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FINAL DESK RESEARCH REPORT FROM TWO NATIONAL DESK RESEARCHES IN ITALY AND POLAND



**WITHIN THE PROJECT: „GOLDEN
HORIZONS: NAVIGATING LIFELONG
LEARNING PATHWAYS FOR SENIORS”**

FREE PUBLICATION



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FINAL DESK RESEARCH REPORT

within the project „Golden Horizons: Navigating Lifelong Learning Pathways for Seniors”

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Introduction

The focus of the project “Golden Horizons: Navigating Lifelong Learning Pathways for Seniors” has been analyzing the educational needs, the current situation and the future perspectives related to lifelong learning of individuals aged 60+ in Italy and Europe in general.

The project involved two organisations working in the field of training in two different countries: Italy and Poland, with the aim of carrying out transnational research on the subject in order to obtain a general overview of the methods currently used and the prospects for training and guidance for an age group with particular vulnerabilities, often isolated from educational pathways. The research does not only focus on the specific situation in the two countries but also tries to make a comparison by including the analysis of good practices at European level, presenting a critical disquisition that can help to explore new ways forward.

The purpose of this specific report is the analysis of the social and educational situation of people over 60 years of age in Italy. Indeed, the older age group often remains isolated from initiatives related to training and guidance for different reasons: from the point of view of the individual users, there are difficulties related to age, level of education, family background and employment status, and often a sense of isolation from society and low motivation; from the point of view of training providers, both public and private, the focus is often on the 25 to 60 age group, which is still employable and for which the acquisition of qualifications can be dispensable on the labour market. However, this overlooks the fact that targeting training at a later age group can help older people to remain active, maintain their cognitive abilities and improve their quality of life. This has a wider impact on the wellbeing of society as a whole.



It t also sought to compare the current situation in Italy with the policies and the best practices implemented in Europe in general. This was done in order to make a comparison and to understand how the specific situation could be improved.

During the research we have used a number of sources, which are listed in the "References" section, and which can be consulted for feedback.





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Methodology

During this desk research, the methodology used has involved the use of existing datas and sources to gain insights and understanding related to educational needs and strategies to use for lifelong learning and guidance of people 60+ aged in Italy and Europe.

Specifically, surveys based on government reports compiled by the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) was chosen to obtain a general picture of the situation; the data was then supplemented with pedagogical, occupational and training reporting tools with the aim of providing a key to convergent interpretation of the training needs of beneficiaries in this age group. Use of specific sources related to particular pedagogical experiences or theories was used to content soundness in the statements presented.

Finally, we chose to select some existing or completed projects that have emerged as good practices, effective and suitable for achieving the identified goals, both in Italy and in Europe.

Careful attention was paid to ethics throughout the research. To ensure the reliability and validity of the findings, all data sources were properly cited and the research adhered to established ethical guidelines and standards.



The situation of adult education and educational guidance for people 60+ in Italy

In recent decades, since the New Millennium and as a result of the deep economic crisis that has affected the Western world since 2008, as well as the aftermath of the CoV-19 Sars pandemic, there have been numerous demographic changes, and their effects have become increasingly rapid and evident due to the interaction with a multiplicity of socio-economic, technological and cultural factors.

The effects of the aging process are becoming increasingly evident. Over a twenty-year period, the average age of the population increased from 42.3 years on January 1, 2004 to 46.6 years as of January 1, 2024¹; the old-age index is 199.8 percent, an increase of more than 64 percentage points over the past two decades. The population aged 65 and over has grown by more than 3 million since 2004, to 14 million 358 thousand individuals.



Improvements in the population's living conditions have positively affected life expectancy, expanding the number of years in good health and free from disabling conditions. So, partly as a result of lifestyles and healthy habits adopted throughout life, people today are living longer and in better overall living conditions.

As far as education and training pathways are concerned, they cover increasingly large segments of the population and have become longer. Even though Italy still lags significantly behind in the European context in terms of the share of adults (25–64 years old) with high educational qualifications, considerable progress has been achieved in recent years, especially by women. The adult population with a low educational qualification (at most, the middle school diploma) has decreased dramatically.

Specifically, as far as the older age group is concerned, more than a quarter of people aged 65 and older today have at least a high school diploma: twenty years ago it was 1 in 10, and in twenty years they will exceed 50 percent.

In parallel with the lengthening of educational pathways, changes in the economic and social environment and in the regulatory framework have altered the possibilities of entering and remaining in the labor market. The age of entry as well as the age of exit from the labor market has risen. To date, increases in the employment rate are observed among those aged 50–64, but also among those over 65 because, partly as a result of the latest laws, the retirement age has lengthened. So, an increase in the number of years in active age has been observed for the elderly population. At the same time, due to the lengthening of the average life span, the also shifted forward the entry into the oldest old age, often corresponding with the loss of self-sufficiency and the contraction of participation in social life, a factor the latter which can become an element of serious individual fragility.



In terms of technology use, the spread of communication and information technologies in recent decades has also affected the elderly population, although even today this segment of the population is most at risk of digital exclusion. Only 4 in 10 people aged 65 and older, in fact, use the the Internet regularly, while almost half are “non-users,” although in the comparison with 2003 a marked improvement emerges (with a significant 2023/2003 adjusted parity index and equal to 1.96). In the European comparison, it can be seen that the growth dynamic of regular Internet use is slower overall for Italy than for other European countries, despite the significant recovery in more recent years. In Italy in 2023, regular Internet users in the 65–74 age group (for which there are comparable statistics) are 57.7 percent: more than 18 percentage points higher than in 2019, but 11 less than the EU27 average and 18–20 points below Germany, France and Spain. Today, low educational attainment among older age groups is still the main cause of the digital divide. However, in the coming years, as the baby-boom generation ages and becomes more educated and comfortable with technology, the digital divide is expected to narrow. (Istat, 2024).

To understand this increase in the level of schooling, it is necessary to step back in history and investigate the reforms implemented in the past decades in Education and Job Policies. The population that went through the school reform of 1963 and the subsequent liberalization of access to university in 1969 record exponentially higher levels of education in numbers than slightly older citizens.

The access to mass education of the late 1960s has meant that in the 2020s – 2040s, those over 60 with only an elementary license will drop significantly in number: from more than 5 million to just over 1.5 million. High school graduates and college graduates, on the other hand, will rise from less than three million to a number of more than 8 million.

More than half of the new elderly by 2040 will have attained a higher or academic degree, with important consequences for various aspects of sociality. More education will ensure greater responsiveness to the increasingly abrupt changes of modern times in terms of habits and lifestyle.



Access to technology, closer relationships with children and grandchildren, and more generally with their neighbors, will be the first aspects in which the "new generation" elderly will differ from the old guard.

Life expectancy will be another factor that will see substantial growth; in fact, an ISTAT demographic study reveals that among 60-70 year-old college graduates as early as 2012 there was an expectation of a year and a half longer, compared to non-graduates.

Historical focus on Education in Italy

Historically, Education in Italy has been reformed several times during the years. One of the most important reformations has been settled in the 60s and 70s, after what is known as the „Sessantotto“ („The 1968“), a year of deep cultural and political changes worldwide that has become the symbol of the creation of a new way of living in all the Western World. In Italy, the process was started with the law establishing the State middle school (1962): before that moment, the scholar system consisted of a compulsory five years cycle of Primary school, which was followed by vocational initiation or work and, only for the few ones who have passed a state exam, by paths of secondary education (first and second grade); after 1962, it was created a single, free and compulsory Middle School, raising the age of compulsory schooling to 14 years (Testa, 2023).

