

REVIEW OF THE RECOMMENDATION LETTER FOR SLOVENIA

Rewiew of the project *Old Guys Say Yes to Community*

Review by dr. Zoran Jelenc

Several years ago, an ambitious group of researchers of the Department of Educational Sciences at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, started research into the activities of men aged 60 years and more, with the project OMAL (*Older Men as Active Learners in Community*, Grundtvig Learning Partnership in EU LLL Program, 2012-2014). The starting point of the investigation was the current life situation, which is significantly determined by the older population and 'longevity society' and which brings up many challenges, such as quality of life, financial security, social inclusion, availability and accessibility of social care and medical treatment for older people. At the same time, it also presents questions regarding the possibilities of keeping older people involved as active and equal members of society who can contribute to the development and empower the social and cultural wealth of the community. With the strategic partnership Erasmus+ project *Old Guys Say Yes to Community* they upgraded earlier findings and deepened the understandings about the researched issue.

Ageing of the European population is one of the biggest economic and societal challenges of the future. Europe is extremely conscious of that challenge and the consequences of these demographic changes; in Slovenia we are principally conscious about it, too. Among the aims of the Lisbon strategy up to 2010, there are also: increased activity of the older people, prolongation by up to 5 years of employment of 55 to 64-year-old inhabitants, later withdrawal from the labour market. Adaptation of the working environment and working conditions is important, too. EU states are asked to prepare national strategies of active ageing, taking into account demographic changes and measures accepted for increasing the employment of older people and later exit from working life.

Besides looking after the possibilities of prolongation of the employment of older people, the other possibilities must be seen after for preserving individual's own activity after the retirement. "Older people are not necessarily (and not only) retired, lower producers or non-producers and passive recipients of various forms of aid and support from the state. Such stereotyped views on ageing and older people can be alarming, since older people must not become invisible, mute, and non-existent overnight with retirement" (Krajnc, 2016). On the contrary (dr. Marta Gregorčič by some cited references in the recommendation Letter): "learning, connectivity with social surroundings, social inclusion and participation are widely recognised as central to mental health, emotional wealth, cognitive, social and human capital, as well as to better quality of life, positive self-esteem and confidence, values and attitudes, etc."

Learning – and education as the way of its realisation – is among the most important factors which decidedly help elevate the quality of living. They have plenty of positive effects, such as: feeling of utility; better understanding of oneself and others; they can increase self-confidence, self-affirmation, make oneself happy; self-dependence and independence; gives possibilities for new social networks (learning from each other, communication, saving intergenerational connections and relations, learning from the thinking of others, in the family as well as from grandchildren and the environment, new acquaintanceships, entertainment); strengthen health and good feeling; enable earnings; encourage creativity, mental activity, broadens the horizon of knowledge, upgrade what the person already knows

about living; enable realisation of past motives and new activities for which person did not have enough time in past; renew and upgrade knowledge; maintain brain activity and curiosity. As obstacles to participation in education older people adduce (in the research 'Odrasli prebivalci Slovenije v izobraževanju' – 'Adults in Slovenia in Education', Jelenc Z. 1987): shortage of time (family obligations, work); health problems, lack of self-confidence; the main obstacle for older participants (would-be learners) is their feeling that they are too old.

The promise for education as a factor of the cited improved living of older people should be the Strategy of Lifelong Learning in Slovenia (Strategija vseživljenjskosti učenja v Sloveniji), accepted by the Ministry of Education, Research and Sport in 2007, which claims on the political level that "lifelong learning should be the master plan of all education and learning and the fundamental socio-developmental strategy".

In the research 'Old Guys Say Yes to Community', implemented in four countries (besides Slovenia, the partners were Poland, Estonia and Portugal), the views of men aged 60 years or more in several local communities were obtained by selected methods (interview, focus groups); they were asked to give answers on: a) well-being and involvement in education and learning in their local environments; b) identification of the obstacles and opportunities for greater involvement of older adults in community activities and communities of practice. The intention was to prepare concrete recommendations for local community authorities and non-governmental organisations to empower older adults in their communities. This was the main subject and purpose of the Recommendation Letter for local community authorities in Slovenia prepared by the research group which is the subject of this review. The Recommendation Letter contains the results of the research, divided in four sectors: - the description of the socio-cultural and economic conditions in Slovenia; - the description of the researched communities: the background of strong and weak results/achievements; - the list of present and/or predictable problems elicited/evaluated from the research; and – the overall results of the interviews. In the final sector there are the general recommendations for local communities in Slovenia.

The research showed that men in the third and fourth life stage are self-marginalised and live their life with less quality than they could in the light of the variety of opportunities they have. (Recommendation Letter, p. 8). They have not been active and engaged in their community, although there were plenty of possibilities for learning and education and possibilities of free-time activities for older people. The number of men (60+) engaging in those activities and non-formal and incidental (informal) learning is significantly smaller than the number of women who do so.

