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# Polish phenomenon of Universities of the Third Age

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## Abstract

The text falls in line with the area of interests of social gerontology as it focuses on one of the adult education institutions, the University of the Third Age. The following issues are addressed: definition of U3A, genesis of the first U3A in the world, history of founding a Polish university for seniors and the role of professor Halina Szwarc, further development of the U3A movement in Poland, changes in Polish U3As brought about by the breakthrough year 1989, joining the European Union and technological progress. The issues addressed are complemented in the final section of the text with an overview of the present U3A movement, its characteristics, critical evaluation and discussion over its further development and innovative nature of educational activities for seniors, which are an integral part of the local and national senior policy.

## Introduction

The goal of the paper is to characterize the development of the Universities of the Third Age in Poland in the context of historical, political and social transformations. It presents the dynamics of the changes and outlines the contemporary role of the Polish U3As. Universities of the Third Age (*fr. Universités du Troisième Âge*) is a very important adult – senior in particular – education institutions in Poland. One can even say they are the “hallmark” of educationally active seniors. First of all, they fit

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the non-formal adult education model (some teaching methods used in U3As involve also some elements of informal education) where the development of knowledge and skills is accompanied by restoring or developing competencies and the learning adults are given the opportunity for comprehensive personal growth. Learning takes place in different locations and spaces, in a relaxed, friendly atmosphere and partnership relations. Students are motivated to get involved, which also encourages them to share the responsibility for the results with their educators. Such an approach may help to stay motivated and generate energy to continue the efforts. More and more often, U3As follow the modern trends in adult education like edutainment, using social media, learning platforms, and other media and education practices of the 21st century. They use mixed strategies of working with adult learners, applying different methods and forms of teaching to activate the senior community. U3As are involved in education, research, social and civil activities focused on improving the quality of life of people in their middle and late adulthood. They are committed to ensure professional preparation of their adult educators to work with senior students, leveraging studies and experiences of modern andragogy and gerontology. Conferences, seminars, trainings, projects, contests, national and international exchange of leaders, administrators and students of the U3As support the processes of developing knowledge and creativity. The activities of the U3As implement the idea of Lifelong Learning (LLL). The above examples do not exhaust the scope of challenges. At present, there are many new opportunities like an opening to the oldest persons and persons with disabilities, distant learning, e-medicine, robotics, the labor market for seniors, lifelong counseling and career planning, further activation and development of creativity among seniors. This would be a brief definition of the contemporary Polish Universities of the Third Age.

## **First University of the Third Age in the world**

The origins of the Universities of the Third Age date back to the 1970s. In 1972, first efforts to found the first institution of this type in the world began and it was launched in 1973, at the official inauguration of the academic year in the University of the Third Age in Toulouse. This event had been preceded by the emergence, in the second half of the 20th century (mainly in Europe), of numerous organizations focused on the advocacy of the rights of the older citizens. These organizations were founded as a response to the noticeable process of progressive aging of European societies. The most important ones were: International Association of Gerontology (IAG), European Federation of Older Persons (EURAG) and International Center of Social Gerontology (*Centre international de gérontologie sociale, CIGS*).

At the end of the 1960s, there were also many student movements demanding university reforms. In France, a bill was adopted which guaranteed the opportunity to learn at universities regardless of age. All these events, the large academic potential of

Toulouse university staff and personal engagement of many people, especially professor Pierre Vellas, created the climate to establish in 1973 the first university for older people, which was called the University of the Third Age (Szwarc, 1995; Konieczna-Woźniak, 2001, p. 40; Czerniawska, 1996, pp. 232-233; Szarota, 2010, pp. 145-146). The University's role was to create a new image of older people and influence public opinion by meeting the following goals:

1. Providing lifelong learning opportunities for older persons,
2. Education of students in the area of social gerontology,
3. Preparation of expert staff to work with seniors,
4. Conducting research into medical, legal and psycho-social problems of old people.