Some years later, in 1969 with the law „Codignola“, the access to university was made accessible to all high school graduates, since until then it had been reserved for those with high school diplomas, excluding those with vocational and technical degrees (Barone, 2022). This resulted in access to high levels of education for more people, including those from less affluent families.

At the same time, the cultural struggle affected society on different levels.



A significant experience, which was a milestone in adult education in Italy, was the “150-hours” experience, settled with the Law 300 of 1970: it refers to a paid study leave scheme for employees that can take time off for educational courses. It allows employees to pursue further education while maintaining their income. Even today, it is still possible to make use of study leave in the amount of 150 hours annually thanks to the struggles waged by workers' unions during those years.

Nowadays, in Italy, the education of adults, including those over 60, is mainly promoted by the Provincial Centres for Adult Education (CPIA), established by Presidential Decree No. 263 of 29 October 2012, with whom the Ministry of Education presented the "Activity Plan for Innovation of Adult Education" (Called in Italian "P.AI.DE.I.A."), aiming at increasing the management, organization and didactic of the CPIAs: the former Permanent territorial centres and 'evening courses' were replaced with the new Provincial centres for adult education (Centri provinciali per l'istruzione degli adulti – CPIA) which provide an educative offer organised in levels of learning aimed at the obtainment of the qualifications released within the mainstream education system, as well as at the acquisition of basic competences for foreigners. CPIAs operate nationwide and offer first-level education (to obtain the final qualification of the first cycle) and second-level education (for the technical, professional and artistic education diploma), as well as literacy and Italian language learning courses for foreigners.

In addition, there are private training centres and e-learning platforms offering refresher courses, courses for entering the job market and for developing specific interests, with corresponding professional qualifications recognised at the level of the Administrative Regions or the Ministry of Education and Merit.



At university level, there are institutions such as the Universities of the Third Age, often called People's Universities or UNITRE ("Universities of the Three Ages" or U3A): these are universities dedicated to adults and older people who wish to continue their studies and cultural activities. They are run by social promotion associations recognised by the Ministry. Their aim is to promote the study of the situation of older people, to raise awareness among the community and to promote the social integration of older people. As in Formosa (2010), they can be defined as "sociocultural centers where third agers acquire new knowledge of significant issues or validate the knowledge which they already possess", underlying both the idea of seniors already having inner resources and the importance of methodologies that can help them increase those resources. The literature reports that the main motivation driving older adults to enroll in U3A courses is the increase of psychophysical independence, socialization, and the enrichment of personal knowledge (Principi and Lamura, 2009). From a teaching perspective, U3As provide non-formal learning where "participants are not expected to sit for examinations, but to engage in learning as an end in itself" (Formosa, 2000 p. 322).

For seniors seeking places for learning and socialization, there are also numerous informal and nonformal learning venues: community centers, senior clubs, elderly care homes, and general recreational activities. These spaces provide a stimulating environment for activities ranging from socializing to maintaining cognitive and physical abilities. They focus on practical skills, digital literacy, and social activities, aiming to enhance the quality of life for older adults. By fostering community involvement, these programs help reduce social isolation and promote active aging.



For what pertains the Job Policies, on the other end, the law that changed the context more recently was the Law no. 92/2012, that transformed multiple aspects of the Job Market in Italy, like: more flexibility of the employment contracts, new rules for layoffs, incentives to hire unemployed people and the provision of training vouchers, strengthens active labor policies and dictates regulations to promote the employment of women and older workers. Its impact was significant and Has totally transformed the way in which work is conceived in the Italian landscape.

It formally established that 'lifelong learning encompasses learning activity, whether formal, non-formal or informal, undertaken throughout life with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence within a personal, civic, social and/or employment related perspective' (Law 92/2012). In addition, law 92 provided the definitions for formal, non-formal and informal learning and, together with the Decree 13/2013 („Definition of general standards and essential performance levels for the identification and validation of nonformal and informal learning and minimum service standards of the national skills certification system”), laid down the general dispositions on the national system of certification of competences. The aim of these dispositions is to make arise and develop professional competences non-formally and informally acquired, and to promote professional and geographical mobility, to facilitate the contact between labour supply and demand, to increase the transparency of learning and the recognition of certifications at national and European level.

In the aftermath of the Sars CoV-2 pandemic, the PNRR (Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza) was implemented in Italy: using the international name, we can say that the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRP) is part of the Next Generation EU (NGEU) program, which is the 750 billion euro package-about half of which is in the form of grants-that the European Union negotiated in response to the pandemic crisis.



As a result of this plan, several measures to contain the hardship caused by the pandemic and numerous investments on education, training and employment were made. For example, the so-called G.O.L. (Guaranteed Employability of Workers) program provides job placement and training pathways differentiated according to the level of skills already possessed by the citizen, with special attention to the most fragile beneficiaries, excluded from the world of work until then (working poor, women, over 55, unemployed...). Unfortunately, no training or placement activities are provided for people over the age of 60, even where they are still of employable age. Only income support measures, such as Assegno di Inclusione (Inclusion Allowance), are provided for this age group, which do not support the motivational aspect of the people aged 60+.



Educational needs of people aged 60+ in Italy and in Europe

In a democratic system, people's education and training represent areas of particular importance, both for the full and conscious exercise of citizenship rights and for the enhancement of human capital. Higher educational qualifications are associated with greater job opportunities, higher wages, better health and greater social engagement of the individual, with positive spillover effects on the community as a whole.

Improving the level of education and training has, therefore, assumed a fundamental role in the economic and social policies of the European Union, to the point of being an integral part of Europe 2020, the 10-year strategy for growth and jobs, launched in 2010 by the EU, with the aim of creating the conditions for smart, sustainable and inclusive development. It now follows a new strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training, which defines average European reference levels to be achieved in 2030, to which each member state will have to contribute.

Specifically, the EU's target for 2030 is for at least 60% of all adults to participate in training each year, settling Lifelong Learning as a priority. This initiative is part of the European Pillar of Social Rights and aims to foster lifelong learning and address the challenges of an aging and shrinking workforce. The EU also aims for at least 47% of adults aged 25-64 to participate in learning by 2025. (Official Journal of the European Union, 2021)



In order to promote an increase in general well-being, each country must seek to activate policies that can homologate it to the standards identified. This is one of the reasons that have led us to carry out a project aimed at studying the current conditions and the prospects that can be achieved through adult education.

Old age is a complex and highly transitional period with numerous psychological risk factors. For people engaged in career paths, following retirement they often lose their usual points of reference: schedules, daily exchanges with colleagues, days marked by work commitments.

In addition, a feeling of having lost one's professional role and identity can set in, and of feeling of little use (Strada, 2020).

The situation is not much different for those who, on the other hand, have been engaged in housekeeping duties: advancing age makes previous movements and habits difficult or impedes them, family balances shift.

Moreover, advancing age is followed, in many cases, by health problems or onset of illness that make it less and less easy to leave home. Many elderly people end up experiencing moments of loneliness, sense of abandonment and loss of motivation. This is why it is useful to activate pathways to counter this risk, creating new positive daily habits and opportunities to socialize, keep mind and body active and stimulate memory. It is important to feel included in a group and fill the days with one's interests, to counteract some forms of depression and cognitive decline typical of old age.

Educational experiences and orientation can result in the initiation of positive aging processes, again giving older people a purpose to pursue and the motivation to still feel part of society.

