



Jana Šemberová

University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice, Czech Republic

Opportunities and perspectives of lifelong learning in older age

The results of the survey from the project eLearning in Later Life - eLiLL

Introduction

Europeans live longer than ever before, but do not know all that well yet, how to handle this fact. Even if some of them think that they find themselves on the threshold of the era of youth, they are really entering an era of old age.

The consequences of the demographic changes are changes in the structure of the households, the life cycle, also historical transformation of age and employment takes place. People experience a relatively new stage, referred to as “long third age”. In this stage they can realise their interests and hobbies, they can study, enter programs for „third-agers“, and join lifelong learning programs at universities.

Seniors in programs of lifelong learning

Lifelong learning includes all education realized in the course of an individual’s life-span, education lasting from an early childhood (formal education) up to education in tertiary sector. The universities play an irreplaceable role in it. They traditionally include education for seniors in their programs.

The scale of their educational activities for seniors is very broad, varied and internally differentiated. It involves compact educational programs, courses in the area of new technologies, language courses, activities supporting physical and mental fitness, programs developing self-organized learning at senior age and in international teams, but also “tried and tested“ and well attended lecture cycles in popular-science subjects and accompanying “leisure-time“ activities.

The Universities of the Third Age provide older adults with general, interest-oriented and non-vocational education. Methodology and didactics of education have a priority in their programs, as well as the selection of themes and types of courses, evaluation of educational activities, and in some cases also research and project activities. They go beyond the borders of the university and regions, and find partners at European universities.

Opportunities and perspectives of senior education

European dimension provides education with a wider perspective, opens skylines of global thought and intercultural understanding. The importance of lifelong learning is seen not only in acquiring further and new knowledge, but also in personal experiences, critical comparison, evaluation and a dialogue. Lifelong learning opens contacts, makes reciprocity and exchange possible, enables participation in international educational programs and grant activities, and this irrespective of age.

Reducing traditional age barriers and roles changes the view of maturity for systematic education. Centres, facilities or institutes of lifelong learning at universities and other places consider to which extent can the distant learning elements, new media and eLearning be included in the educational programs and subjects of the University of the Third Age and how active seniors can be engaged as “tutors“ for this type of education.

Results of the survey about practice in the use of ICT in seniors' education in Europe from the project eLiLL – eLearning in Later Life 2006 – 2008

Project partners in five European countries (Centre for General Scientific Continuing Education of Ulm University (ZAWiW) in Germany, UTA Summer University of Jyväskylä in Finland, South Bohemian University in Ceske Budejovice in Czech Republic, Department of Library and Information Science at Comenius University in Bratislava in Slovakia, Universidad Permanente at University of Alicante in Spain) have carried out a large survey about the use of the information and communication technologies in the education programs of 72 institutions of seniors' education in Europe. As a tool for obtaining data for the following content analysis they have designed a questionnaire and for the analysis of the examples of good praxis they have applied tests and evaluation techniques. The questionnaires were distributed to people in charge of seniors' education organisations. The results received from the educators from organisations based at universities (U3A and adult education organisations or with their cooperation) in the Czech Republic 32, Spain 17, Germany 9, Slovakia 9 and Finland 5 were presented in the conference "web4seniors", October 4-5, 2007 at Ulm University.

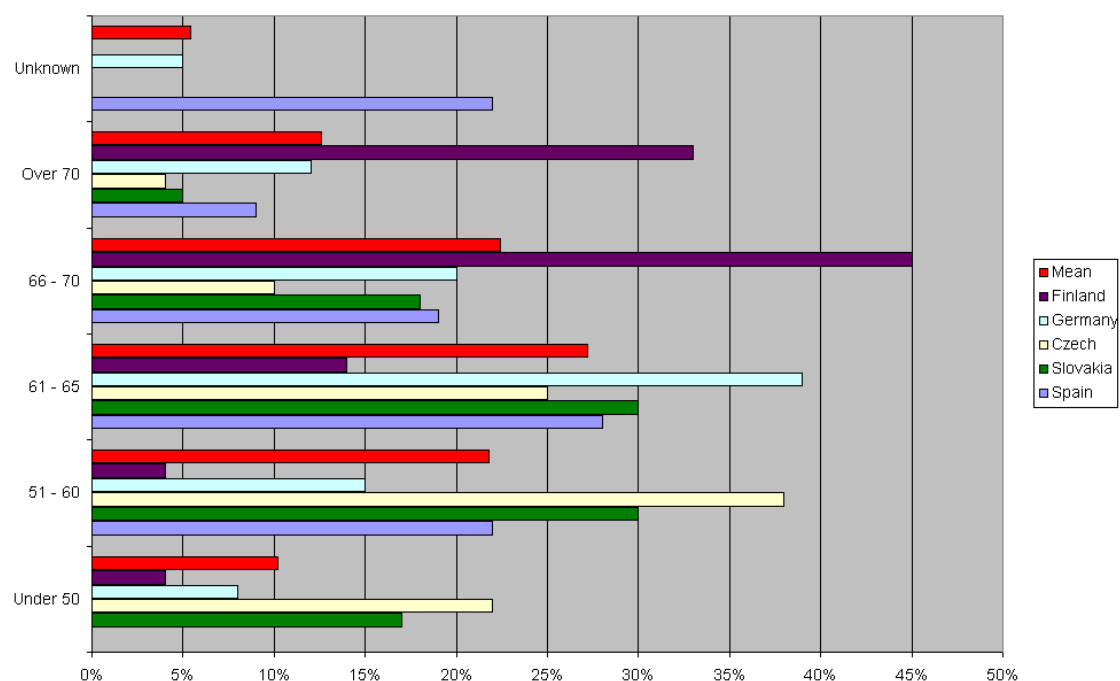
The following is a summary of the main results from the analysis of the data obtained from the questionnaire.