The founder of the first U3A, an international law professor Pierre Vellas published the book "Le troisième Souffle" in which he describes his own experiences related to the founding of the University: *The University began its, at first modest, activity without any gerontologist on board. About 40 people came for the first meeting. There was nice music in the room before the lecture. But the first session did not meet with particular interest. Only when young people joined the U3A and began to greet the seniors, guide them to their seats, provide information and assistance the initiative spread and older people felt more secure and confident... Older people are dynamic, cheerful, await every offer with excitement, they are grateful, zealous learners aware that they do not have much time left and, what is interesting, this last reason is a very strong motivator. They are also committed and turn out to be grateful students. For many of the students, U3A turns out to be not only an educational institution but also the institution of human solidarity* (Vellas, 1977, cited in Konieczna-Woźniak, 2001, pp. 41-42).

The supreme goal of creating a university for seniors was the intention to ensure they have the proper and rightful place in the national and global socio-political structures. These assumptions were to be implemented through scientific research and the practical implementation of the results. The creator of the idea and the first U3A also wanted to prevent loneliness of older people, to give them the motivation to live and be active, often as they struggle with different diseases and changes in the quality of their lives. Professor Pierre Vellas knew the problems but also the developmental potential of seniors because he spent much time with his parents and grandparents, and his own family was multigenerational.

The unique, original initiative of Pierre Vellas turned out to be very relevant because, after Toulouse, new U3As were founded in Europe and then all over the world. *Now, thousands of the universities (even if we count only the European ones) for older people provide education under different names, not necessarily referring to the third age (e.g. Seniorenuniversität), and evolve in various directions. Different countries set different requirements for new establishments. For example, in the Czech Republic, there are only over a dozen senior universities due to the very strict criteria regarding teaching staff in a university of the third age and curricula, which limit the number of the U3As only to those funded directly by the academic centers. In Hungary, in turn, there are no typical*

*Universities of the Third Age because the so-called open universities play that role* (Fabiś, Wawrzyniak, & Chabior, 2014, p. 191).

It is worth to point out that, apart from the Universities of the Third Age, there are many other (and sometimes older) educational institutions in the world, where seniors can learn. The British examples include The Open University, Institutes of Senior Education, Institutes of Continuing Education, Education Colleges, etc. In Germany, seniors study in Senior Academies or People's Universities and other, similar units. In Scandinavian countries, education offers targeted specifically to older people is also connected with adult education and university programs. In the United States, there are also different forms of education addressed specifically to seniors. A unique form of teaching during summer are courses in university campuses connected with leisure and travels (some Polish U3As also introduce the same practices). American universities open special programs for older citizens. There are many senior education institutions in the world and they function under different names but these which follow the programs similar to the ones realized in the Polish U3As are most often called: senior academies, intergenerational universities, universities of the third age and free time, universities for all, mid-life universities, universities without borders, universities (academies) of the noble age, open universities of the third age or profiled U3As (medical, artistic, biological, etc.) (Zych, 2001; Halicki, 2000; Konieczna-Woźniak, 2007).

## **Universities of the Third Age – historical overview**

The idea of opening the first University of the Third Age in Warsaw came as a result of scientific collaboration and relations of professor Halina Szwarc with professor Pierre Vellas. Halina Szwarc was a professor of medicine and gerontologist, an amazing person, charismatic and open to people and their concerns. As a very young woman she became a war conspirator and a soldier of the Polish Home Army, imprisoned and tortured by Gestapo, she was even sentenced to death. *“Since about 1974 she began to specialize in gerontology. She had always liked older patients. She organized the Institute of Gerontology with the Gerontological Rehabilitation Ward at the Centre for Postgraduate Medical Education in Warsaw. She found out how much one can help the elderly if working in a team consisting of medical doctors, psychologists, sociologists, and physical culture specialists. By the end of the 1970s, she was a renowned gerontologist. Amazing person. Amazing woman. National hero. Unquestioned authority and a very humble, direct, understanding and friendly person”* (Bielowska, 2015). During the hard 1970s, despite Poland being closed to cooperation with the Western European countries and the United States, she had already been recognized by the international gerontological organizations. Inspired by Pierre Vellas' idea presented during the gerontologist meeting on 2 April 1975, professor Szwarc decided to found a U3A. It was then named the Study of the Third Age by the Centre for Postgraduate Medical Education in Warsaw. The official inauguration of the first academic year in this in-

stitution took place on 12 November 1975 and it was the third institution of this type in the world. The interest among the seniors and attendance was great and during the first term in 1975 as much as 323 persons enrolled. This reflected the great need for this type of educational offer in Poland (Lubryczyńska, 2005).

