIVE AGING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE THIRD AGE: EXPERIENCES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF RIJEKA

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Active aging as a framework for social policy towards the elderly implies the importance of their participation in social life with the affirmation of independence, dignity and quality of life. The contemporary paradigm of active aging emphasizes the role of lifelong learning and raises the question of the role of the community in its promotion. In line with the university's third mission and promoting collaboration with community, the University can make an important contribution to the well-being of senior citizens. One of the ways is the organization of lifelong learning at the University of the Third Age (U3A), which was launched by the University of Rijeka in cooperation with the City of Rijeka in 2009. So far, more than 50 programs of informal education from different scientific fields with university teachers as lecturers have been conducted within the framework of U3A. With the idea of involving retired teachers more in the U3A program, the University Club for the Third Age was established in 2020 which retired teachers from the University of Rijeka can join. By establishing the U3A Club, the University of Rijeka aims to maintain continuous cooperation with its retired faculty staff and contribute to their quality of life even after retirement. Through the U3A programs, the university professors remain active as lecturers and share their knowledge with their peers who are willing to continuously learn.

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Introduction

The lengthening of life expectancy and the increasing proportion of older people in the population are leading to new challenges in working with older people. The quality of life of older adults is becoming an important issue for experts of different profiles, including those outside the health and social sectors. The heterogeneity of this population means that they have different needs depending on their health status, sociodemographic characteristics, and personal interests (Foster & Walker, 2015; Smojver-Ažić, 2018).

In explaining the relationship between aging, quality of life, and community well-being, different but related theoretical models can be considered, such as the active aging model, and the successful aging model. According to the World Health Organization, active aging as part of health policy means "the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation, and security with the goal of improving the quality of life in old age" (WHO, 2002). Active aging refers to the use of strategies to extend life expectancy while maintaining a high quality of life (WHO, 2002). This paradigm of aging has resulted in the creation of senior centers and clubs with a variety of activities (Pardasani & Thompson, 2012). According to studies, older adults who are healthier, more active, and more educated tend to need family and community resources and services less frequently (Merriam & Kee, 2014). Active and healthy seniors contribute to the well-being of the community with their accumulated life experiences and skills.

The concept of "successful aging" (Rowe and Kahn, 1997) as a health promotion strategy includes activities that focus on learning. This concept emphasizes the idea that aging does not always mean deterioration but rather has a number of characteristics that allow physical and mental health to be maintained as we age. The model includes reducing the risk of disease and illness related disability, maintaining mental and physical abilities, and allowing individuals to continue to actively participate in their own lives and maintain a productive daily routine (Rowe & Kahn, 2015). The successful aging paradigm assumes that one must be proactive in dealing with the inevitable changes that aging brings. Various forms of social engagement through social activities, helping activities, formal and informal learning, and leisure activities are positively related to physical and mental health (Herzog et al., 2002).

In a range of activities that can empower a person, lifelong learning contributes to the maintaining and even improving cognitive functioning and the maintaining and expanding social networks (de Maio Nascimento, & Giannouli, 2019). Lifelong learning plays an increasingly important role in promoting active and successful aging and in delaying or reducing the elderly population's dependence on public resources by promoting the maintenance of their independence and autonomy. Continuous learning throughout life is one of the essential factors that enable individuals to be adaptable and resilient and to remain active in an increasingly complex and changing world (Preston & Hammond, 2003).

Involvement in lifelong education programs has a number of benefits both on the personal level of the individuals involved and on a broader social level, why policymakers, society as a whole, and older people themselves should recognize the importance of education in late life (Groombridge, 1982). According to research (Panitsides, 2013; Maniecka-Brya et al., 2013; Niedzielska et al., 2017), participation in educational programs for older adults has a positive impact on quality of life and positively affects cognitive and emotional functioning as well as social relationships. Findings from the studies suggest that continued engagement can help older learners in maintaining wellbeing over time, as evidenced by increased levels of self-assurance, self-satisfaction, self-esteem, and sense of coherence, as well as a decrease in depressive and anxiety symptoms (Jenkins & Mostafa, 2015). Lifelong learning is also reflected in health literacy and healthy lifestyles (Wister, et al., 2010), which can have long-term effects on longer and healthier lives (Menéndez, et al., 2018).

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the role of lifelong learning in the process of active aging, focusing on the University of the Third Age model. The paper presents the experience of implementing informal education for the elderly at the University of Rijeka, as well as the importance of involving retired faculty in these programs through the activities of the University Club for the Third Age.

Universities of the Third Age

Among various programs and offerings for the continuing education of older adults, the Universities of the Third Age (U3A) are the most common specialized educational institutions that promote the active aging paradigm (Formosa, 2014; Menéndez et al., 2018). The term “third age” according to Laslett’s (1991)

categorization of four stages of old age refers to dependence on others. In contrast to the first stage of being dependent on others and the second stage of being responsible for others, the third age is the time when people are retired and no longer tied to a career and have the freedom to manage their time and environment to pursue their personal needs and interests. The fourth age refers to the point at which they are dependent on the help of others.