If until a few years ago the concept of aging was thought of with a negative meaning, that is, a phase of life characterized by a gradual loss of interests and goals, today it can finally be understood that old age is not a period of decline, but a specific phase of development with its own peculiarities and strengths: for example, after retirement one has a lot of time at one's disposal, one already possesses skills acquired over a lifetime, and, in most cases, one can count on economic stability. This can help people find pathways based on real interests, not just job opportunities.



As Rowe and Khan (1987, 1997) have pointed out, “successful” aging, in contrast to pathological and usual aging, is characterized by high functionality at the general level and low risks of related diseases and disabilities.

Obviously, seniors’ educational needs are different from children’s and teenager’s, but also than adults’ that want to enter the job market or refresh their competences: they often seek opportunities to maintain mental sharpness, learn new skills, and combat isolation through learning. Additionally, they may be interested in topics like health information, technology, or their hobbies and interests. Their most important goal is not acquiring new skills or knowledge, but enhancing their quality of life.

In addition, cognitive performance changes with age, and teaching methodologies must adapt to different rhythms. It is essential to use individualized teaching approaches, calibrated to the specific needs of the person involved in the training that take into account the delicate condition of those in this age group. Moreover, it cannot go without the presence of facilitating figures who can enable, even during collective trainings or online courses, to keep track of everyone’s needs, not making any learner feel abandoned.

The most effective methodologies implies community-based learning, because they both fulfill educational and social needs for people aged at least 60 years old, promoting social exchanges with other learners and educational workers, with whom they are able to establish a more effective relationship rather than with online courses.

In any case, online training should not be ruled out. Indeed, it is an excellent resource, especially for those with mobility problems or more specific learning needs that may not be met in centres close to where they live. (Erasmus60+, 2024) Of course, online courses are limited to the segment of older people who have sufficient computer skills, as they require a basic knowledge of how to use technology.



Best practices in teaching adults / people 60+



When talking about adult education, it is impossible not to mention the studies and experiences promoted by Paulo Freire in Brazil in the 1960s. The methodology developed by Freire, originally within an adult literacy program in northeastern Brazil in the early 1960s, is characterized by the use of what the educator himself calls “generative words”: words that come from the learner's own experience, to be used to keep interest high and foster learning. It is an approach that focuses on dialogue and attention to the life experience of the learner: the learner is not a passive listener but an active interlocutor in a process of collective knowledge construction.

«No one knows everything and no one knows nothing; no one educates anyone – no one educates himself alone -, men educate each others with the mediation of the world»
(Freire, 1972)



This is a celebrated statement by Freire that sums his idea of education: knowing is a process linked to practice and socialization; everyone, even the most humble ones, have competences and an experience of life and the world himself, and that has to be the starting point to start a process of investigation of the world, of oneself, of processes, of connections between people, of social and political reality, leading to action for social change.

Freire calls it a process of “**conscientization**”, more precisely „the process of moving from naive or passively received understandings of self, others, and the world to more critical and active understandings, of moving from partialized or focalized views of reality to a more total and contextual view of reality” (Lawton, 2022).

Freire began working on adult literacy in the rural context of Brazil's Northeast in the 1960s, marked by deep social and economic inequalities and a 60 percent illiteracy rate. During the first experiment of his innovative method in 1963, three hundred sugarcane workers in Angicos, in the state of Rio Grande do Norte learned to read and write in just 45 days. The Paulo Freire method was based on the small number of generating words (words belonging to the common lexicon of the educands, used as a basis for learning phonemes, syllables and other words), and for the coupling of language learning to the emancipation process of the educands: this allowed them to learn in a very short time, bringing their own life experience back into the learning process.

The Paulo Freire Method in Italy

In Italy, The Paulo Freire method became successful in the 1970s, as it was in the wake of numerous impulses of critical pedagogy that had been making their way since the Resistance period.

They in fact already shared several of the Freirian pillars, such as the non-neutrality of education, the link between politics and pedagogy, the emphasis on social justice, and the belief in the transformative power that collective educational processes had on society.



The first practical applications of Freire's method in Italy occurred within the workers' movements that became interested in adult education and led to the previously mentioned experience known as the "150 hours". The resulting courses, which were specially set up by trade unions, regions, local authorities and the Ministry of Education, were not necessarily aimed at scholastic or vocational training, but were aimed in the direction of democratizing knowledge and enhancing the individual and his or her human potential, thus with a view to emancipation.





Another “Freirian” experience in Italy was Danilo Dolci's experience in Sicily. Dolci had moved to western Sicily (Trappeto, Partinico), where the Mafia kept the population a reality of degradation and oppression. From this experience, the knowledge and practical possibility of collectively organizing interventions and forms of nonviolent protest, in which hundreds of people participated and which had great media resonance, matured.



Although distant in years, these experiences cannot be omitted and we have chosen to include them in this research because we believe that their ideological conceptions are still very relevant today. Indeed, when we talk about adult education, we must consider that the work to be done is not that of accompanying the world: adults have already spent in the world and given the world much, personally and professionally. What they have not been able to experience, unfortunately, is awareness: to provide them with the tools for a critical analysis of reality is to free them from the oppression of ignorance and show them that they can contribute actively to their own well-being and to society.



Widening our gaze beyond the borders of our country, to the European level, and bringing it back to the present day, let us try to reflect together on some experiences related to adult education, and particularly 60+ aged people's, that we believe are in line with the principles expressed so far.

For example, the project „Erasmus 60+“, lead by 8 partners (University of Versailles Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines – France; University of Split – Croatia; University of Porto – Portugal; European University Foundation – Luxembourg; University of Latvia – Latvia; ELTE – Hungary; Mendel University in Brno – Czech Republic; University of Zurich – Switzerland) focusing on higher education for people aged 60+.

Its main outputs have been:

- A desk research on intergenerational practices;
- A Toolkit “Enhancing lifelong learning through intergenerational learning”;
- 7 e-learning courses on the platform WiseLearn.
- Policy recommendations for enhancing cooperation, improving services, and increasing the accessibility and impact of Erasmus+ mobility on the intergenerational learning process.

The results of this project produce a high impact given their adaptability to the diversity of European populations 60+ and their relevance for many Higher Education Institutions (HEI) aspiring to build a complementary learning infrastructure for Europeans aged 60+. The transferability potential is also high. The e-learning courses, toolbox and its related reports are available in open access mode for all interested HEIs willing to offer e-learning to their senior communities and to senior citizens themselves.





Senior Universities

Reconnecting with the experience analyzed earlier, we now open a reflection on what represents one of the most successful experiences for adult education: Senior Universities. Apparently, they are against the principles of critical education – based on the pedagogy of Paulo Freire that we mentioned before – because they are based on functionalism and their first goal is not the emancipation of the elderly, but filling leisure time, also using lectures (a tradition form of education). But actually, according to Bursová & colleagues (2024), of course Seniors Universities are not a mass solution for all old people, but at the same time they can't be totally related to traditional schools, because they are based on heterogeneity of elderly population and diversity of educational offerings. They break with the traditional vision of old age and have an impact on improving the quality life of senior citizens. Indeed, in most cases, they are not even tied to previous degrees, as is the case in traditional universities: often it is enough to have reached the prescribed age to join the various courses. This allows even those who have not had the opportunity to earn degrees previously to have access to the same educational pathways. And this seems to us, instead, very democratic and in line with the emancipatory spirit that guided Freire.

As it can be observed in the following image, from the same research previously quoted by Bursová & colleagues (2024), next to educational needs, Seniors Universities are seen by the applicants as a source of socialization and a safe place to fight against abandonment and loneliness.