The first activities in Study of the Third Age were interest clubs but due to the growing number of students, they were transformed into teams and sections. The first university for seniors set several goals.

*“Organizing the first U3A, we set the following goals:*

- 1) Include older people into the lifelong learning system,*
- 2) Intellectual, psychological and physical activation of the students,*
- 3) Development of teaching methods and implementation of gerontological prevention,*
- 4) Conducting scientific observations and research* (Szwarc, 1995; Informator Sekcji

UTW przy PTG, 1987; Pólturzycki 2014, p. 97). These goals were consistent with the objective of the French U3As. Apart from its didactic activities addressed to the students, the pioneer university engaged in cooperation with other educational institutions and its representatives supported the efforts of those who wanted to open similar centers in other regions of Poland. The idea of U3A began to spread all over the country. Already a year later, in 1976, the U3A in Wrocław was founded. Then, universities for seniors were established in Opole, Szczecin, Poznań, Gdańsk, and Łódź. The Warsaw U3A had become a think tank regarding the development of the idea of universities of the third age and the research into the education of older people. The U3A in Warsaw had contributed greatly to the further development of the U3As in Poland both, practically (the number of new units) and ideologically, especially regarding the research into learning in and for the old age (see Lubryczyńska, 2005; Konieczna-Woźniak, 2001). In 2003 the Warsaw U3A was named after Professor Halina Szwarc (who died in 2002).

Years 1975–1979 were the time of the intense growth of the U3A movement in the big academic centers in Poland. For several years after 1979, there were no new universities and then, in the 1980s, came another wave of new institutions.

The activity of the Polish U3As was based on French and Swiss patterns. Already during the first period of their functioning, the movement organizers and authorities of the 7 existing Polish universities noticed the necessity to establish a single organization to join their efforts. Its role was to coordinate the work at the national and international level. In 1980, during the second scientific conference and organizational meeting, the representatives of the Polish U3As submitted a motion to establish a University of the Third Age Section by the Polish Society of Gerontology (PTG, Polskie Towarzystwo Gerontologiczne). The request was supported during the annual general PTG meeting in Białystok in September 1981. The first president of the Polish U3A Section by PTG was professor Halina Szwarc and the section became part of the International Association of the Universities of the Third Age (L' Association Internationale des Universités du Troisième Âge – AIUTA). Professor Szwarc became a Board member and was actively involved in it for many years. Thanks to her efforts, the 1987 AIUTA

Congress was organized in Warsaw and its main focus was on education and health. Another Polish representative in the AIUTA Board was prof. Czerniawska from Łódź.

According to the Section, the primary goal of the universities of the third age is: *“to improve the quality of life of older people, providing conditions for good aging, breaking false stereotypes and images of older people as physically and mentally disabled. This goal was to be met by including seniors into the education system based on the intellectual, scientific and material potential of the universities”* (Informator Sekcji UTW przy PTG, 1986).

## **Universities of the Third Age against the backdrop of systemic changes**

As the years went by and new social, cultural or economic conditions emerged, the implementation of Pierre Vellas' idea had to be modified. Today we have the French U3A model which is based on the strong engagements of the academic centers in creating and managing such units, whereas in the British model self-assistance and independence of the students are the dominating features.

The 1989 breakthrough – the collapse of the communism and the beginning of systemic transformations – was also reflected in establishing new and reorganizing the existing U3As. Many of them initiated the process of transformations and began to strive for greater autonomy by establishing associations, which did not exclude continuous collaboration with the academic environment (based on separate agreements made). As a result of this reorganization, some U3As became NGOs, associations with legal personality and own program within the set statutory role.

Thanks to the generosity of their students and other entities, some U3As set up foundations to support the activities of universities, individual needs of their students or certain environments, seniors in particular, in a poor financial condition.

