

TEORIA I PRAKTYKA ANDRAGOGICZNA ZA GRANICĄ

Kateřina Krupková

ORCID 0000-0002-9002-2777

Václav Bělık

ORCID 0000-0001-6717-0213

Barbora Nováková

SENIOR EDUCATION AS A FORM OF PREVENTION FROM SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Keywords: seniors; senior education; Covid-19 influence; social exclusion; third age universities.

Summary: The article emphasizes the importance of senior education being a form of prevention from social exclusion. The first part is dedicated to basic terminology and the opportunities in senior education within the Czech Republic are also being defined. Particular attention is devoted to the risks associated with the period of the Covid-19 pandemic when the risk of social exclusion increased due to the impossibility of interaction with others, so the seniors often became a neglected group in social isolation.

Introduction

The seniors represent a specific part of population which may seem to be neglected in relation to education. Not only this target group and its characteristics are being described below, but also the opportunities in adult education which are available for Czech seniors. The seniors may find themselves in situations, in which they suffer from the feelings of loneliness, they live alone, not all of them have positive family relationships, or even opportunities to see their children, grandchildren etc. These are the most common reasons for social exclusion, although

there are many more, as for example health condition, lack of services, immobility, and others. This article, therefore, focuses on education as a form of prevention from social exclusion. Furthermore, the seniors search for educational activities due to social contact with like-minded people etc. Unfortunately, during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic various unpleasant complications arose, and the risk of social exclusion increased. The conclusion of this article provides information about the survey conducted among the students studying at the University of the Third Age (abbr. U3A, in Czech abbr. U3V) in Hradec Králové, which helped to become aware of thematic preferences of seniors as well as reasons for further study. The main benefit is the social contact and maintaining relationships with others.

Seniors as a subject of education

At first, the key terms should be explained. Education (learning) develops intellectual character. It may be described as the process of personality development focusing on acquiring knowledge, learning skills, and forming habits. Průcha, Janík and Rabušicová (2019) remark that education is not limited only to the stage of childhood and youth. Education is understood to be a lifetime process nowadays. Průcha (2017) points out that learning is referred to as 'education' in professional terminology. He characterizes 'education' as a process of guided learning which generally takes place in school or another educational surroundings. Mužík (2004, p.13) defines 'education' as *'a process in which, through teaching, a person acquires a set of knowledge and activities, which are being transformed into knowledge, skills and habits through internal processing (especially interiorization) – learning'*. Sak and Kolesárová (2012) mention that education takes a person to a higher intellectual level, changes their personality, improves their lifestyle, and helps them to create new social contacts. Matýsková (2004) confirms that senior motivation for education is the expansion of knowledge, the need for selfrealization and spending the time meaningfully.

According to Průcha, Janík and Rabušicová (2019, p. 743) a number of fields of study and scientific disciplines are concerned with aging. One of them is gerontopedagogy (a scientific discipline dealing with the seniors). *'Gerontopedagogy can be understood as a multidisciplinary discipline in which knowledge is intertwined, mainly from pedagogy, andragogy, social work, social policy, medicine, psychology, sociology, law, etc.'* Gerontopedagogy is a part of gerontology, which is a general science of aging. It was defined as a sub-discipline in the second half of the 20th century. Unlike gerontology, which deals with the issue of aging and old age from the perspective of exact natural science disciplines, gerontopedagogy is conceived as human and social science.

Rabušicová and Rabušic (2008, p. 267, 275, 277) state that educational activation is important for active aging, as self-education is necessary not only for the seniors in this dynamically changing society. But unfortunately, the participation rate in education declines with age. However, it is well known that

people with higher education more often participate in educational activities in old age, and therefore it is important to motivate them to learn.

The issue of old age and aging is becoming increasingly visible nowadays (Tomczyk, 2015). The seniors are a specific group but with their important place in adult education. According to Příbyl (2015), aging is a complex, irreversible and dynamic process that affects all living organisms continuously from conception by involuntal changes and is influenced by a number of factors (e.g., genetic makeup, physical diseases, financial security, family background etc.). The specifics of the seniors should also be reflected in the educational offer designed for them.

For the seniors, tertiary education provides an opportunity to stimulate and maintain a person's developmental potential. Furthermore, it is a source of a sense of life optimism, meaningfulness of life, it can lead to a higher quality of life and its enrichment, preservation of intellectual powers, but it also benefits the seniors in relation to society (e.g., as an integrating element of intergenerational understanding) (cf. Benešová, 2014; Ondráková et al. 2012).