Motivations of undertaking educational activities by seniors

Motivations of undertaking educational activities by seniors	N	%
Opportunity to spend leisure time in an interesting and active way	247	94,6%
Opportunity to gain knowledge, skills and pursue interests	163	62,5%
Integration of seniors into the local community	127	48,7%
Bridging the fear of "sitting out" on retirement	97	37,2%
Getting to know people in similar life situations	61	23,4%
Opportunity to learn about leading a healthy lifestyle	41	15,7%
Gain recognition, respect and satisfaction of needs	22	8,4%
Getting help in difficult and problematic moments	4	1,5%

Note. The results do not add up to 100%, because respondents could select more than 1 answer.



Interesting are the motives of seniors to use the offers of those universities, which are related to the desire to spend time in an interesting way, opportunities to acquire new knowledge and skills, opportunities to establish new friendships and opportunities to get involved in life.

To gain a better understanding of how attending a Senior University can impact the well-being of older people, we can look at some European experiences.

-University of Bergen: in June 2021 the University of Bergen held an event called "Last Chapter: A Late Life Festival", which even involved some senior students from Graz.

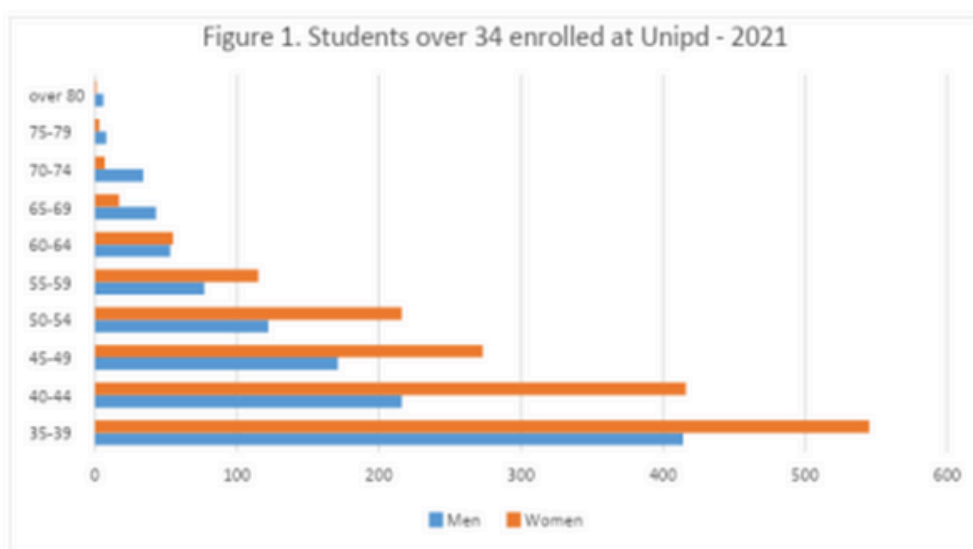
-University of Granada – Spain: The Permanent Open Training Classroom was launched in 1994 with the aim of meeting the educational demand of people over 50 years of age, who are admitted to the University without any other prior requirement beyond having reached that age.

-University of Graz – Austria: The educational programme Vita activa – bridging generations through learning. The programme is an open learning opportunity especially for women and men in the second half of life who actively seek their own learning.

-University of Padova – Italy: Progetto Formazione Continua (PFC) has the aim to promote lifelong learning since 1987 for people in the second half of their age.

Senior students at Unipd

Enrollments at the University regard students of various age, beyond the more canonical ones, as reported in Figure 1.





-University of Vilnius, Lithuania: The range of programmes, activities and initiatives of the lifelong learning meet the 10 professional and personal development needs of different age groups, educational backgrounds, professions and interests.

The consortium between all these experiences, and others, has been called "ARQUS": the Arqus European University Alliance brings together the universities of Bergen, Granada, Graz, Leipzig, Lyon, Padua and Vilnius. Its most important aim is on enabling people: the students of all age on accessing to knowledge; educators and teachers to be an educational community; society more in general. Additionally, the Alliance aims to develop shared policies for inclusion and diversity for all members of the university community.



Best practices in the lifelong learning and educational guidance for people 60+ in Italy

As we mentioned before, the 1960s were a period of cultural transformation in Italy as it was in the rest of the western world. An early inkling, in Italy, came with the telecast „Non è mai troppo tardi. Corso di istruzione popolare per il recupero dell'adulto analfabeta” („It's never too late: Popular education course for the recovery of the illiterate adult”), promoted by RAI (the national public broadcasting company of Italy) and the Ministry of Education. Alberto Manzi, in addition to being the face of the television programme, was a schoolmaster and pedagogue with a strong passion for education and social inclusion. Manzi, with his innovative teaching method, did not limit himself to transmitting notions, but endeavoured to involve his pupils, encouraging them to think critically and develop their skills. His pedagogical approach was based on respecting each pupil's learning time and creating a stimulating and motivating educational environment. The impact of 'It's Never Too Late' was considerable, and it is estimated that the programme contributed to the literacy and vocational retraining of about one and a half million Italians, according to Colnaghi (2022).

In addition to his television work, Manzi also devoted himself to adult education on several other occasions, both through the creation of teaching materials and his work as a consultant for the Italian government. His pedagogical thinking still remains an important reference point for those involved in adult education today, emphasising the importance of inclusion, personalisation and the enhancement of each individual's abilities.

The situation at the time was indeed complex and worrisome, with a very high illiteracy rate and a high rate of people who did not even reach the compulsory elementary school leaving certificate. The TV program was an immediate success, enabling so many people, until then totally illiterate, to learn to read, write and do arithmetic. The approach was very different from that employed in school, as it was aimed at an adult and older audience and based on the medium of television.



Today the situation is very different. The level of literacy has risen, although the phenomenon of “functional illiteracy,” that is to say “the inability to understand and use written information at a level sufficient for daily living and working,” while possessing reading and writing skills, remains very common. The phenomenon is worrying: 25 out of 100 Italians are experiencing this problem, which is exacerbated in the South (Pasino, 2023).

Living conditions, however, have very changed: life expectancy has lengthened and the elderly population is growing.

Apart from the critical issues highlighted above, namely the sense of abandonment and lack of motivation that the elderly often experience, we want to reflect together on effective projects that have brought about a positive change in the living conditions of the elderly in our country, as was the case, for example, in the Erasmus+ project " Education of Senior Citizens on their Health and Wellness – Silver Age Learning".



The strategic partnership was composed of partners from the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Italy, Greece, and Iceland, all with experience on learning and care for the elderly, and is the result of previous relationships-between the Italian partner, Provincia di Livorno Sviluppo srl, and the lead partner ACZ in Prague, for example-and participation in new thematic networks on the elderly.

The project, which began in October 2019, lasted for 34 months until June 2022.



The Erasmus+ Silver Age Learning project aimed to help people over 60 prepare for older age through a quality training program designed to make this stage of life more enjoyable, dignified, and independent. Extending the period of self-sufficiency in older adults had a profound and positive impact not only on the individuals themselves but on society as a whole.

This educational path went beyond the traditional offerings for seniors, which often focus on leisure or digital skills. The settled goals were personal development, knowledge and enrichment of life, adapting to aging and changing personal conditions, maintaining physical and spiritual well-being.

The program consisted of five modules, each lasting approximately 30 hours:

-**Health:** Covered the aging process, healthy lifestyles, and health issues in later life. It aimed to improve understanding of different aspects of aging, promote a more positive view of growing older, encourage healthy living, and personal care. It also addressed common health problems and suggested ways to manage them.