Another change invoked opening next U3As thanks to the growing network of non-public and branches of the public universities. This way, the idea of the U3A reached smaller towns that decided to open U3As despite lacking an academic infrastructure and using the resources of their local institutions or certain individuals interested in collaboration. U3As were established by public libraries, culture centers, social assistance centers or lifelong education institutions (with about 30 by the end of 2000, the number of U3As grew up to about 130 during several following years). The number of U3As grew dynamically and in some of these institutions, the highest academic profile typical for the initial phase of their functioning changed. At the same time, it is worth to point out that the huge growth if the number of senior universities reflected the real needs of some members of the senior population.

The accession of Poland to the European Union in 2004 was also an important moment that influenced the functioning of the U3As. It meant new opportunities for international collaboration, attracting specific partners (foreign U3As) and exchange

of good practices. European funds obtained as project grants turned out to be an extremely important element of the functioning of these institutions. Since 2005 U3As could also take part in the contest to receive funds from the Polish-American Freedom Foundation (PAFF) which assigned significant amounts for the “Third Age Universities” program. The program manager was the Association of the Creative Initiatives “ę”<sup>3</sup>

An important step in the development of the U3Aa was also 2012, the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations in Poland. It initiated the first efforts to view the problems of older people from the perspective of the whole country. Two years later, the first nation-wide government’s 2014–2020 Programme for Participation of the Elderly in Society. It emphasized the role of the Polish U3As in activating the older generation. The programs that followed continued, complemented and expanded the first one<sup>4</sup>.

The 21st century has “rejuvenated” the U3As, attracting pensioners who have exercised the right to earlier retirement. Due to these changes, the offers of the existing and newly found U3As had to be verified, analyzed and modified. Education in the areas of a healthy lifestyle, globalization, the world of computers and all other media and electronic devices has become necessary to prepare seniors to navigate in the new reality. Foreign language classes (included in the curricula from the very beginning) had to be expanded and computer laboratories, courses, and training had to be redesigned to teach how to use electronic media.

From the very beginning, the U3As published various books, newsletters, guide-books, and special publications but this activity has expanded significantly. Many periodical magazines were launched as well as collective publications presenting the literary and artistic works of the students. With time, certain U3As have become the subjects of scientific monographs presenting the specific nature of these universities, their history, contributors, special events and chronicle records. Internet and social media are also used to promote the achievements of the students and the U3As.

The above-mentioned examples of changes are not exhaustive, however, they show the ongoing necessity to update and adapt the offer to the life situation of the older people and the reality.

The functioning of the Polish U3As has been based on the following principles: distinctness, autonomy, and self-governance. At the same time, they implement good practices of other partner institutions and, more and more often, adapt professional benchmark of operating and self-accreditation processes.

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3 In this section the author refers mostly to her previous text: Konieczna-Woźniak R., *Uniwersytet Trzeciego Wieku* – entry in *Encyklopedia Pedagogiczna XXI wieku*, tom VI, T. Pilch (ed.), Wydawnictwo Akademickie „Żak”, Warszawa 2007, p. 1091–1097.

4 In 2018 there was a program launched: Social Policy for Older People 2030. Safety. Participation. Solidarity. <https://www.gov.pl/web/rodzina/polityka-spoeczna-wobec-osob-starszych-2030-bezpieczenstwo-uczestnictwo-solidarnosc>

To summarize, U3As offer seniors the ways to spend their free time on learning, in an active and healthy way, in the company of their peers. As the scientific and research institutions, U3As diagnose the needs and expectations of their students, conduct research into the issues related to older people, organize conferences, congresses and seminars, and train staff to work with seniors. One can say that they try to implement the gerontology prevention program.

## **Polish U3As today – overview, critical view, discussion, and new solutions**

Polish universities for seniors are surely the most recognized space where older people can learn. Active seniors are often identified as U3A students, even though these individuals are active in many other areas and U3A is only one of them. However, we need to point out that despite growing popularity, participation in U3A offers is still an exclusive activity. It is worth to refer to several exemplary results of the research conducted by the Central Statistical Office in 2018.

At present (GUS, 2018), seven out of ten U3A students are 61–75 years old, only ten percent are older. Half of the students have secondary and more than one third – higher education. Eight out of ten students are already retired. Professionally active persons consist of barely 4.3% of the students. Others are pensioners. The unemployed are only individual cases. Other studies (Zoom na UTW, 2012; Fabiś & Łacina-Łannowski, 2013; GUS, 2015) prove that U3A students form a very feminized group as only 14–15% of them are men.