A lot of foreign literature and research can be found on the topic of educational and teaching needs. E.g. Kramkowska, Danilewicz, Prymak and Constancio (2019) also point out that education the elderly is a challenge and explore the fulfillment of the needs of this age group helps to improve their quality of life, leads to a sense of life satisfaction and self-realization, and at the same time gives younger generations the opportunity to benefit from the experience of older people.

In the Czech environment, the seniors can participate in regular educational activities intended for the general public, but also in activities specifically aimed at them, which should respect the specifics and methodological principles of their education. Self-education (e.g., reading professional literature) is also one of the forms of education that represents an additional learning opportunity for the seniors (Špatenková, Smékalová, 2015).

We can also find a number of institutions which provide the educational offer to the seniors. According to Suchá (2019), these include universities of the third age, academies of the third age, universities of free time, experimental universities for grandparents and grandchildren, a virtual university of the third age, senior clubs, the senior summer school, activation programmes, or leisure activities in libraries.

For many seniors, beyond educational needs, social needs such as the need for social contact, acceptance and appreciation also play an important role (Matýsková, 2004, p. 113). If these needs are not met, the seniors may feel lonely and isolated, which is being discussed in the following text.

Social exclusion of the seniors

Social exclusion may be defined as a process in which individuals and even the entire groups of people are deprived of access to the resources necessary to participate in the activities of society as a whole (social, economic, and political activities) (Novotná 2016). The resources which are inaccessible to socially excluded

people include employment, housing, social protection, health care, and even education. The process of social exclusion always affects the whole of society, as it permanently undermines social cohesion (Čeledová, Kalvach, Čevela, 2016, p. 87). According to Růžička and Toušek (2014, p. 119), social exclusion is „*a concept that takes into account the relationality, processuality and multidimensionality of different forms of social inequalities and social disadvantage.*“ Haškovcová (2012) states that social exclusion is a reality or a threat to people of all ages. The issue of exclusion cannot be reduced only to certain subpopulations, but it is important to focus on both, the aging, and the elderly.

According to Mareš (2002, p. 15-16), we may distinguish the dimension in which social exclusion manifests itself. This refers to economic, cultural, and social, symbolic, political, and spatial exclusion, whereas the mentioned dimensions are interconnected.

With respect to their specifics, the seniors may suffer from their social exclusion in the economic dimension due to the lack of financial resources and low pensions. Sak and Kolesárová (2012) mention that the seniors are the group most affected by changes in economic processes in society. It affects them if rents and health care payments change. The economic situation of the seniors depends on several criteria: whether the senior lives in the household alone or with someone else, which city and type of apartment or house they live in, and last but not least, also their health condition, which affects subsequent medication and treatment. Diseases and drug need, low pension, high rent and living alone with only one income are the most risk factors for the poor economic situation of the seniors.

In the cultural and social dimension, their exclusion may be understood not only because of poor accessibility, but also for economic reasons, as they may not have enough money to commute and attend various educational and cultural events. Janiš and Skopalová (2016) mention that the seniors may face a reduction in their financial funds due to the fact that their retirement pension is lower than the income they were used to get from jobs. Their financial options become limited, and they may not have sufficient funds for leisure activities. Hošek (2013) also points out that the seniors are worried about their finances and the fact that they will not be able to cover their living expenses due to the lack of finances. These concerns may lead to subsequent passivity, pessimism, and reduced quality of life. This resignation and passive lifestyle result in non-participation in educational and leisure activities.

The population of seniors will find it much easier to cope with social exclusion than the working-age population, as many of them no longer have regular reasons to leave their homes. As Haškovcová (2012) states, social exclusion may be caused by loss of contact with people of the same age, but also with representatives of younger age groups. The loss of social contacts is usually a consequence of living alone. On the other hand, the seniors living in retirement homes may have symptoms of closed community syndrome. Mareš (2002) states that exclusion of seniors is not only caused by external circumstances, but also by their internal

psychological state, as they may lose interest in socializing with people of the same age. Sak and Saková (2007, p. 273–274) remark that one of the main person's needs is to gather, communicate, and interact with others. Although, this need may not be always satisfied. The reasons may vary, e.g., some disease, or limited use of IT technologies which greatly affect the form of communication nowadays. The oldest part of the Czech population is considered to be the loneliest group.