-**Physical Exercise and Nutrition:** Focused on essential aspects of physical activity and nutrition for overall health and well-being in old age. It promoted a healthy lifestyle through regular exercise, physical activity, awareness, and maintenance of bodily functions, supported by proper nutrition and hydration, to ensure better quality of life in later years.

-**Intellectual Well-being (Mental Health):** Provided information about mental disorders and cognitive impairments that elderly people are at higher risk of developing. Included mental exercises aimed at keeping participants' minds active, ensuring full cognitive functionality, and maintaining self-motivation.

-**Social and Residential Life:** Addressed key aspects of residential living, both tangible and intangible. It identified the necessary tools to enable full social participation in both local and broader communities. Focused on practical issues seniors face daily in their homes and discussed the pros and cons of living in a "smart" house.

-**Services for the Elderly and Community Life:** Focused on the essential social aspects of aging, both in family and community contexts. It described how to access a wide range of community services for seniors, both free and paid. It emphasized developing useful approaches and skills to support elderly people's involvement in peer communities and to effectively manage personal affairs in later life.



Another experience, dedicated to digital literacy, called “Nonni su Internet” (Grandparents on the Internet) has been promoted by the Fondazione Mondo Digitale since 2002, based on intergenerational formation and betting on the winning role of young people to combat the social exclusion of the over-60s, and we built the alliance between schools and senior social centers.

In more than 20 editions, more than 60,000 senior internees (about 65 percent are women) have been trained, led by 30,000 student tutors and 2,600 coordinating teachers. The intergenerational learning model involves the entire country and 11 countries.

The course program, dedicated to true beginners, is structured to complete in 15 lessons the abc of the computer, from powering up to surfing the Internet, from using e-mail to social networking. The presentation of the various peripherals that can be connected to the PC, (camera, scanner, etc.) is also an opportunity to help seniors become familiar with new communication technologies (mobile phones, digital terrestrial television, iPods, Iptv, etc.). Each edition is enriched with multimedia work that tutors and grandparents build together to practice with the pc: from writing an online dictionary of the games of yesteryear to a digital photo album with vintage photos.

The intergenerational model has inspired several local and transnational declinations and the birth of the Knowledge Volunteer Network, which has 40,000 people of all ages and countries engaged in the exchange of knowledge and skills. Intergenerational exchange is based on relationships of proximity and closeness: with the health emergency during the Covid-19 pandemic, it was impossible to bring the two generations together physically. Fortunately, “Grandparents on the Internet” has over time become a real model, scalable, replicable, but also customizable to various contexts and situations, even the most difficult ones. In 2020-21, the digital literacy efforts for the elderly focused on the production of on-demand content (video pills, online guides, etc.) and “remote” accompaniment.





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Finally, we present an experience carried out by “Auser” (Active ageing Association) a voluntary association supporting the elderly, in partnership with the “Fondazione con il sud”, including all the CPIAs of the involved administrative regions (Basilicata, Campania, Calabria, Puglia, Sicily): the project “Social-mente” has set itself the goal of getting in touch with broad segments of citizens, especially the elderly but also adults, immigrants and NEET youth, who have low or very low levels of education and for this reason risk a serious condition of isolation and exclusion with serious repercussions on their quality of life. The challenge has been to involve them in cultural and socialization activities, with a varied and stimulating offer able to solicit interest and participation.



Conclusions and recommendations for further work on the results

This report about the situation of educational needs, the current situation and the future perspectives related to lifelong learning of individuals aged 60+ in Italy and Europe in general reveals several significant findings that have implications for educational policies, strategies, and practices.

-Promoting lifelong learning is essential for cognitive and emotional well-being: as we discussed, educational activities positively impacts the cognitive health and emotional well-being of older adults. Engaging in learning activities helps maintain mental agility, sharpens critical thinking, and promotes a sense of purpose. Education is not only an intellectual pursuit but also a tool for enhancing quality of life and combating feelings of isolation and loneliness.

-Social interaction is a key benefit: One of the most cited advantages of education among individuals aged 60 and above is the opportunity for social engagement. Learning environments, especially those that are community-based or involve group settings, foster interpersonal relationships, create a sense of belonging, and reduce social isolation.



-For older adults, these social interactions often become as valuable as the educational content itself.

-Flexible and tailored learning models are crucial: Traditional educational models are not always conducive to the learning styles, time constraints, or physical limitations of older learners. Flexible, learner-centered approaches are most effective for older adults. Additionally, tailored content that considers prior knowledge, experiences, and specific interests is key to keeping older learners engaged and motivated.

-Educational programs promote intergenerational understanding: The report also points to the importance of intergenerational education programs, where younger individuals and older adults learn together. These programs not only benefit the cognitive and emotional development of older learners but also promote greater understanding and empathy between generations.

-Long-term impact on social and economic participation: Education for older adults has a broader societal benefit by fostering greater social inclusion and active citizenship: older learners who engage in continuous education are more likely to stay employed longer, volunteer, and contribute to community development. By investing in the educational advancement of older adults, society benefits from an enriched, more engaged, and productive older population.

In conclusion, education for individuals aged 60 and above plays a crucial role in enhancing their quality of life, maintaining cognitive health, and promoting social inclusion. By addressing the barriers to education and fostering more inclusive learning environments, we can unlock the full potential of older adults as active, engaged members of society.



Although Italy lags behind the European average and changes are happening at a much slower rate, a movement of change has been underway for decades now that aims to make our elderly increasingly included in society and free from the cultural constraints that for years kept them out of society. The goal is to bring us closer and closer to the European average, supporting all seniors, but particularly those who for cultural, economic, educational reasons have already experienced social exclusion and fragility throughout their lives.





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Introduction

Research conducted within the project has enabled the staff of partner organizations to deepen their understanding of the educational needs and challenges faced by individuals aged 60+ in Poland, Italy, and across Europe. This phase of research provided an opportunity for partners to exchange best practices and insights on effective approaches to lifelong learning, with particular attention to the methodologies, strategies, and tools that have been successful in addressing the educational needs of this demographic.

The findings from the desk research have helped to create a comprehensive picture of the current situation regarding lifelong learning for older adults. This includes identifying specific educational needs, understanding the barriers that individuals aged 60+ face in accessing education, and highlighting strategies to improve their learning outcomes. The research also explored successful initiatives and best practices in education, guidance and teaching older adults in Poland, Italy, and Europe, offering valuable examples that can inform future work in this field.

This report is intended to increase the awareness and knowledge of partner organizations' staff and other stakeholders regarding the educational landscape for people aged 60+ in the partner regions and countries. By doing so, it supports the development of evidence-based solutions tailored to meet the needs of this demographic.



Additionally, the report identifies key challenges and opportunities related to lifelong learning for older adults, including the availability of appropriate tools, resources, and guidance frameworks. By collecting and analysing real-world examples and experiences, the project aims to provide practical recommendations that will be used to guide the next stages of the project and ensure its outputs are both relevant and impactful.

Ultimately, the goal of this research is to promote the exchange of knowledge, tools, and materials that support effective lifelong learning for people aged 60+. By doing so, the project contributes to the broader aim of fostering active participation, social inclusion, and personal development among older adults across Europe.





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Methodology

Desk research was conducted to gather information from existing academic literature, policy documents, reports, and other sources related to the educational needs of people aged 60+ in Poland, Italy, and Europe. This included a comprehensive review of statistical data, national policies, strategies, and findings from previous research, as well as best practices identified in other programs and projects focused on lifelong learning and guidance for older adults.

