

INCLUSION OF SENIOR CITIZENS IN LIFELONG LEARNING TO REDUCE THE NEGATIVE IMPACT OF POPULATION AGING IN LATVIA SOCIETY

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Abstract. Today, the age structure of the population of Latvia is close to the average for the European Union, but the share of senior citizens is rapidly increasing. Population aging is one of the most significant trends in demographic processes, which brings changes to all areas of society. This article analyses some risks both for seniors themselves and for society resulting from these trends, and the reasons why Latvia is falling behind in addressing these risks. The primary goal of this article is to summarise and interpret a variety of scientific publications and legal documents from a global perspective, also using methods such as monograph analysis, content analysis, descriptive statistics, and compilations of experiences and best practices. The author of the article put forward arguments in favour of the inclusion of seniors in lifelong education in Latvia, as one of the elements of social policy to reduce the negative effects of population aging. According to the author, it is necessary to promote and develop a fully lifelong learning system for seniors in Latvia.

Keywords: lifelong learning, population aging, senior citizens, University of the Third Age.

Introduction

The age structure of the population of Latvia is close to the average for the European Union, but the share of senior citizens is rapidly increasing. Population aging is one of the most significant trends in demographic processes, which brings changes to all areas of society. This article analyses some risks both for seniors themselves and for society resulting from these trends, and the reasons why Latvia is falling behind in addressing these risks.

The objectives of the study are: to synthesize a wide variety of academic sources, including scientific publications and legal documents; to provide an analysis of the possible risks, both for seniors themselves and for broader society, resulting from population aging; to propose arguments evaluating the inclusion of seniors in lifelong education in Latvia, as one of the elements of social policy for the reduction of the negative effects of population aging.

In data selection procedure was a wide variety of academic sources assembled, with emphasis on those sources that provide critical insight into the topic of population aging, and the inclusion of seniors in lifelong education.

The following methods were used: interpretation and academic synthesis of a variety of expert opinions, monograph analysis, legal document analysis, content analysis, descriptive statistics, compilations of experiences and best practices.

Analysis of current demographics trends

As life expectancy increases and the proportion of senior citizens in the population is growing wider, the aging of Latvian society becomes one of its biggest challenges. According to the data of the Central Statistical Office, at the end of the last century, the share of people aged 65 and over in Latvia did not exceed 15%, but in 2021, approximately 21% of the population of Latvia was over 65 years old. In this respect, Latvia is not an exception, as in the European Union the average proportion of people 65+ in 2021 was around 21% of the total population (EUROSTAT, 2023). In the territory of Latvia, population aging proceeds unevenly, especially affecting certain regions: Latgale and Vidzeme, as well as larger cities (Kučinskis, 2019). In Eastern European and post-Soviet countries, the process of population aging is accelerated by labor migration and other factors (Poutvaara, 2021). Demographic forecasts show that population aging will accelerate in the coming decades, with a rapid increase in the proportion of older people (Krumiņš & Bērziņš, 2019). Today, about a fifth of the population of Latvia is at an age that is usually associated with diseases, economic dependence and social passivity. The aging of society is a long-term and irreversible process that cannot be stopped, but one can try to reduce its negative consequences. This opinion forces us to re-evaluate our understanding of age and may become the basis for changing the paradigm of old age (The World Bank, 2015). In the past years, the stereotype of old age as "empty spending of the last years of life" is outdated in today's view, and a new vision of our retirement years must be created, as an active, diverse, and meaningful stage of life.

The changing paradigm of ageing

As the discussion about population aging develops, different terms for older people are employed. Along with the combination of words "older people", "elderly people" and "senior citizens", "seniors" is often commonly used to correctly and neutrally denote this age stage of life. This article will use these terms interchangeably. Belonging to the senior category is usually determined by the time when, according to the applicable laws, a person can retire. However, this does not mean that from this moment on, a person stops developing and turns into a kind of static personality. What the individual's "third stage of life" will be filled with depends on them (Zaļkalns, 2013). On the

other hand, society's task is to create conditions in which the rights of senior citizens will not be restricted, but their status and the guarantees offered by the state will give them confidence about the future, as well as allow them to participate in the development of the well-being of the entire society.