According to Čeledová, Kalvach and Čevely (2016), the ability and motivation to give an attractive and socially positive meaning to one's old age weakens in old age. The existentiality of an individual's life can be critically affected by various circumstances in old age. These circumstances include, for example, the above-mentioned social exclusion, loss of participation, absence of a sense of usefulness, loneliness due to limited social contacts, inability to be self-sufficient, or the inability to participate in certain activities due to health problems and loss of strength. Other circumstances include loss of autonomy, control over events, level of standard of living, sense of dignity, loss of loved ones, disharmony in the family, loss of self-esteem, continuity of life story, inappropriate treatment, and last but not least, there may be a complete resignation, loss of meaning of life, leading to extreme self-neglect.

The seniors are at risk in their access to participate in society. Reasons for this include poor health, low income, level of education, poor access to transport or services, age discrimination or social stereotypes in old age. Despite the fact that the active participation of the seniors in social life has many advantages, such as the potential for lifelong experience and knowledge of seniors, building respect and esteem, strengthening social cohesion, etc. The persistent negative attitudes of society towards aging, the presentation of aging not only in the context of increasing expenditures on health or social care and the pension system, must be minimised. (Čeledová, Kalvach, Čevela, p. 103).

For today's seniors, the use of online technologies brings a number of challenges and opportunities. The ability to use the Internet is considered essential because it helps to prevent social exclusion (Young-Min, 2008), which has gained importance in the period of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Situation of the seniors during the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly limited or even prevented full-time education for the seniors at universities and academies of the third age, or in libraries and senior centres/clubs. While the education for pupils and students was quickly transferred to online space via modern technologies, this form was more complicated for the seniors. Even though some institutions were able to provide materials for online self-study, some seniors were not reached by them due to the absence of internet connection (Hamberger, 2021, online). According to the Czech Statistical Office only 40% of seniors use the internet. The seniors even lost the option to meet the people of their age (Czech Statistical Office, 2020, online).

Many universities of the third age had to stop their educational programmes completely. However, e.g., Masaryk University in Brno offered distance education for the seniors. The University of Hradec Králové (hereinafter referred to as the UHK) was one of those that stopped regular courses and programmes for participants of the University of the Third Age (hereinafter referred to as the U3V), but also took advantage of the online environment in which it implemented lecture cycles. First, informal meetings were held for the seniors with the coordinator, who introduced them the Microsoft Teams environment and made them familiar with it and presented them the intended course of lectures. It turned out that for many seniors, at least this possibility of virtual meeting was an escape from everyday worries and a means of social contact. However, the U3V UHK started to run its regular programme again only after the situation had improved. As soon as the situation allowed, the seniors overwhelmingly preferred the educational offer, which took place on the premises of the UHK. Although the programme was supplemented by online lectures with the prospect that even those seniors who have some health limitations, are immobile, etc., will have the opportunity to participate in the educational process, only a fraction of the audience showed interest. For the seniors, real meetings are much more favourable, as they bring the possibility of better social interaction, eliminate the risk of communication noise, and do not require computer literacy, which, however, is increasing year by year among the seniors.

The role of the U3V UHK in senior education

In spring of 2022, we managed to carry out a research survey. The aim of the survey was to find out the motivation and reasons why seniors participate in the U3V program. Research questions were therefore defined as follows. The main research question is: *What is the main reason why seniors participate in the U3V program?* The sub-research questions are as follows:

- Is prevention of social exclusion one of the main reasons?
- On what basis do seniors decide on their participation in the U3V program?
- What are the benefits of participating in U3V program?
- How do seniors evaluate educational opportunities during the Covid-19 pandemic?

The research was conducted using a questionnaire survey among seniors who are active participants in the U3V program. The questionnaire had a printed form. The questionnaires were distributed with the help of teachers, who presented them to the students during the teaching days.

115 women and 21 men at the age of 62–86 participated in the survey. 50.7% of them live in Hradec Králové. The questioned seniors showed the main interest in lecture cycles (53.7%), and they were least interested in online lectures (1.5 %). Seniors most often learn about U3V opportunities via their relatives and friends (47.8%), followed by the internet (43.4%).