Secondary data was collected from reputable sources, including government publications, academic journals, reports from international organizations, and research institutes. This data provided valuable insights into the specific educational needs of individuals aged 60+, the challenges they face in accessing education, and the resources currently available to support their learning. Additionally, the research highlighted best practices in educational guidance, teaching people 60+ and program delivery that have been implemented successfully in Poland, Italy, and Europe.



Case studies of successful initiatives targeting the lifelong learning needs of older adults offered in-depth insights into the design, implementation, and outcomes of these programs. These case studies provided practical examples of effective educational strategies, emphasizing innovative approaches and lessons learned that can inform future work in this area.

A comparative analysis was carried out to examine the educational landscape for people aged 60+ across Poland, Italy, and Europe. This analysis involved reviewing relevant data and literature to identify similarities, differences, and unique approaches between the countries. By doing so, the research aimed to develop a broader understanding of how diverse cultural, policy, and societal contexts influence the design and delivery of education for older adults.

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the research process. All data sources were properly cited, and the research adhered to established ethical guidelines and standards to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings.





The state of art of the adult education and educational guidance for people 60 plus in Poland and in Europe

By the end of 2022, the population of individuals aged 60 and older in Poland reached 9.8 million, marking a 0.7% increase from the previous year. Older adults made up 25.9% of the total population, up by 0.2 percentage points from 2021 (GUS, The situation of older people in Poland, 2023).

According to Statistics Poland's projections, the population of people aged 60 and older is expected to continue growing through 2060, reaching 11.9 million, a 21% increase from 2022, and representing about 38.3% of the total population by that time (GUS, The situation of older people in Poland in 2023, 2024).



In 2022, the economic activity of older individuals remained similar to that of 2021. Among those aged 60–89, 7.8 million (84.3%) were economically inactive, while nearly 1.5 million were economically active. The activity rate for this age group was 15.7%, and the employment rate for seniors stood at 15.5% (Wyszkowska, 2023).

Due to given statistics adult education and educational guidance for people aged 60 and above have become essential components in ensuring the continued well-being, social participation, and personal development of older adults in both Poland and Europe. With populations aging rapidly across the continent, lifelong learning has gained increasing recognition as a means to combat social isolation, enhance cognitive and emotional health, and empower older adults to remain active participants in society. This demographic shift brings with it both challenges and opportunities, with education playing a pivotal role in meeting the evolving needs of older individuals.

In Poland, as in many European countries, the education of people aged 60+ is seen not only as a means of personal growth but also as a tool to strengthen social inclusion, economic participation, and active aging. The role of educational guidance is also critical in providing direction and support for seniors who wish to engage in learning activities but may face challenges such as lack of digital literacy, financial constraints, or limited access to appropriate programs.

Understanding how adult education and educational guidance systems are currently structured and functioning for people aged 60+ is key to improving their efficacy and accessibility in the future.





According to Eurostat, the participation rates of adult Poles in Adult Education and Training (AET) have consistently remained below the EU average for many years. However, Eurostat data shows a steady rise in the percentage of adults engaged in education or training within the four weeks before the survey, reaching 8.7% in 2023, an increase of 5 percentage points compared to five years earlier. In Poland, the proportion of adults engaged in lifelong learning (LLL) remains lower than the average across the 27 EU Member States, where participation has also been steadily rising. The Eurostat indicator applies to the total population aged 25 to 64 (EACEA, 2024).

In 2022, 22% of individuals aged 25–69 in Poland, participated in lifelong learning in education and training, compared to the EU-27 average of 44%. Sweden had the highest participation rate at 70%, while Greece had the lowest at 15% (Eurostat, 2022).

According to the Central Statistical Office's Report, in 2022, 54.0% of people aged 18–69 in Poland, declared that they were acquiring knowledge in different ways. Specifically, 48.3% (approximately 11.4 million people) engaged in informal learning, relying on colleagues, friends, family members, or self-study. Meanwhile, 9.2% (about 2.3 million people) participated in formal education, including school systems and higher education (GUS, 2022).

The report also highlights that one in five people in this age group (5.6 million individuals) took part in courses, training, or other forms of organized learning. Women and city dwellers were more likely to engage in all types of educational activities compared to men and rural residents. However, formal education was an exception, with more rural inhabitants participating than those living in cities (GUS, 2022).

According to 2020 CEDEFOP data, 5.6% of people aged 50–64 participated in education or training in the European Union in the four weeks preceding the survey. The highest rates were recorded in the Nordic countries: Sweden (21.5%), Finland (19.3%) and Denmark (14.3%). The lowest rates were observed in Romania and Croatia – below 1% (CEDEFOP, 2023).



In Poland, the participation of older people in education is relatively low. In 2018, only 7.4% of people aged 60–69 participated in non-formal education, while in the age group 65–69, 20% engaged in non-formal learning (Dorota Gierszewski, 2021).

Adult participation in lifelong learning		
Year	European Union (27 countries)*	Poland
2012	8.2	4.5
2013	9.9	4.3
2014	10.1	4.0
2015	10.1	3.5
2016	10.3	3.7
2017	10.4	4.0
2018	10.6	5.7
2019	10.8	4.9
2020	9.1	3.8
2021	10.8	5.6
2022	11.8	7.8
2023	12.8	8.7

Source: Eurostat (SDG_04_60; data for 11/09/2024). * EU-28 between 2013 and 2019; EU-27 since 2020.

Poland's commitment to lifelong learning is reflected in national policies such as the "Lifelong Learning Perspective" and initiatives led by the Ministry of Education and Science (European Commission, 2025).

One of the most prominent initiatives for older adults in Poland is the Universities of the Third Age. Which play a crucial role in fostering social interaction and combating isolation among older individuals, allowing them to continue their personal and intellectual development (Książek, 2015).



Poland was one of the pioneers in creating Universities of the Third Age (U3As). The first U3A was established in 1975 in Warsaw on the initiative of Professor Halina Szwarc. By 2018, the number of U3As in Poland had grown to 640 institutions, offering older people the opportunity to continue their education and social activity. UTAs in Poland operate in various organizational forms: as independent non-governmental organizations (56%), units within the structures of universities (21.5%) and as part of cultural centers (17.7%) (Dorota Gierszewski, 2021). Many local educational institutions offer tailored lifelong learning programs for seniors, such as digital literacy courses, workshops on personal finance, and health and wellness education.

Lifelong learning for seniors in Poland is implemented through national strategies that align with the European Union's "Education and Training 2020" framework. These strategies aim to integrate older adults into educational programs to promote active aging and reduce social exclusion. The Polish Ministry of Education and Science and other governmental bodies support these initiatives, alongside financial support from EU funds, ensuring the availability of programs for older learners (Departament Strategii, Kwalifikacji i Kształcenia Zawodowego).

Educational guidance for people aged 60+ in Poland is increasingly seen as essential in helping older adults identify the most appropriate learning opportunities.

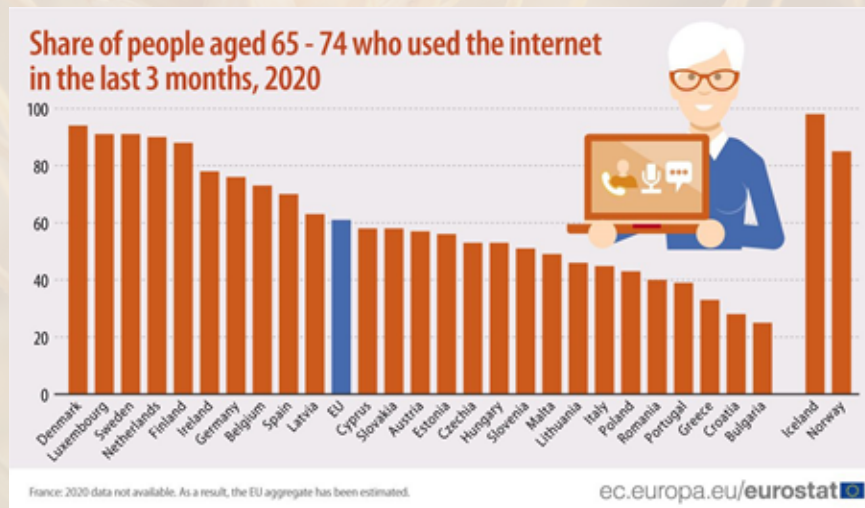
This guidance often comes from U3As, local community centers, and NGOs that specialize in services for older people. In addition, the rise of online learning platforms has further expanded the availability of educational guidance for seniors, particularly for those with mobility or access challenges.





