

Mobility of 65 + Society – Needs and Expectations of Third Age University Students

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Abstract. Evolution of information society, which arises mainly from the development of technology and information technology, causes that older people may be marginalized and their activity in society may be limited. One can avoid such a phenomenon by all initiatives of stimulating seniors towards intellectual and physical activity. The most popular initiatives are Universities of the Third Age. The first university in Poland was founded over thirty years ago. Universities of the Third Age are one of the most common forms of education for older people. Their main task is to increase the intellectual activity of older people and to meet the needs arising mainly from psychosocial changes. The aim of this paper is to characterize the education of retirement age people with particular regard to their expectations in the age of computerization and digitization of society.

Keywords: University of the third age · Education of older people · Implementation of IT solutions

1 Introduction

According to forecasts of the Central Statistical Office in year 2035 the number of people in the retirement age in Poland reached almost 9.6 million, while in year 2008 it was 6.2 million [1]. According to Eurostat's forecasts from year 2008, in year 2030 in Poland the ratio of the number of over sixty-five year old people to the number of people between fifteen and sixty-four year old will be 36 %, while in year 2050 this figure will reach 56 %. EU population projections for years 2010–2060 predict an increase in the number of elderly people in the total population of the EU-27.

The Fig. 1 shows that elderly people will constitute an increasing proportion of the total population in the next fifty years. The age structure of the elderly will change. Our population will include more and more sixty-four year old people. At the same time, the number of people between fifty and sixty-four year old will decrease. Demographic problems cause increase in the number of older people, digitization of information and the dynamic development of indirect communication and enforces European space to take some actions in creating various types of initiatives. Their goal is to educate

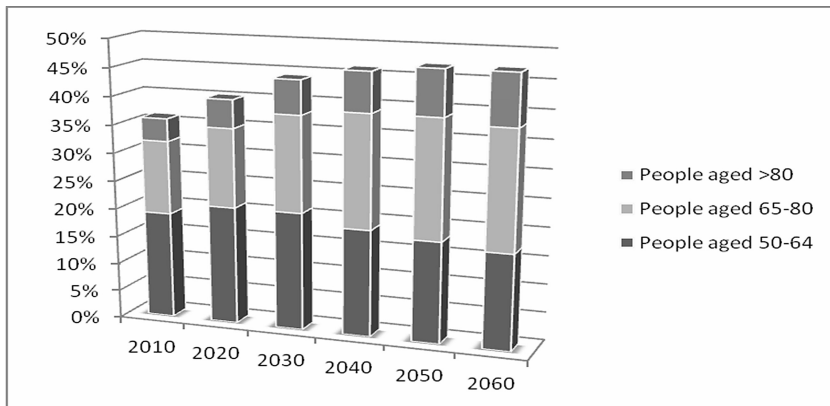


Fig. 1. The projected structure of the older population in the European Union divided into age group (% of total population) [2]

people between sixty and eighty year old, so that they will familiarize with changing conditions of human functioning as an individual in the society.

2 The Role of the European Union in the Education of Seniors

According to the Recommendations of the European Commission of 11th July 2011 [3] on initiatives in the field of joint research programming, EU countries should focus their efforts on fostering elderly people to be active in every field of social life, both at the regional and local level. Simultaneously, LifeLong Learning Program (LLL), which corresponds to the concept of learning throughout life is the result of the European Parliament and the Council's activities in year 2006, related to education and science development in years 2007–2013. Until now, 31 countries belonging to the EU, EFTA and EEA took part in this program [4].

The European Union supports the need for the use of modern information and communication technologies, which support older people. These technologies allow them to maintain social contacts, activity and independence. Since year 2008, the EU is also involved in the Modern technologies in Ambient Assisted Living project (Ambient Assisted Living, AAL), which the key objective was to introduce new solutions of information and communication technology (ICT) to facilitate the proper functioning of older people [5].

The positive impact of seniors education is confirmed by the results of Central Statistical Office in Warsaw [6]. It showed that elderly people, whose participate in UTA activities and have at least secondary education, are characterized by better mental and physical efficiency.

2.1 University of the Third Age as One of the EC Initiatives

One of the initiatives of elderly people education are Universities of the Third Age (UTA) created mainly at universities. UTA was created to:

- facilitate contacts with public institutions.
- promote educational initiatives.
- develop skills and knowledge.
- build and maintain social ties.
- improve interpersonal communication among seniors [7].

The number of functioning UTA in Poland until 2014 is shown in Fig. 2.

Currently, there are 187 Universities of the Third Age in Poland, including 145 of them in the Mazowieckie voivodship. In order to meet seniors' expectations and needs, UTA are intended to provide an adequate educational and activating program, which includes an auditorium, themed and open lectures, language courses, movement classes and computer courses.



Fig. 2. The number of Universities of the Third Age in year 2012 in Poland [8]

3 The Importance of Information Technology Among Seniors

Computer classes are very important in elderly people education, because we strive to a society based on knowledge and information. Teaching is also conditioned by an increasing access to the Internet, which gives not only the possibility of fast and efficient issues implementation, but it is also an opportunity for the development and

Table 1. The use of ICT in different age groups (%) [12]

Age group	Computer	Internet	Persons who do not use any technology	Persons using all new technologies
16–24	90.2	86.8	1.0	80.8
25–34	79.8	73.7	1.8	69
35–44	67.7	62	5.3	57.2
45–59	43.5	39.5	19.1	34.6
60–64	23.6	20.6	35.1	17.8
65 and more	7.5	5.8	66.2	4.6

active participation of older people in many areas of everyday life. Technology-assisted learning helps to develop interests and contributes to being creative and active in social life [9]. The possibility of using instant messaging or e-mail is also significant. Therefore, the Internet is an instrument of idea, which says that we should learn our whole life and which is a key factor in the implementation of the idea of creating a knowledge-based society [10] (Table 1).