The problems that prevent older men from engaging in local communities, the Slovenian University of the Third Age, and other non-formal or informal educational, learning, social and cultural activities were mainly the following (we will mention only the main items of the Recommendation Letter without details):

- erased past life history; - retirement as a break-even point or as the start of a new creative period;
- activities and lifestyle in the first two life stages determine activities and lifestyle in the third and fourth life stages; - lack of political participation as a consequence of individualisation and changed social situation; - for older men, "priceless women" and family are the most important pillars on which to base acceptance of their own process of ageing; - insufficient awareness of the fragility of social networks (friendships) in the third and fourth stages of life; - the role of community support in understanding the process of ageing; - satisfaction: their past life was in accordance with their expectations, but the future is not promising. Major difficulties and obstacles faced in everyday life are: loneliness; feeling

overburdened; lack of time, they don't know how to use it; resignation, reconciliation with their age; criticism concerning society and some other matters and their lifestyle as well; keeping quiet about their needs; disappointment over their health condition and the inability to do things that once made them happy; accessibility and appropriateness of infrastructure; accessibility to services and mobility; general lack of information about services and assistance for older adults as well as about activities, events, etc. for older adults; lack of non-commercial spaces in the community; the financial malnutrition of associations working with older adults and led mostly by older adults; a general concern for the future of the world and society illuminated from a variety of angles; men will not approach (new) activities without personal encouragement; men often do not know how to participate in an informal/non-formal environment where activities are led by women; fear of having to prove themselves (again) and/or having to admit that they no longer have their old roles; unsuitable existing activities; seniors' activities are taking place in age-segregated communities and not in the intergenerational community; they did not want to be in a subordinate position or in a position of ignorance, or to be taught; decided to withdraw from society for solitude, peace, and rest.

Based on the results of the investigation, the research authors give the following general recommendations for local communities in Slovenia:

1. Local and national authorities should support implementation of legislation based on national strategies and the preparation of action plans by different ministries.
2. Because retirement is a critical stage in life that older adults (and especially men) are not prepared for, programmes aiming to prepare older people for old age and give meaning to old age to those in the second stage of life should be implemented; young people should also be informed and educated about the process of ageing; the wider society (and not just older adults) should be encouraged to challenge the traditional and stereotypical views of old age and ageing.
3. Practices for a gradual transition to retirement should be developed; inclusive longevity society could be developed through practices of old-new career; at the national level, laws should be drawn up to institutionalise gradual/partial retirement practice; 'partnerships' with older adults should be financially supported.
4. Local communities should develop more democratic and participatory processes for the involvement of older adults in consultations and other practices that would enable them to contribute to the community.
5. Educational and other integration and intergenerational programmes and projects within the non-governmental sector which already create diverse opportunities for the active engagement of older adults should be financially supported and strengthened; it is necessary to connect, strengthen and upgrade local caretaking institutions and services.
6. Improve accessibility to quality services, develop adequate public infrastructure and mobility.
7. The invaluable contribution of older people as 'agents of progress' for the wider community should be recognised and rewarded in local communities; strategies should be prepared for transfer of knowledge, practices, skills, competences to the upcoming generation which does not (yet) possess these skills and competences, or the awareness of the importance of community service work and solidarity and the awareness of social welfare and community that the current generation of older adults built in their active working life.

8. Activities and services for older adults should be connected, coordinated and upgraded with the aim of better integration, cooperation and accessibility for all older adults; local authorities should ensure adequate facilities and co-financing of activities and services that are at present mainly dependent on bureaucratically demanding open calls and the market.

9. Attention should be paid to potential and pre-existing good practices in Slovenia and abroad.

We fully agree with these recommendations. For improving activities of integration of older people in the communities where they live and for the encouragement of their educational and learning activities links with nongovernmental and civil organisations should be established. The most important organisations in Slovenia for that are: the 'Association of Societies for Retired People' (Zveza društev upokojencev Slovenije) and the 'Slovenian Adult Education Association' (Andragoško društvo slovenije). The state and local community authorities in Slovenia should be acquainted with the results of the research project 'Old Guys Say Yes to Community' ('Vključevanje starejših moških v skupnost'), which already have been publicised – see

- Jelenc Krašovec, S., M. Radovan (ur.) (2014). Older Men Learning in the Community: European Snapshots. Ljubljana: Znanstvena založba Filozofske fakultete Univerze v Ljubljani; and

- Jelenc Krašovec, S., Š. Močilnikar, in M. Radovan (2016). Learning of Older Men in Voluntary Associations. International Scientific Researches Journal, 72(9), 39–51.

Dr. Zoran Jelenc