Population aging as a social process is inextricably linked to our understanding of individual aging. Together with healthy lifestyle recommendations, concepts such as "active aging" and "successful aging" enter the daily circulation. According to the definition of the World Health Organization (WHO), "active aging" is the optimization of the processes of human health, social protection and inclusion in society for its older members (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020; Tomšone, Pranka, & Briška, 2020). The application of this principle gives seniors the opportunity to use their potential in physical, social and spiritual aspects throughout their life, as well as to participate in public life, considering their needs, wishes and opportunities. In practical terms, it is an approach that supports older people's participation in the labour market and community life; balancing it with household care, caring for loved ones, volunteering, hobbies, etc. On the other hand, the concept of "successful aging" is founded in principles of psychology. The basic elements of the concept are the individual's psychological mood and motivation, which promotes inclusion in society by assuming his social role in a different quality (Mendes, 2013). Society and the prevailing attitude in it can create a favourable environment in which everyone is able not only to feel safe, but also to see opportunities for self-realization for their own growth. Riga Stradins University assoc. prof. Dr. med. Signe Tomšone introduces the term "active and healthy old age", which is more in line with the peculiarities of the Latvian language and social environment (Tomšone, Pranka, & Briška, 2020). Understanding and researching the aging of society will also help to develop scientific language in the relevant field.

Specifics of Latvian society

In Latvia, the average pension is about 40 percent of the average salary, so a significant part of the elderly population is at risk of poverty. But even if the size of the pension was decent and corresponded to the real market prices, material well-being is not the only issue that worries seniors. Stories about the low income and unsecured needs of the "poor pensioner" are endlessly repeated in the mass media; they condition the seniors to be constantly dissatisfied with themselves, with those around them, and with their life in general. At the same time, in the eyes of economically active people, the image of the elderly is depicted as constantly begging for something. This leads to the deformation of moral values, because it creates the illusion that their sadness, loneliness, the loss of the meaning of life do not cause suffering. In the authors' opinion, the

social problems that arise with the aging of the population need to be solved not only by redistributing funding and ensuring the availability of medical and social assistance in the long term. It is also important for seniors to be shown the benefits of an active lifestyle: the opportunity to devote time to hobbies, meet interesting people, travel, learn new technologies, etc. It is no less important for people in old age to get new impressions: tastes, smells, movements, emotions. One of the main conditions for the well-being of elderly people is regular social contact. Scientific research results show that seniors are more exposed to risks such as social isolation, loneliness, depression and diseases related to disorders of the nervous system (Centrālā statistikas pārvalde [CSP], 2020). Those who are involved in social activities and maintain a high level of interaction feel better and are more satisfied with their quality of life. Conversely, seniors who lack social contacts are more likely to feel lonely and suffer from social isolation. On average, in the EU-28, about 7% of people over the age of 75 have not had contact with family members or relatives in the last 12 months (in Latvia there were 2%), while about 9% of respondents had no one in the neighborhood with whom they could discuss personal issues or ask for help (In Latvia there were 13%) (CSP, 2020). In fact, today, elderly people are at a higher risk of social isolation, instead of being naturally connected to one common network of social, neighbourly, familial and other relationships.