Older people are usually learned how to use electronic and internet banking, Internet, how they can purchase through the Internet or use Internet communicators [11]. Older people, as a result of attending computer classes at UTA:

- develop basic skills in computer usage,
- use Internet sources of information and communication,
- improve their live by making online payment,
- deepen social relations.

The survey conducted in year 2009 showed that with age increase the number of people using computers and Internet significantly decreases. Young people and those under 45 years most frequently use new technologies. Every fifth person between 60 and 64 years use computer and Internet. The oldest part of the population (over 65 years) constitutes the smaller group participating in the computerized space.

This low participation of senior citizens in the use of modern technologies is mainly connected with emotional, psychical and material concerns. Therefore, seniors most often attend computer classes to expand their knowledge in the field of Information Technology, to maintain intellectual ability and to keep in contact with people from the same age group, what strongly emphasizes the importance of digital education for this social group [13–15].

3.1 University of the Third Age at the Technical University of Czestochowa

University of the Third Age at the Technical University of Czestochowa was created in year 2004. Currently, 800 people study there. Every year, the number of seniors on the UTA at the Technical University of Czestochowa is steadily increasing, what causes the demand exceeds supply (Fig. 3.) and forces organizers to restrict the number of

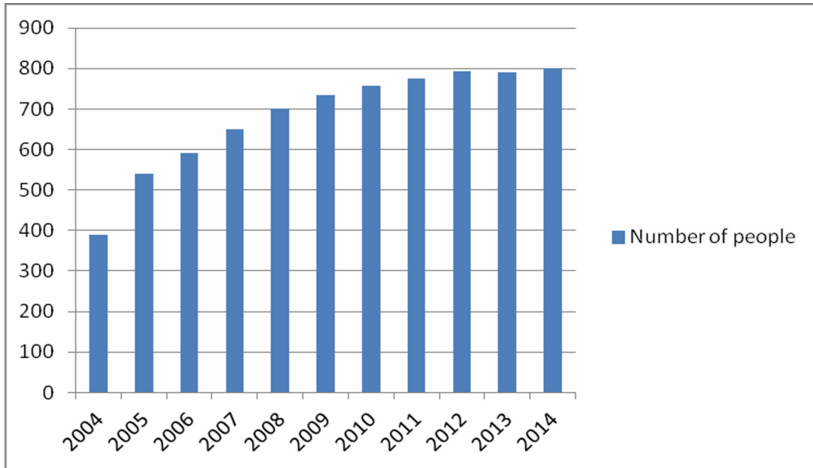


Fig. 3. The number of older people participating in UTA classes in the past few years

participants, especially in the area of subjects and issues related to IT, because the number of computer labs and instructors is limited.

The studies conducted among the participants of these courses showed that the need to use ICT (Information Communication Technology) results from current needs of 65+ generation. The most common needs are: access to current information, especially information regarding the symptoms of diseases, ways and methods of prevention as well as information about available medicines and their prices. The next group of needs is communications (textual communications, emails “adu-Gadu” or video messenger such as Skype). What is interesting, conducted study shows that textual communicators are used mainly in order to exchange information with local government units, or to make an appointment in the medical health center. In contrast, in Poland video messengers such as Skype are mainly used for contacts with family.

Students at the University of the Third Age emphasize that it is mainly concerned with children and closer relatives living outside the place of residence of the contact person. Video conversation gives a semblance of real direct contact. Interestingly, respondents drew attention to the fact that during video conversation you can see the room where the caller is located and other people being in the room. Respondents argue that it allows them to assess caller’s health status, mood or overall situation.

The third group using ITC is interested in organizing photos and documents, creating archives in electronic form, making presentations or modifying pictures and photos in order to print them. In addition, in this group, abilities to modify pictures and texts are used to create Christmas or note cards.

The study shows that there are three dominant groups but the Third Age University students want to be able to move freely in the areas of these three groups and do not reject decisively any of the group mentioned above. In addition, they claim (students 65+) that skills obtained in these three areas cause that they do not feel like socially rejected people.

The curriculum of the University is planned for the whole academic year and includes language classes, hobby classes, physical activities, but primarily classes which concern basic knowledge connected with computer usage and classes for advanced student. During the whole academic year, University also offers about thirty obligatory thematic lectures.

4 Summary

Economic and technology transformations resulting from rapid development of innovative technologies and globalization of market processes enforce process of continuous education [16] also in the case of older people. Development of ICT disrupts older people's lives. They need specific support in this increasingly mechanized environment, because otherwise they are cursed with marginalization.

Providing continuous education for older people, among others, through the creation of the Third Age Universities can improve their life's quality, support the process of social integration and thus facilitate an active participation in social life. In addition, from the perspective of people studying at the UTA, additional computer classes provide them greater security and independence of functioning in today's society, influence their personal development and stimulate creativity.

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