Target learner group in the survey

The seat of the national institutions in the individual countries, namely urban agglomerations with a higher number of population, shows ties with universities and organisations of higher education, and so indirectly specifies the learner types and the spectre of the education programs offered. The content of the offered education programs with the aid of ICT is varied and differentiated. In total 46.294 older participants make use of them.

Seniors' education is open, older people can join the offered activities irrespective of age. They have mainly secondary education, but there are also seniors with university as well as primary education. The table below shows the representation of seniors participating in education according to age.

Which age group do the participants mainly fit in?



	Spain	Slovakia	Czech	Germany	Finland	Mean
Under 50	0%	17%	22%	8%	4%	10,2%
51 - 60	22%	30%	38%	15%	4%	21,8%
61 - 65	28%	30%	25%	39%	14%	27,2%
66 - 70	19%	18%	10%	20%	45%	22,4%
Over 70	9%	5%	4%	12%	33%	12,6%
Unknown	22%	0%	0%	5%	0%	5,4%

Lifelong learning is open to a wide spectre of people who are interested in education. Each age group is represented and its expectations fulfilled. Traditional is the representation in the age group 61-65, noteworthy is the representation of “youngest” seniors. The generation 50+ that forms itself, brings new impulses into lifelong learning and points the direction to be taken in the future.

The ICT and especially the Internet in seniors' education

Apparent is strong representation of Internet application in the education of seniors, 74% asked organisations answered that they use it in their education activities, 25% that they do not use it.

Do you use the Internet in seniors' education at your institution? If “yes”, please specify the areas of use:

	UTA Spain	UTA Slovakia	UTA Czech	UTA Germany	UTA Finland	Mean
Courses on the Internet	65%	78%	66%	67%	40%	63.2%
Internet search	53%	22%	63%	44%	60%	48.4%
Platform for self- presentation	18%	22%	25%	44%	40%	29.8%
Online distant education	12%	0%	3%	11%	0%	5.2%
Blended learning	29%	0%	28%	22%	0%	15.8%
Internet for communication	35%	33%	19%	11%	0%	19.6%
Learning platforms - e.g. Moodle	12%	0%	3%	11%	0%	5.2%
Others	6%	11%	6%	11%	0%	6.8%

The U3As and institutions educating adult and older people dispose over standard or high standard technological equipment. However, the type of its use in seniors' education is not comparable. This is conditioned by various factors that are equivalent or similar in the individual countries and institutions. These are for example differences in the functional literacy of seniors (such as the abilities to participate in the world of information and to apply these in other new situations), or the more attractive educational programs offered in the area of humanities and natural and social sciences, where the utilisation of the Internet in education is not so frequent. If it is included in such course offers, then it addresses seniors with more advanced digital competences. The representation of seniors in the courses is shown in the diagram to question above.

For what do your seniors students use the new communication and information technologies?

	UTA Spain	UTA Slovakia	UTA Czech	UTA Germany	UTA Finland	mean
Creation of texts	41%	78%	78%	78%	80%	71%
Picture processing	12%	78%	69%	78%	20%	51%
Statistical data processing	0%	56%	44%	44%	40%	37%
Internet search	53%	89%	78%	89%	60%	74%
Internet-based-research	12%	11%	44%	67%	20%	31%
e- mail	47%	78%	75%	89%	60%	70%
Chat	24%	44%	44%	56%	20%	38%
Forums	24%	33%	34%	56%	0%	29%
Mailing lists	29%	33%	44%	67%	20%	39%
WebCam	0%	11%	38%	44%	0%	19%
Learning environments	12%	11%	25%	33%	0%	16%
Other	0%	11%	3%	22%	0%	7%



Seniors use the new technologies most frequently in the search for information in the Internet, in the creation of texts and image processing, for email communication, and also in work with data and their statistic evaluation. The already mentioned level of skills and competences make seniors' active participation in national and European programs and projects possible. They make only a limited use of web cameras and rare is also the use of ICT via learning platforms requiring advanced technical equipment in the institution and knowledge of the problematic.