According to the data by the Central Statistical Office, in 2018 in Poland there were 640 Universities of the Third Age. More than half of them function within the NGO structure. However, says GUS, *“the universities which exist more than 20 years are only 4% of all the Universities of the Third Age. Most of the existing units (44%) were founded in the years 2006-2010. Until then, the number of U3As in Poland had been regularly growing. However, in recent years, this trend slowed down and in the years 2011-2015, there were only 145 new universities opened”* (GUS, 2015).

Only 21.5% of the U3As were part of the structure of a university and 17.7% were organized by culture centers. Others were managed by lifelong education centers, libraries, foundations and even units coordinated by city halls or municipalities.

The psycho-social development of the aging and old persons set as the goal of the U3As determines their main roles:

- educational – expand students’ knowledge in many areas, play an important role in gerontological prevention and stimulate activity
- psychotherapeutic – improve mental wellbeing, prevent isolation and pathologies resulting from loneliness and the sense of being useless
- integration – strengthen social interactions, promote self-help and initiation of new relations, facilitate contacts with both, peers and people from different generations (Konieczna, 2000, pp. 209–212).

Functions identified years ago are still relevant but it is also worth to add the contemporary ones as they reflect the cultural context of the second decade of the 21st century.

One such functions are the ludic role realized through: fun, recreation, leisure and other activities aimed at providing pleasure. The world of pop culture does not exclude older generations. Subjects like: fashion, food, new challenges, discovering the beauty of new places are included in the curricula of the modern U3As. These trends are confirmed by GUS surveys.

According to GUS data from 2018, the main educational activity performed at U3As were lectures – about 97% of the institutions regularly held lectures and seminars, most often weekly. Even though the data from 2015, from the analysis of 4 forms of activities: lectures and seminars, regular classes, cultural events, and social activity, prove that “the most often form were cultural events organized by 98.7% of the U3As. Engaging seniors in social activity and allowing them to make social interactions was connected mainly with the organization of special events, for example, Christmas Eve, New Year’s or St. Andrew’s Day party (88.1%). Trips and tourist events were also very popular (87.3% of the U3As). Trips to the cinema or theatre were almost as popular (79.7%). More than half of the respondents were engaged in the organization of field events (66.2%), dancing parties (54.1%) and shows of the dance or theatre sections – 51.9% (GUS, 2015). An additional offer is a wide range of courses and training. The most popular ones are computer and other related to the use of new technologies, and language lessons. The choices of the students confirm this tendency, as the vast majority focused their additional activities around the three areas: computer and language courses, and sport. Art-related activities: visual arts, dance, and crafts were also very popular. Seniors also willingly engage in tourism and recreation.

From the very beginning, women consist of the majority of the U3A students. In all the studied U3As in Poland, there were 113.2 thousand students, out of which 95.4 thousand were women.

The programs, forms of work, organization, and functioning – in other words, the shape of the university- are most often tailored to the environment and the organizational and didactic abilities of a certain unit.

The structure of the U3As is, in turn, very alike and standardized, especially in the case of the U3A associations. The highest authority is the Annual General Meeting which determines and adopts the directions of actions, yearly didactic and financial plans. The AGM resolutions are then implemented by the Board; there is also the Student Disciplinary Panel which investigates and decides the cases of breaking the provisions of the statute, rules, and resolutions by the U3A members and authorities and resolves disagreements regarding the U3A activity. The role of the Audit Committee is the overall control of the didactic and financial activity.

The U3A activity if financed by the U3As themselves (membership fees) and different supporting institutions. The money is also obtained from foundations, grants, projects and local governments.

The main teaching method used at Polish U3As are lectures which are held once or several times a week. With every year though, the offer of activities in different sections: thematic, artistic, sport, interest clubs, teams or language groups increases. There are also trips and more and more students participate in cultural events, artistic groups, holidays or special meetings.

U3As do not hold exams, there are no grades and diplomas, some universities issue documents to confirm the membership. However, more and more often, they recruit students. This results from the great interest in these institutions and their limited capacity to accept all candidates.