The questioned seniors marked „interesting themes“ as the most important factor while **deciding** about participating in educational programme. The second most important is meeting their acquaintances which reflects social contacts being one of the key factors of attending the U3V. Some seniors even see the U3V more as a meeting place than a place to acquire new knowledge. They often associate their lectures at the U3V with coffee and a pleasant sit-down with other students. For many of them it is a specific ritual.

Among the **topics** that the seniors are interested in, history is the most interesting one (82.4%, 112 respondents), followed by culture as the second most interesting topic (69.1%, 94 respondents), followed by geography (43.4%, 59 respondents), psychology (36.8%, 50 respondents), and 24.3% (33) of respondents chose topics such as healthy lifestyle and art themes. Foreign languages were found interesting by 22.8% (31) of respondents, 19.9% (27) of respondents chose personal development as a great topic for them (preventive programmes, healthy aging), 16.9% (23) of respondents chose physical activities, 14.7% (20) of respondents were interested in medicine, and natural sciences were interesting for 13.2% (18) of respondents, computer skills, information and communication technologies are found attractive by 11.8% (16) of respondents, 9.6% (13) respondents were interested in the topics of social science and art techniques, 5.1% (7) of respondents were interested in topics such as economics and ecology. The option „other“ revealed that 3 respondents would be interested in opera, literature and sewing.

One of the questions in the survey was ‘*Why do you attend the University of the Third Age in Hradec Králové and what are the benefits for you?*’ Most respondents (88.2%, 120) answered that they see the benefit in acquiring new knowledge and information, for 54.4% (74) of respondents it was the social contact with other people, 51.5% (70) of respondents see the benefit in improving their memory, for 50% (68) of respondents it is beneficial to have a status of ‘an active retiree’, 45.6% (62) of respondents understand studying at the U3V as a leisure activity, for 22.8% (31) of respondents it is a form of self-realisation, 18.4% (25) of respondents want to improve their self-esteem, 16.2% (22) of respondents want to ‘Keep up with the times’, 15.4% (21) of respondents see an opportunity how to meet new people, 10.3% (14) of respondents feel the positive effect on their physical condition, 8.1% (11) of respondents understand that they may renew their professional qualification, and only 5.9% (8) of respondents attend the university because they want to feel useful. ‘Other options’ were not chosen.

The questionnaire also focused on the senior education during the pandemic, with the question, ‘*Do you feel that **the covid-19 pandemic** has made your education at the University of the Third Age UHK **impossible or difficult?***’ For most respondents the pandemic was a barrier to study at the University of the Third Age. More than half of the respondents (52.9%, 72) report that the Covid-19 pandemic has made it more difficult for them to study, and another 34.6% (47)

of respondents feel that it has made it rather impossible for them to study. 9.6% (13) of the respondents rather do not think that the pandemic has made it difficult for them to study, and 2.9% (4) do not see the pandemic being a barrier to study. Most respondents agree that the Covid-19 pandemic made it more difficult for them to study. Due to this reason, online education at the U3V UHK was used only by 28.7% (39) of respondents and 71.3% (97) of respondents did not use this option of further study. The seniors also used other forms of education during the pandemic. 36% (49) of respondents did not use any other form of education. The others used the articles the most (67 respondents – 49.3%). 22.1% (30) of respondents watched educational videos, 12.5% (17) of respondents read posts on the websites of various educational institutions, 9.6% (13) of respondents attended online courses, or used the option to study at a virtual university of the third age. Apart from the given options, the respondents report books, the internet, Wikipedia, broadcast educational programmes as other means of studying. The option to read an article in e-magazine 'Povzbuzení' (Encouragement) was not used by any respondent.

Another question asked about the **availability of online education**, courses or lectures during the pandemic, where even 15.4% (21) of respondents answered that they were not interested in this information during the pandemic. Other respondents were not aware of this information, they did not find it, or online education was not suitable for them. 57.4% (78) of respondents (more than half of the respondents) found out about online education via the internet. 16.9% (23) of respondents noticed this information in the media (newspaper, TV, radio). For some respondents, acquaintances or relatives played a role, when 14.7% (20) of respondents received an email from their acquaintances and 10.3% (14) of respondents learned about it directly from them. 5.9% (8) of respondents received this information directly at the educational institution in the place where they live. The lowest number of respondents learned about various options of online education from the municipal/city office (4 respondents – 2.9%), or a leaflet (3 respondents – 2.2%). For some respondents, the U3V UHK played a key role as they received information directly from the school or received an email from the U3V. Nobody received this information either from the doctor or the social service provider.