The lack of financial resources in the tertiary sector, the high measure of dependence on financing through the state and low level of funding through private sources, limit the development in this sector. The low level of availability of up-to-date ICT (PC, Internet) equipment in the seniors' households, the lower level of digital competences of seniors, and not in the last place, also the unpreparedness of the tutors, pedagogists for the specifics of education of older adults with the aid of the ICT, hinder the seniors in participation in modern forms of lifelong learning to which they have a right.

The right to education belongs to one of the basic human rights, regardless of age. When it is really accessible also to older people, then the provision of this right to education by means of relevant funding and appropriate programs relating to all areas of education inclusive applies also to them.

Problems in the provision of ICT-based education programs to older people from the viewpoint of the providing institutions are addressed in the answers to question below.

Problems with using the ICT in the educational activities in seniors' education

Where do you find in your praxis in education for older adults problems with using the ICTs in the programs of your institution?¹

	UTA Spain	UTA Slovakia	UTA Czech	UTA Germany	UTA Finland	mean
lack of access to the Internet outside	1.0	3.2	1.5	1.1	5.0	2.4
inadequate technical infrastructure	4.3	3.0	2.1	1.3	5.0	3.2
insufficient technical support	3.7	2.5	2.1	1.6	5.0	3.0
inadequate information	2.0	2.0	1.9	1.9	5.0	2.6
inadequate financial resources	4.3	5.0	2.6	1.7	5.0	3.7
difficult to get qualified teaching staff	4.5	1.7	2.5	1.3	5.0	3.0
teachers' inner reluctances	2.0	1.0	2.1	1.1	5.0	2.2
language barriers	2.0	1.0	1.9	0.6	5.0	2.1
lack of appropriate teaching contents	4.0	1.0	2.0	1.2	5.0	2.6
lack of appropriate teaching methods	4.0	1.3	2.3	1.2	5.0	2.8
others	5.0	0	3.7	0	5.0	4.6

The providers of seniors' education see as main problems in the realisation of Internet and the latest ICT-supported education programs, courses and projects that are aimed specifically at seniors in inappropriate, respectively inadequate financial resources and subventions (mean 3,7), in inadequate technological infrastructure for the education of seniors (3,2), insufficient technical support (3,0) and also in difficulties in finding qualified pedagogists and tutors (3,0).

¹ The answers to this and the following questions were entered in the questionnaire on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 = less important and 5 = very important



Where in your praxis with education for older adults do you think lie the problems in ICT-supported learning activities for the older learner?

	UTA Spain	UTA Slovakia	UTA Czech	UTA Germany	UTA Finland	mean
no access to the Internet outside	4.0	3.2	3.8	2.6	3.7	3.4
lack of technical skills	4.5	3.6	3.5	3.2	3.3	3.6
inadequate information about the benefits	4.0	2.5	3.4	2.4	3.0	3.1
insufficient financial resources	4.0	4.1	3.3	2.1	3.0	3.3
learners' reluctances to technical issues	4.7	3.1	3.6	2.4	4.0	3.6
learning contents not interesting	4.5	1.7	2.5	1.7	2.5	2.6
drop out due to bad supervision	3.0	1.7	2.6	1.7	1.0	2.0
women give up	4.0	1.3	1.8	1.6	1.7	2.1
learners' language barriers	2.0	1.8	2.2	1.2	2.5	1.9
others	5.0	0	0	0	0	5.0

On the basis of experiences from the institutions and the testimony from direct educators of seniors it is evident that seniors are afraid of the new information and communication technologies and that small technical skills and insufficient motoric abilities present barriers in learning with the aid of the ICT (they often mention starting problems in working with the mouse). Seniors approach electronic forms of learning with apprehension (mean 3,6). Other problems indicated by the educators are the lack digital competences, technical prerequisites and skills (mean 3,6), limited access to the Internet (mean 3,4) and insufficient awareness and knowledge about the advantages and benefits that digital and information literacy will bring in their future life (mean 3,1). The further problems are limited financial investment into self-education in older age (mean 3,3). Content and less interesting forms of teaching are seen as further problems (mean 2,6).