The first University of the Third Age was founded in 1973 in Toulouse, France, and today there are hundreds of such institutions around the world with different ways of working. Regardless of the different organizational forms, the U3A is present in more than 60 countries around the world (Formosa, 2014). This expansion of the U3A program is related to demographic, scientific, and sociopolitical grounds (Menéndez et al., 2018).

Universities of the third age can be independent institutions, they can operate as part of existing adult education institutions, or as part of a university. Based on the French model, various forms of U3A have been launched, which did not necessarily be connected with universities but with local government institutions (Swindell & Thompson, 1995), many of which also operate at the level of national networks (e.g., Slovenia, Poland, Slovakia, Italy). Funding sources vary, in some cases it was universities and/or the state, in others U3A was a combination of community donations and/or a monthly fee paid by seniors, with or without financial support from the local community (Formosa, 2014).

The experience of implementing this form of lifelong learning around the world over the last 50 years confirms the contribution to active aging through the message that, regardless of age, it is never too late to learn and fulfill certain ambitions, interests, and desires. Regardless of how they are organized, studies confirm that participation in a university program for the third age population has several benefits: it has a positive effect on the development of cognitive processes, self-confidence, and strengthening of participants' social relationships (Menendez et al., 2018). At the same time, it impacts people of younger ages - those who participate as lecturers or students who encounter them in college corridors or share lecture halls - in ways that reduce prejudices about the possibilities of learning at an older age (de Maio Nascimento & Giannouli, 2019).

Although lifelong learning is highlighted as one of the pillars of active aging with confirmed benefits, it is still insufficiently recognized in active aging policy, and mentioned far less frequently than topics such as physical activities or unpaid work. Late-life learning is seldom integrated into age-related policies, programs, and research and is generally underfunded. For example, Schuller and Watson (2015) highlight that less than 3% of education spending is focused on those over 50 years of age. A similar practice is characteristic of Croatia, where there is no elaborate educational policy aimed at the education of older people, and institutionalized and organized continuous forms of education for the older people are still rare. The first organized form of education for the older adults in Croatia started more than twenty years ago in Zagreb within the Open People's University (Čurin, 2018), and the University of the Third Age in Rijeka is the second.

The University of the Third Age at the University of Rijeka

The University of the Third Age at the University of Rijeka began in 2009 in accordance with the University's Strategy 2007–2013. The aim of this program was to promote lifelong learning among people in third age, and support the quality of life and mental health. In order to determine the interest in continuing education and the type of educational programs among people aged 50–75 in Primorsko-Goranska County, an adapted version of the questionnaire from the AARP Survey on Lifelong Learning (2000) was conducted. The research was conducted in 2008 on a representative sample of 670 people aged 50–75 years (Baljak & Smojver-Ažić, 2008). Willingness to participate in the program was expressed by 44% of the participants, most of them in their 6th decade of life. At the same time, the majority indicated that they were more suited to an informal form of education, where their acquired knowledge and skills would not be evaluated. Most respondents indicated that they would participate in the program to acquire new knowledge, while an equally important, though less pronounced, reason was to socialize and spend leisure time in a meaningful way. Participants in the survey expressed the greatest interest in education in computer science and foreign languages. The biggest barriers to participating in an educational program were lack of time, the belief that they did not need it, and health problems.

The results of the study at the University of Rijeka (Baljak & Smojver-Ažić, 2008) are similar to those of other surveys (e.g. AARP, 2000) and repeated studies at the University of Rijeka (Smojver-Ažić, 2015). In addition to a similar interest in topics,

a common finding relates to “learning for pleasure” which is one of the guiding principles of the U3A. In most of the programs, there is no validation or accreditation, and there are no tests or credentials that can be acquired (Panitsides & Papastamatis, 2013). Since the acquisition of new knowledge is most often emphasized as a primary motive, educational programs for older adults to satisfy intrinsic learning motivations should be free to choose and allow learning without strict constraints and coercion (Čurin, 2018). As Bjursell (2019) notes, older adults prefer nonformal learning activities, and according to Narushima et al. (2018) those who participated in nonformal learning were better able to maintain their mental health.

The findings of the research at the University of Rijeka (Baljak & Smojver-Ažić, 2008) were sufficient arguments for the University administration and the local community to start a non-formal education program for people over 55 years. The main goals of the project were to inform participants about the latest scientific knowledge, enable the connection of scientific knowledge with life experiences, and promote lifelong learning and a culture of learning. In the fourteen years about 70 programs have been realized in almost all scientific fields that cover the components of the University of Rijeka, and the topics are tried to meet the interests of potential participants. It is possible to enroll in programs with a duration of 10 to 20 school hours in the spring or fall cycle, or to listen to one-time lectures on various topics lasting 2 school hours. Lectures and workshops take place in the classrooms of the university, mostly on the University campus. At the end of each cycle, participants receive a certificate of attendance. So far, more than a thousand students over 55 years of age have participated in the various programs of the University of the Third Age in Rijeka, mostly women between 55 and 70 years of age and most of them with a higher level of education.