The history and the presence of the U3A is connected with change. Today this notion is very often fundamental in the descriptions of the postmodern reality. Change seems important for the evaluation of the functioning of the universities of the third age, which is confirmed in the constructive criticism and discussions over their further development. In the 21st century politicians, economists, adult educators, gerontologists, sociologists, psychologists, and other researchers, media representatives and, first of all, practitioners (as well as students) directly involved in the functioning of the U3As began to take interest in these institutions. Thus, some critical evaluation of the existing universities for seniors is inevitable (see Klimczuk, 2013) and it may provide grounds for further development of the idea of studying at U3As. As contemporary Polish U3As are criticized for abandoning the university traditions, mainly by separating themselves from the academic structures, then it needs to be highlighted that despite many U3As functioning in the structures of the state, local or NGO administration, the main idea of the U3A – regular academic lectures delivered by academic staff – has been kept. Second, P. Vellas postulated that students are to get involved in the organization and implementation of the activities addressed to seniors. Today, this task seems to be even more difficult than back then, however, it does not mean it should be ignored and engaging also middle-aged (e.g. early retired forty-year-olds) and even younger (e.g. the unemployed, on maternity leave) adults also seems worth considering. If U3As are to be more common – and their elite character is also a strong charge against them – then expansion outside the academic centers and beyond the “third age” seems to be even necessary to ensure the inclusion of seniors.

One can also consider the relevance of the names of the analyzed educational institutions. Even though the name “University of The Third Age” has become common, some countries use completely different terminology, for example, *Seniorenuniversität* (Germany, Switzerland). In Poland, there are also *universities of every age*, *senior academics*, etc. The name U3A is a reference to the idea by P. Vellas, focused on supporting individuals in their old age, which is a hallmark of the initiative gathering active seniors. It adds prestige to this group and successfully removes the negative age-related stereotypes. For the persons who have had no opportunity to develop themselves in the institutionalized forms of education the U3A offer is undoubtedly a chance for self-fulfillment and gaining higher self-esteem. The activity of these educational units

defends itself and the program determines the character of the chosen educational solutions. The division into the third and fourth age (plus students younger than 60) only means the need for a deeper diagnosis of the needs of all members of the U3A community, the diagnosis which would consider the oldest and the youngest. However, the division according to age and the place of U3A's activity and its affiliation, the name or assumed prestige related to the U3A tradition seem to be the secondary issues. Educational needs of students should be the point of reference in developing the U3A curricula and they should, at the same time, open the space for non-formal education activities. Thus, there are separate academic sections in the U3A structure for those who expect interactions with the people of science and participation in discussion groups or scientific research. But the activities outside the U3A buildings are also necessary as they represent education without a strict framework and professional assistance, activities focused on entertainment or physical wellbeing. Without a doubt, the U3As must and become institutions supported by modern technologies used both, as learning tools and the platform for integration, especially the intergenerational one.

The new approach to the U3As seems to be justified by the following, unquestionable facts: the role of the new information and communication technologies and new media has been growing – this refers particularly to the Internet which enables social integration of seniors, teleworking, e-volunteering and e-services. But in the highly developed countries, there are already programs like “from the Internet to robotics” which is also important for the quality of life of seniors, as emphasized in the UN policy as the concept of the “society for people in every age”. The new model of society and economy is built on creativity and wisdom, which generate changes in the required cultural competencies, strengthen the role of imagination, creativity, responsibility, and experience. These are the conditions where not only the paradigm of active but also creative aging is being developed (Klimczuk, 2013). This last argument, in particular, is supported by the concept of design thinking. The economic and political aspects of creative aging are very important in the dynamically aging societies but they are even more convincing when supported by the arguments posed by gerontologists and adult education experts. According to Marcin Muszyński whose opinion is formed on the grounds of critical gerontology, especially the conclusions of Marvin Formosa and theoretical concepts of Paul Freire and the Frankfurt School, “...many curricula do not refer at all to this postmodern vision of senior education, which should focus on redefining the identity in the old age and the ability to re-invent self. Postmodernism requires permanent self-actualization, an ongoing re-defining one's own existence. Such education should feature many teaching and learning styles. The goal is to meet diverse needs of learning seniors” (Muszyński, 2016, p. 91). The author emphasizes that the existing approach places older people as receivers whereas emancipating role (connected with the new approach) abandons the traditional vision of senior education where teachers share their knowledge and skills with the students. Older people are not only retired persons who deserve to rest, subject to negative stereotypes and released from their

activities and creativity. From the postmodern perspective, an old person is the author of their biography which they construct in the lifelong process (see also Dubas, 2008).