One of the key focuses of adult education for seniors is digital literacy. As digital technologies become deeply embedded in daily life, older adults must acquire digital competencies to navigate online services, communicate with family and friends, and access essential information (European Commission, 2019).

According to Eurostat data, in 2020, only 41% of people aged 65–74 in the European Union used the Internet regularly, compared to 93% of people aged 16–24 (Eurostat, 2021). In Poland, the internet usage rate for individuals aged 65+ in 2020 was only 33%, placing the country below the EU average (Eurostat, 2020).



In Poland, internet usage among individuals aged 65 to 74 is relatively low compared to other European Union countries. According to Eurostat data from 2020, only 43% of Poles in this age group had used the internet in the preceding three months, placing Poland 22nd out of the 27 EU member states in this category (Eurostat, 2021).



This digital divide is further highlighted by data from Statistics Poland, which indicates that merely 25% of individuals aged 65 and older are connected to the internet (Fundacja Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, 2018).

Several factors contribute to the limited internet usage among Polish seniors. Many older adults lack the necessary digital skills and experience, as they did not have the opportunity to learn about digital technologies during their younger years, and technological advancements have been rapid. Additionally, there is a prevalent fear of new technologies among seniors, including concerns about personal data security and a lack of confidence in using digital devices. Health-related issues, such as vision, hearing, or manual dexterity impairments, can also hinder the ability to use technology effectively. Moreover, there is often insufficient availability of training and support tailored to seniors, leaving them feeling lost amidst the plethora of available technologies (Obywatelskich, 2024).

In contrast, Scandinavian countries exhibit significantly higher internet usage rates among older adults. For instance, in 2020, Denmark recorded that 94% of individuals aged 65 to 74 had used the internet in the last three months, followed closely by Luxembourg and Sweden at 91%, the Netherlands at 90%, and Finland at 88% (Eurostat, 2021).

These disparities underscore the importance of raising awareness among seniors about the benefits of digital competencies and providing them with the necessary training to navigate the virtual world. Enhancing digital literacy among older adults can facilitate the management of daily tasks and enable the acquisition of new skills, thereby improving their quality of life. Various initiatives, such as the "Digital Poland" program, aim to bridge the digital divide by providing tailored courses and support for older learners (Ministry of Digital Affairs, Poland, 2021).





In Poland, the Human Capital Development Strategy 2020 (Strategia Rozwoju Kapitału Ludzkiego 2020) was adopted as one of nine integrated strategies. According to the provisions of the Act of December 6, 2006, on the principles of development policy (Article 13, Section 1), it is consistent with the National Development Strategy 2020 (Strategia Rozwoju Kapitału Ludzkiego 2020, 2013).

The Human Capital Development Strategy 2020 (HCDS 2020) serves as a pivotal framework in Poland's efforts to enhance the quality of life and human capital. This strategy focuses on creating a universal and attractive lifelong learning system, which is essential for adapting to the evolving demands of the modern labor market. To achieve this, the strategy proposes several key initiatives (Ministrów, 2013).

Expanding adult learning is a central component of the HCDS 2020. This involves promoting effective forms of adult education, such as workplace learning, social engagement, and short courses. Recognizing learning outcomes from non-formal and informal education is crucial, enabling employees to swiftly update their qualifications. Enabling adults to access higher education is another priority. This is facilitated through systems that validate competencies acquired outside formal education, including self-improvement efforts, work experience, and training courses. Developing a national qualifications system aligned with the European Qualifications Framework is also emphasized. This alignment enhances the comparability of qualifications and ensures recognition of learning outcomes, irrespective of when, where, or how learning occurred. Enhancing financial support for adult learning aims to create a comprehensive funding system. This involves analyzing various support mechanisms, such as supply-side funding for educational institutions and demand-side solutions like training vouchers, with cost-sharing among employees, employers, and public funds (European Commission, 2025).



Across Europe, adult education for individuals aged 60 and above is strongly supported through both EU strategies and national programs. The European Union places significant emphasis on lifelong learning, acknowledging that education and training are vital for the social integration, well-being, and active participation of older adults in society. One notable EU initiative is the Erasmus+ program, which promotes mobility, cooperation, and education across European countries. Erasmus+ includes specific actions aimed at adult learners, offering opportunities for individuals to engage in learning experiences abroad. These experiences can range from group mobility, where adults participate in organized learning activities in another country, to individual mobility, allowing adults to pursue personalized learning programs tailored to their needs. Such programs may encompass various formal, informal, and non-formal learning methods, including peer learning, work-based learning, volunteering, and other innovative approaches (European Commission, 2022).





These efforts collectively underscore the EU's commitment to fostering inclusive education systems that support the continuous development and active engagement of older adults, thereby enhancing their quality of life and societal participation. When it comes to participation in Erasmus+, the most targeted group is seniors – 61% – according to the quantitative survey amongst beneficiary organizations (Marta Petelewicz, 2024).

The following EU framework Education and Training 2020 focuses on improving the quality and efficiency of education and training systems across member states, with particular attention to inclusivity. As part of this initiative, member countries are encouraged to offer educational opportunities for older people, ensuring that seniors have the opportunity to participate in learning throughout their lives (Commission, Education and Training Monitor 2024)





Digital Education Action Plan (2021–2027) initiative aims to improve digital skills among European citizens, including older adults. The plan supports member states in developing educational programs and policies that help seniors acquire the skills needed to thrive in a digitalized world. Digital literacy programs targeted at older adults are a key aspect of the EU's strategy to combat digital exclusion and promote lifelong learning (Commission, Digital Education Action Plan (2021–2027)).

Despite these advancements, several challenges remain. Accessibility and affordability of educational programs continue to be significant barriers, particularly for older adults from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or rural areas, where educational opportunities may be scarce or costly. Furthermore, disparities in digital literacy levels create additional obstacles, as many lifelong learning programs are now delivered through online platforms, requiring a certain level of technological competence that not all older adults possess (Boeren, 2016).

Motivational barriers also play a crucial role in hindering participation. Many older adults may perceive learning as irrelevant to their daily lives or feel discouraged due to negative past educational experiences (Cumming, 1992). Social and psychological factors, such as fear of failure, lack of confidence, (Millar, 2000), or limited peer support, can further reduce engagement in lifelong learning initiatives.

Additionally, policies and strategies for adult education vary widely across European countries, leading to inconsistencies in the availability, accessibility, and quality of learning opportunities. While some countries have well-established frameworks supporting adult education and lifelong learning, others lack sufficient funding, infrastructure, or political commitment to ensure effective implementation. For example, Northern European countries tend to have more robust policies promoting adult education, whereas Southern and Eastern European nations often struggle with underfunded programs and fragmented strategies (EAEA, 2020).