The special feature of the University of the Third Age in Rijeka is that the lecturers are university teachers from different scientific fields who adapt their lectures and working methods to this group of students. The greatest interest of potential participants is in the fields of psychology and art, so the art workshops (drawing, painting, sculpture, graphics, and photography) are always fully booked. However, the same is true for lecture cycles in art history, biotechnology, personal finance, medicine, neuroscience, and various other topics related to the current research of our university professors. Lecture topics include recent scientific knowledge and

introduce participants to content that was not accessible to them during their initial education and career (e.g., art workshops or nanoscience or artificial intelligence). The content offered also relates to current issues (e.g., pandemics, vaccinations, financial literacy, and the transition to a new currency). Information about the programs can be found on the official website of the "University of the Third Age" (<https://uniri.hr/sveuciliste-i-drustvo/sveuciliste-za-trecu-dob/>), where everyone can follow the news and stay up to date.

Similar to other U3A models (Formosa, 2014), at the University of Rijeka the programs are tailored to participants: each cycle is evaluated, and participants are asked for suggestions on how to improve the program and for examples of topics that interest them. The results from all these years show that participants are very satisfied with the program overall, with the content and amount of new knowledge, with the easy-to-understand lecture materials, and with the competence and motivation of the lecturers and their encouragement of participants to actively participate (Smojver-Ažić, 2015). About two-thirds of the participants reported learning new things. About 70% saw benefits in maintaining their self-esteem and having better health, and about half of respondents said that participating in informal education also kept them connected to others. Most participants said that what they learn at U3A programs or individual lectures inspires them to acquire new knowledge, engage in conversations with peers, or share knowledge with family (Smojver-Ažić, 2015).

In addition to students, professors also evaluate their participation in the program cycle. It should be noted that the professors indicate that they are satisfied with the participants' interest and motivation to acquire new knowledge, which is not the usual experience of professors who regularly work with much younger students. Professors indicate that their motivation to participate in these activities stems from an understanding of the value of lifelong learning as well as their responsibility to popularize science. Motivated and inquisitive participants have a stimulating effect on professors, leading to the satisfaction of both and justifying the sustainability of this program.

The funding model of the U3A at the University of Rijeka is a combination of funds from the local community, the University, and registration fees for lectures and workshops. The City of Rijeka, Department of the Municipality of Health and Social

Welfare, as member of the European Network of Healthy Cities, has supported the U3A project since the beginning of its implementation.

The University of the Third Age Club

Although the original idea of the University of the Third Age was to motivate retired professors as lecturers for the U3A, this has been a rather rare practice. Therefore, in order to encourage collaboration with retired professors in continuing their academic activities, a new way of working was proposed, and the University Senate decided to establish the University of the Third Age Club in 2021. The basic idea behind the establishment of the University of the Third Age Club is that those university professors who wish to continue to be active in the academic community and share their knowledge and skills can do so after retirement. Useful guidelines for the establishment of the U3A Club were from “Act on The Establishment and Operation of The Centre For Professors Emeriti and Retired Higher Education Teachers of The University of Maribor”. With the formally established U3A Club, the University, in line with the idea of intergenerational solidarity, wants to show that it continues to care about its former employees and their quality of life after retirement. The founding of the U3A Club began the process of creating a social academic network that promotes intergenerational dialogue and actively works to change the experiences of older people to prevent their isolation after retirement.

The future of the U3A at the University of Rijeka

Given the growing number of older people with higher levels of education and their need for continuous learning, various lifelong learning options need to be considered. For the future organization of the program, a systematic IT literacy training for older adults is needed, and with it a wider range of programs via e-learning. It has already been confirmed that the virtual university for the third-age could be an alternative to traditional classroom teaching even for the elderly (Swindell, 2002). This form of education can be interesting for those who are unable to come to college due to mobility problems or other health issues.

After fifteen years of successful implementation of U3A at the University of Rijeka, it is necessary to offer new ways of working within the possibilities and other commitments of the college community. In addition to new approaches to the U3A

program and various activities promoted by U3A Club members, it is necessary to connect with international organizations and apply for membership in the Age Friendly University Global Network.

The sustainability of the U3A program at the University level is related to the University's third mission that promotes connection with the community (Petersen et al., 2022). The University of Rijeka has been recognized for these efforts and was awarded by the Triple E Awards in the category of Committed University of the Year in 2022. This recognition is an incentive to continue the existing good practice of the U3A program

The importance of investment in active aging programs ensures the sustainability of the program through continued co-funding at the community level. The City of Rijeka Health Plan 2019 –2024 and the selected priorities and activities are aligned with the main themes of the European Healthy Cities Network. This plan is related to a 10-year global action plan known as the UN Decade of Healthy Aging (2021 – 2030) which aims to ensure a long and healthy lives (Amuthavalli Thiyagarajan et al., 2022). Non-formal education can provide intellectually enriching experiences and opportunities for social engagement. These opportunities are aim to improve the psychological well-being, social inclusion, and empowerment of older adult students, consistent with the active and healthy aging framework (WHO, 2020).

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