In Latvian society, negative stereotypes about seniors have been formed in the previous century: they are perceived as boring, useless, socially insignificant; they are in poor health; they are unable to quickly adapt to the new socio-economic situation, unable to learn new technologies, etc. It is often believed that people are unable to work when they reach retirement age, and this belief is the basis for discrimination in employment relations. However, about one fifth of Latvian pensioners continue to work, finding paid positions despite limited availability. For objective reasons, older people have outdated knowledge, conservative habits and ideas, but most of all they lack the skills to independently organize their free time. Many seniors do not have hobbies, they are not used to caring about the diversity of cultural life, so a lot of time is devoted to television, which satisfies their need for information. Some of the older people do not know where to go for help or advice, they are not well versed in legal issues, laws and regulations. In addition, having lived through an era of authoritarianism, when the most sought-after human qualities were diligence and obedience, seniors feel uneasy in front of officials, afraid to defend their interests. Most people over 65 are single or widowed. They are mostly women, whose average life expectancy is much higher than that of men (in Latvia, this difference is 10 years). Losing a spouse and friends, they feel lonely and unneeded. Many face age discrimination - ageism - which manifests itself in negative stereotypes about older people spread in society.

Ageism is discrimination – an unfavorable, different, restrictive, unequal treatment based on a person's age. In 1968, gerontologist Robert N. Butler described the phenomenon of ageism as irrational hostility. Within ageism, older people, unlike the young, are perceived as old-fashioned, weak-minded, rigid, less valuable (Butler, 1969). The laws of the Republic of Latvia declare the principle of equality for all citizens, but in practice, a less favorable attitude towards the elderly is often tolerated. Ageism is sustained by the influence of the mass media of the Western world, which propagates an obsession with youth. As a result, youth is associated with beauty, and many people, especially women, fear aging.

The effects of population aging in a global context

The effects of population aging are evident in many areas of life. As a result of the decrease in the number of people of working age, tax revenues also decrease, and difficulties arise in creating the part of the social budget that is spent on ensuring societal guarantees. This is a serious threat to the quality of life of all age groups. Economic growth is slowing down, the structure of the labour market is changing - there is a shortage of qualified labour (EUROSTAT, 2019). Inevitably, the level of general consumption will be lowered, the amount of personal savings will decrease, which is spent to maintain a full standard of living and the health of family seniors. The increase in the proportion of elderly people in the country leads to more and more expenses related to the provision of medical care, especially in the long term. More social care centres and nursing homes will soon be needed to accommodate lonely, elderly people who are unable to care for themselves. An expansion of inpatient gerontology centres, day centres and home care services are likely to occur soon. The political consequences of the aging process are also significant if we consider the experience of already "aged" countries - for example, Japan, which can currently be called a democratic gerontocracy. Japanese politicians are directly dependent on the most powerful social group – seniors (Coulmas, 2007). Seniors are extremely influential, as the older generations traditionally participate more actively in elections than the young. Many political and economic decisions are made with their interests in mind.

At first, demographic aging, social isolation and similar social processes were primarily perceived in relation to the economic costs of solving these problems. But in recent years, the peculiarities of social processes in Europe are increasingly viewed as opportunities for innovation, as new and prospective market niches (European Commission, 2013). A new market segment dubbed the "silver economy" is emerging, in which goods (special mobile phone models, technical aids) and services (tourist trips, training courses) are developed, tested and manufactured according to the needs of the elderly. The

main task of these innovations is to technically provide people with limited opportunities a full life at home, reducing the burden on the social care and health protection system, as well as enhancing the quality of life of senior citizens. However, technological innovation is not effective if it is not embedded in a wider context of social change.

Population aging issues have been recognized by many international organisations. Questions related to the aging of society were brought up in the following international conferences: in Bucharest in 1974, Mexico City in 1984 and Cairo in 1994. The United Nations has increasingly focused on aging issues since 2002, when the Madrid International Plan of Action on Aging was adopted. This assembly approved a strategy for addressing the problem of population aging and related social, cultural, economic and demographic issues in the 21st century (Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, 2002). In the European Union, the year 2012 was named the "European Year for Active Aging and Solidarity between Generations" (Wittich, 2011). And lastly in 2016, the World Health Organization approved the document "Global Strategy and Action Plan on Aging and Health (2016-2020)", which is mandatory for related policies in all UN countries. Each country should create a "healthy ageing" strategy, formulate an evidence-based social policy and action plan. The WHO strategy defines the main priorities in the development of the social policy of the member states (WHO, 2016). The strategy includes lifelong learning - provision of non-formal education opportunities for the elderly (Rudnicka et al., 2020). One of the goals announced in the strategy is to create a "friendly" environment for the seniors and favourable conditions that would help realize their potential, maintaining a longer independent and healthier life.