Benefits with using the ICT in the educational activities in seniors' education

Where do you find in your praxis in education for older adults benefits in using the ICTs in the programs of your institution?

	UTA Spain	UTA Slovakia	UTA Czech	UTA Germany	UTA Finland	mean
testing and applying new concepts	4.0	2.7	4.1	2.1	0	3.2
improvement of quality of offered programs	4.0	3.8	4.2	1.9	0	3.5
widening of the educational offers	4.0	4.0	4.0	1.9	3.0	3.4
widening of the educational program	4.3	3.7	3.8	1.7	3.0	3.3
extension of information chain	4.3	4.3	3.2	1.8	4.0	3.5
widening of activity to other regions	4.0	3.5	3.3	1.4	5.0	3.5
internationalisation	5.5	3.7	2.5	1.6	5.0	3.4
finding new sponsors	4.0	2.0	1.6	0.8	0	2.1
improvement of an image	2.0	4.0	4.2	2.3	0	3.1
reaching new learners	5.0	4.0	3.9	2.2	0	3.8
reaching new teachers and experts	5.0	3.0	3.1	1.7	0	3.2
teaching independent on time	5.0	4.3	3.2	1.4	0	3.5
teaching independent on place	5.0	4.5	2.8	1.1	0	3.3
financial savings on infrastructure	0	3.0	2.2	1.1	0	2.1
others	5.0	4.0	0	0	0	4.5

The education of older people with the aid of the ICT is advantageous for seniors as well as the institutions. The main advantages of utilisation of the ICT seen by the institutions are in reaching new students and people interested in lifelong learning (mean 3,8), in the improvement of quality of the programs offered, in the extension of the information chain (mean 3,5) and the extension of the field of activities to other regions (mean 3,5). Teaching independent on time is considered also important (mean 3,5). The smallest benefits are seen in the area of realisation of the education programs with the aid of ICT in financial savings on infrastructure (rooms, etc.) in online courses (mean 2,1) and the search for sponsors (mean 2,1).

The education in the area of the new information and communication technologies demonstrably enriches people who are interested in educating themselves, also in older age.



In spite of the initial barriers and problems that they need to overcome, the benefits for the older people are significant.

What in your praxis with education for older adults do you think are the benefits of ICT supported learning activities for the older learner?

	UTA Spain	UTA Czech	UTA Slovakia	UTA Germany	UTA Finland	mean
opening of new fields of activity	4.9	4.6	4.5	2.9	5.0	4.4
improved accessibility for people with limited mobility	4.0	4.2	4.1	2.6	5.0	4.0
acquisition of media competence	4.7	3.8	4.2	2.9	0	3.9
communication with other ICT-interested persons	5.0	4.1	4.1	3.0	0	4.1
easier exchange with other people interested in a subject	4.5	4.1	3.8	3.0	4.0	3.9
improved understanding of the way of life of the younger generations	4.0	4.0	4.0	2.2	5.0	3.8
chance for intergenerational communication	4.0	4.0	3.9	1.9	0	3.4
learning independent on time	4.5	3.3	4.2	2.3	0	3.6
learning independent on place	4.5	3.3	4.2	2.6	0	3.6
reduction of inner reluctance against the new technologies	4.5	4.0	4.5	2.4	4.0	3.9
additional source of information	4.8	4.2	4.0	3.2	5.0	4.3
improvement of social co-determination	3.0	4.0	3.8	3.2	2.0	3.2
increased knowledge of and interest in other cultures and countries	4.5	3.7	2.8	2.8	2.0	3.2
increased interest in learning languages	2.0	3.4	3.2	1.3	0	2.5
other	5.0	0	0	0	0	5.0

The results of the survey show what educators in the field of education of seniors consider as beneficial for seniors. This is in the first place that ICT in education provide older people with an opportunity for discovering new and further fields of activities (mean 4.4), that they widen their information sources (mean 4,3), make communication with other people with a common and specific interest in ICT possible (mean 4,1), that they improve access to education programs for people with health difficulties (mean 4,0) and limit their fears of the new technologies (mean 3,9).

Conclusion

The modern information and communication technologies are an important tool for the support of quality in education. They offer opportunities for the improvement of content of education programs, methods of education and the improvement of accessibility of lifelong learning also to seniors. The requirements on quality and content of education and the corresponding requirements on the profiling of pedagogical workers, didactical approaches, appropriate methods and reinforcement of interest of younger specialists in the work with seniors, indicate the direction in the education of adults. Together with financial sources and mechanisms that make the institutions into essential providers of education in the regions, they enable entry to lifelong learning for active seniors.

The vision for lifelong learning is the provision of the possibility to all population groups to gain in the course of their life competences needed for personal realisation in professional, civic and also personal life.