The widely understood and omnipresent change affects also older people and, consequently, the U3As (see Orzechowska, 2008). These and other institutions in our country have taken certain steps in recent years, which may prove they attempt to meet the new challenges. Some of these steps have been already briefly mentioned herein, some – selected – are listed below:

- In 2005 the Polish-American Freedom Foundation began to support financially the activities of the U3As which received grants for further development and employing the potential and creativity of seniors.

- In 2007, the Polish Federation of the University of The Third Age Associations was established. The Federation set the formal-legal and didactic-organizational U3A standards. It also entered into a collaboration with external entities and published (among others) the “Operating Standards of the Universities of The Third Age in Poland”, provides training, counseling and certification visits, grants “Professional U3A” certificates, organizes congresses, raises funds and participates in projects. It collaborates with the Polish U3As abroad and AIUTA.

- Announcing 2012 as the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations in Poland resulted in many further decisions. During the whole year, there were conferences and seminars held, focusing on seniors. The Foundation National Agreement of the Universities of the Third Age was established, which organizes U3A congresses, collaborates with different partners and participated in senior-dedicated projects. Also, the Senior Policy Council operating by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy was appointed.

- In 2015, the Civic Parliament of Seniors was formed on the initiative of the biggest and most representative senior environments, that is U3As (represented by the Foundation National Agreement of the Universities of the Third Age and the National Federation of U3A Associations), Polish Union of the Retired, Pensioners and People with Disabilities.

- For years the U3As have been lobbying different environments to join the efforts of activating seniors and promoting the senior policy. They work with different organizations in their local communities.

## **Characteristics of Polish U3As**

Finally, we should characterize the functioning of the Polish U3As. Diverse activities features, forms and solutions implemented in certain U3As excludes a single model which could be recognized as typical “Polish” one. However, we can list several characteristics which refer to the present U3A movement in Poland:

- Pluralism understood as diversity, multitude and the right to express individual beliefs. It refers mainly to the formal and organizational aspects of the functioning of

single units. Thus, we have the traditional entities established by the academic centers, which determine the ways of recruiting their students, employ lecturers with academic degrees and are founded by the authorities of the given university and supervised by its representative. On the other side, we have usually smaller units established at the initiative of the direct stakeholders, which use the existing infrastructure and function as part of local associations, culture centers or even fire stations. They are completely independent and rarely use the services of academic staff. They realize completely different curricula which usually are the results of the work of a special group of people selected for this purpose.

– Autonomy means that delegates and decisive bodies are free in their decisions and are selected on the self-rule basis.

– Elitism – a feature referring to the U3A students. Despite their availability and easy participation, the students are mainly more emancipated seniors who live in bigger cities or smaller towns, are better educated, better situated and read more than an average senior (Fabiś & Łacina-Łanowski, 2013). Even though the number of students grows with every year, 113 thousand participants in 2018 mean a small percentage of people aged 65 and more (the population of which amounts up to almost 7 million). The barriers may include the fees required by the organizers but also the proximity of the U3As from the place of living, though we cannot exclude psychological and cultural barriers either.

– Innovation, flexibility and openness characterize the U3A curricula. The organizers are open and whenever possible they reach proper didactic staff to meet the need of the students. Apart from the traditional lectures and language courses, the offers contain many original options.

– Openness to the present changes in the functioning of the U3As as well as changes that may come. Senior will change: the level of their formal education, their aspirations, expectations, and lifestyles. Activity, creativity, and entrepreneurship seem to be the characteristics which will require even greater involvement in the U3As, the involvement of their coordinators, boards, program committees, federations or associations, as well as the personal commitment of the students. The engaging nature of learning is an important feature in adult education in the 21st century.

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