Lifelong learning as an element of social policy

One of the common practices to reduce the negative effects of population aging is lifelong learning for senior citizens. Today, education is not only associated with one specific early stage of life, but rather has become a dynamic process throughout life. Due to demographic changes, the number of students is decreasing, which is causing changes in the structure of education. Concurrently, demand for education services is increasing in older people. The myth that a person is unable to learn new knowledge and skills as they age has been completely refuted, and there has long been talk of implementing a truly lifelong educational model. More than 6% of EU-28 residents aged 55 to 64 and 3% aged 65 to 74 participated in formal and informal training in 2018 (EUROSTAT, 2019). The highest level of participation of elderly people in lifelong learning is in the Nordic countries - Finland, Sweden and Denmark. There are significant differences between adult education and education for older people, primarily in goals and motivation. In adult education, there is a

need for more professional training programs aimed at improving the skills of students. Seniors are offered more playful and simpler methods that are appropriate for their ability to perceive new information (Lacob, Lisa, & Pocinho, 2019). Education for seniors is both a kind of mental gymnastics that prevents the weakening of cognitive abilities, and secondarily a tool for acquiring new knowledge or verifying old ones. In some rare cases, participation in lifelong learning programs is combined with the desire to continue a working career.

University of the Third Age

For most seniors, special educational institutions have appeared under the common name of the University of the Third Age or U3A, which emerged with somewhat different goals. As a result of development for almost 50 years, two completely different models have appeared: "French" and "English".

In France, at the University of Toulouse in 1973, Pierre Vellas created the first training course for people of retirement age (The First University of the Third Age). It included not only lectures, but also the development of special curricula for seniors, which were then used in other countries as well. Pierre Vellas defined three main tasks of the University of the Third Age: 1) intellectual (professors and lecturers) and administrative (rooms, libraries, staff) resources of the university should be used in senior education; 2) the university should conduct gerontology research in the interests of science, the state and the seniors themselves; 3) the university should promote communication and cultural exchanges between generations (Escuder-Mollon, 2014). A characteristic feature of the "French" model is the combination of high-level didactic and research activities, using various organizational forms. Most U3As in France are formally (as a university course) or informally (as a centre for lifelong learning) connected to one of the universities. Their activities are financed by a combination of state subsidies, sponsor funds and the participants' own fees. Considering the wishes of the participants, U3A students are offered a wide selection of courses. Usually, the curriculum for seniors includes courses such as computer training, legal and financial skills, the basics of healthy eating, English or another foreign language at a conversational level, dancing, choir singing, handicrafts and others (Lassnigg, 2020). According to the "French" model, life learning courses for senior citizens were established in Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, etc. (Selecky, 2017). Later, similar universities for seniors were organized in some Central and Eastern European countries: Poland, Czech Republic, Slovenia.

The "English" U3A model is based on other idea. As early as 1983, community-type associations based on self-organization and mutual assistance were established in Great Britain (Beckett, 2009). Seniors organize learning

activities themselves, using their own and their colleagues' knowledge and experience, giving lectures voluntarily. This model has characteristics such as equality of participants and cooperation. Learning centres provide funding independently by collecting tuition from members. The program is created considering the interests of the participants, and information is often provided via the Internet. The "English" U3A model is distributed in Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, Cyprus, South Africa, Malta and elsewhere. Other models are also known in international practice, for example the so-called "People's schools" have long existed in Denmark, which are based on the ideas of N.F.S. Grundvig, and are characterized by mutual learning of participants without formal knowledge tests, while in Finland a "hybrid" model is being developed - U3A tends to draw on university resources, but seniors' groups are essentially voluntary community-based associations.