The seniors also used other forms of studying **during the pandemic**. Most respondents read books, either their own, or books borrowed from the library. A significant number of respondents watched YouTube videos, ČT2 and ČT3 channels, or documentaries. Some respondents preferred newspaper, magazines (e.g., *Meduňka*), a smartphone, or virtual lecture organized by the Czech University of Life Sciences Prague.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, 43.4% (59) of respondents feel that there were limited options how to educate themselves. 36.8% (50) of respondents understand this situation being rather positive. 13.2% (18) of respondents have negative feelings about it, and only 6.6% (9) of respondents feel positive.

However, when the question “*What did you miss during the Covid-19 pandemic with regard to educational offers?*” was asked, the vast majority (100 – 73.5%) answered that they especially missed the **social contact**, which is understandable as they needed to spend their time at home during the pandemic. 30.1% (41) of respondents think that the range of educational activities did not vary enough. 17.6% (24) of respondents lacked the information about education. 12.5% (17) of respondents did not miss anything. 2.2% (3) of respondents did not fully understand the information about education (e.g., the application forms). Two respondents mentioned that they missed all of the above mentioned, and one respondent mentioned the isolation.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to highlight the education of the seniors and its impact on the participation in social life and otherwise to focus on the possibility of social exclusion and the threats associated with this issue. The seniors are part of the group which is threatened with social exclusion. Exclusion is characterized as the exclusion of an individual or a group from participating in social life. The reasons for social exclusion are for example health condition, immobility, independent living without the possibility to meet the family, or people of their age, etc. Poor accessibility to social and cultural events may also be a problem.

Another task was to focus on the role of third age universities, which are designed for the senior education. Third age universities represent one of the ways how to prevent social exclusion. However, it must be point out that the Covid-19 pandemic has had an impact on the senior education and has therefore increased the risk of their social exclusion.

The survey conducted at the University of the Third Age in Hradec Králové revealed information collected from students concerning various areas related to lifelong learning within the University’s programmes. The obtained results are helpful to U3V program implementers in the creation of further educational offers for seniors. The survey shows that the most important factor for the seniors is the topic. The most popular are historical topics, followed by culturally oriented programmes and also geographical topics. At the same time, the survey examined the respondents’ reasons for further education and the benefits of it. Most of the interviewees find an advantage in acquiring new knowledge and information. The advantage in the form of the possibility of social contact with people of the same age takes the second place in the range, and a lot of seniors found the way how to improve their memory. One part of the survey also focused on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on education. More than half of the respondents indicated that the pandemic made education more demanding for them. It should be mentioned that a person is constantly learning and therefore education plays an important role at any age. The third age universities have many benefits for the seniors, whether it is acquiring new information or being in touch with people of the same age.

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EDUKACJA SENIORÓW JAKO ZAPOBIEGANIE WYKLUCZENIU SPOŁECZNEMU

Słowa kluczowe: seniorzy, edukacja seniorów, wpływ Covid-19, wykluczenie społeczne, uniwersytety trzeciego wieku.

Streszczenie: W artykule podkreślono znaczenie edukacji seniorów w zakresie przeciwdziałania ich wykluczeniu społecznemu. W pierwszej kolejności zdefiniowana jest podstawowa terminologia oraz możliwości kształcenia seniorów w Republice Czeskiej. Szczególną uwagę zwrócono na zagrożenia związane z okresem pandemii covid-19, kiedy istniało znacznie większe ryzyko wykluczenia społecznego ze względu na brak możliwości interakcji z innymi, kiedy to seniorzy byli często grupą zaniedbaną, znajdującą się w izolacji społecznej.

Dane do korespondencji:

Mgr. et Mgr. Kateřina Krupková

Institute of Social Studies

University of Hradec Králové, Faculty of Education

katerina.krupkova@uhk.cz

doc. PhDr. Václav Bělík, Ph.D.

Institute of Social Studies

University of Hradec Králové, Faculty of Education

vaclav.belik@uhk.cz

Bc. Barbora Nováková

Institute of Social Studies

University of Hradec Králové, Faculty of Education

barbora.novakova@uhk.cz