One of the most positive examples in the Eastern European region is Poland, where the first training course for older people was created at the post-graduate education centre of the Medical University of Warsaw in 1975, then mainly in large cities (Poznan, Krakow), but now they also operate in cultural centres and libraries of small municipalities. Currently, there are about 600 such universities in Poland, whose classes are attended by more than 200 thousand people. Based on the vast amount of information about the activity of U3A in Poland, there is a proposal among scientists to categorize it as a unique model (Kobylarek, 2019).

In the Baltic region, the most active development of U3A can be observed in Lithuania. In 2018, there were 67 such institutions in various cities of Lithuania, some of them worked in cooperation with existing universities, that is, they worked according to the "French" model: Kaunas College, University of Kaunas, University of Klaipeda, Lithuanian University of Sports, Panevezys College and Rokiški branch of Panevezys College (Kalvaitis, 2018). Other U3As often use the material base of schools, public libraries, museums or municipalities - premises, equipment, etc. Most of the U3As in Lithuania collect tuition from their members and seek funds from other sources to ensure their activities, municipalities also financially support about one third of them.

University of the Third Age is a widely developed international movement that uses diverse forms of organization of their work. In general, the goals and programs of U3A are similar: involvement of seniors in social life, strengthening of health, prevention of social isolation and loneliness. Despite the differences in U3A models, seniors actively use the opportunity to learn, acquire useful skills and competences, and do not stop in their development. In many cases, the most important result can be simply a systematic load on the brain with the aim of preventing or at least delaying neurodegenerative diseases (Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, etc.). Several scientific studies have shown that going to university at an older age improves the quality of life: improves physical and mental

health, reduces the risk of isolation, reduces drug use and increases social integration (Jacob et al., 2019). As the education level of the elderly increases, their opportunities to use electronic forms of state and banking services increase, active participation in voluntary work is observed, and other positive changes are taking place, which have wide social consequences.

The first steps towards lifelong learning for seniors in Latvia

In Latvia, seniors are not yet included in the lifelong education system, although the first training courses exist in various cities. As an analogue of U3A, the "School for Seniors" was established in Krāslava in 2015, and by 2022, a similar institution opened its doors in a few more places - Kuldīga, Aglona, Sigulda and Ikšķile. There, seniors receive modern knowledge in various fields, and find out what their lifestyle should be like in order to stay energetic longer and keep a clear mind (Azamatova, 2021). Most older people attend these courses and educational programs mainly for the pleasure of learning and to interact with other students, not to obtain a certificate or diploma. At the same time, there is also the passivity of senior citizens and the prejudiced attitude of the population of Latvia towards the acquisition of education for the elderly.

The good experience and good successful solutions accumulated in foreign countries can serve as an example for the development of lifelong learning methods for seniors in Latvia. The experience of such training centres shows that an active lifestyle in old age allows them to feel like they belong to a group of like-minded people, which helps to distract them from bad feelings, sad thoughts, and anxiety. By engaging in regular and interesting activities, people are less exposed to the risk of depression, get sick less often and seek medical help less often, better navigate social processes, and feel more satisfied with life. By researching and gathering foreign experience and good practice examples, it is possible to consider the peculiarities of each U3A model.

Conclusions

To address the challenges of population aging, modern societies are trying to change the paradigm of peoples' 'third age', transforming it into an active lifestyle not only in public image, but also in content. The concept of "healthy aging", embodied in the social policy programs of nation states, implemented in the light of policy documents of international organizations, will become a model of behaviour for many older people.

Although the aging process of the society is accelerating, Latvian society is still starting to get used to the new demographic situation and develop adaptation measures. It is necessary to develop a positive attitude of all age groups towards the inevitable changes.

The inclusion of seniors in lifelong education in Latvia is one of the necessary elements of state social policy to reduce the negative effects of population aging. Modern Latvian society must make serious changes - overcome prejudices and use the experience of other European countries in organizing education for seniors (University of the Third Age or its analogue), in order to reduce the impact of population aging.

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**MĀKSLA UN DIZAINS, DIZAINA
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