Educational needs of people aged 60+ in Poland and in Europe

As people get older, their knowledge and skills obtained at school can deteriorate, become less relevant or outdated. Thus, individual development continues during adulthood in various ways, e.g. by learning at work, at training courses, through hobbies or community activities. The process is called lifelong learning (LLL), and it refers to the pathway of all learning activities undertaken throughout life that improve one's knowledge, skills and competencies related to work, career, personal life and societal engagement (Turek, 2023).

According to Eurostat data, in Poland, in 2020, the group of people aged 60+ accounted for over 25% of the population. With current trends, in 2060, Polish society will be one of the oldest in the EU. Learning in older age has never been more important for individuals and societies than now (Withall, 2010).



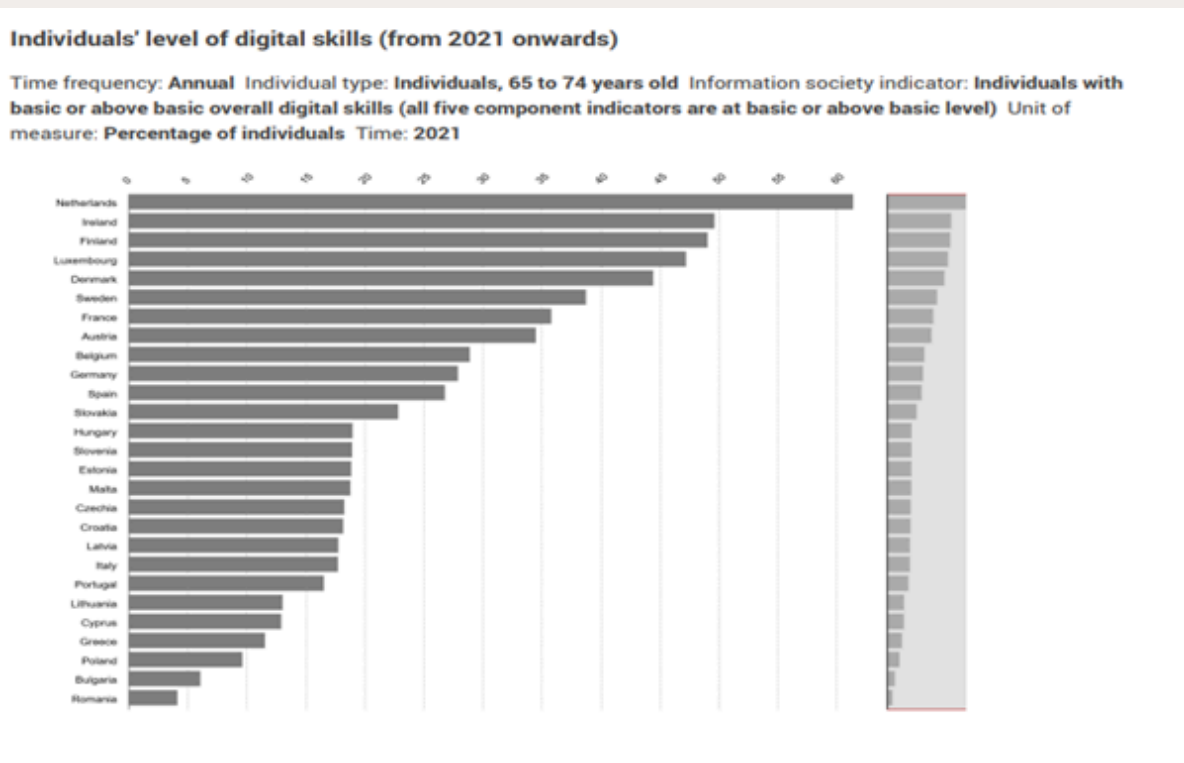
According to the Eurostat data on 2023, the educational needs of people aged 60+ in Europe focus on digital literacy, health education, social inclusion, and vocational training. Many seniors require digital skills to access online services, with only 28% of Europeans aged 65–74 possessing basic digital competencies. Health education, including fitness, mental wellness, and nutrition, is essential for maintaining independence (WHO, 2024). Social inclusion programs, such as University of the Third Age (U3A) and intergenerational learning, help combat loneliness and promote engagement. Vocational training supports older adults in re-skilling and employment but participation in lifelong learning remains low at 9.2% (CEDEFOP, 2023). That is why, expanding senior education programs is crucial for active aging and quality of life in an aging European society.





Digital literacy

As the world becomes increasingly digital, the ability to navigate online environments becomes essential for maintaining an active and connected lifestyle. One of the most important skills that older adults need to develop in today's society is digital literacy. Seniors in both Poland and Europe face various challenges, such as limited access to digital tools or lack of training, which can result in digital exclusion (Czaczkowska). Eurostat data indicate that seniors in Poland exhibit comparatively low levels of computer skills relative to other European countries. This digital gap significantly hinders their capacity to engage with the growing digitalization of societal services, underscoring the necessity for targeted educational initiatives aimed at enhancing their digital literacy.





First and foremost, digital literacy is essential for older adults, as it facilitates maintaining communication with family and friends, which is critical for their social well-being and mental health. Tools like email, social media, video calling (e.g., Skype, Zoom), and messaging applications (WhatsApp, Messenger) have become critical for communication (Tech, 2021).

As many public services, such as healthcare and banking, shift to digital platforms, it is essential for seniors to acquire the necessary skills to navigate these systems. Training in using e-health services, such as telemedicine and online prescription refills, as well as managing finances through online banking, is crucial for seniors to maintain their independence and ensure access to vital services (Xiaoyi Chen, 2025).





Health and wellness

The importance of health and wellness for seniors cannot be overstated. As people age, staying physically and mentally active is crucial to maintaining a high quality of life. Education in health and wellness for older adults often focuses on physical fitness, mental health, and preventive health strategies.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), physical activity is one of the most effective ways to prevent and manage various chronic diseases such as cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, hypertension, and arthritis. Regular physical activity can also prevent the loss of bone density, which is particularly important for older adults to avoid fractures and osteoporosis. In fact, WHO recommends that older adults engage in at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity per week, along with muscle-strengthening activities on two or more days a week (World Health Organization, 2024).





Physical exercise is not just beneficial for the body; it also has a significant impact on mental health. Studies have shown that regular physical activity reduces symptoms of depression and anxiety, which are prevalent in seniors. Exercise stimulates the release of endorphins, the body's natural "feel-good" chemicals, leading to improvements in mood, cognitive function, and sleep quality (Sharma, 2025).

Nutritional awareness among seniors is also a key factor that influences their quality of life. A proper diet can prevent many health problems associated with the aging process. As people age, their bodies face new health challenges, which is why it is crucial to adjust the diet to meet changing needs. Here's how a proper diet can support seniors in various aspects of health:

Maintaining a healthy body weight – according to the National Institute on Aging (2021), as we age, metabolism slows down, and older individuals often face difficulties in maintaining an optimal weight. They may gain weight due to reduced physical activity, but equally often experience a loss of muscle mass, which is linked to the aging process. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2015), a diet rich in proteins, healthy fats, and fiber can help maintain a healthy weight, which in turn reduces the risk of many chronic diseases, such as heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and hypertension.

Preventing chronic diseases – as people age, the risk of developing chronic diseases increases, which is why it is important for seniors to focus on healthy eating. According to Ishikawa, H., et al. (2018), a diet rich in the right amounts of proteins, vitamins, minerals, and healthy fats can help prevent diseases such as hypertension, as reducing salt intake and increasing the consumption of potassium and magnesium can help regulate blood pressure. Osteoporosis can be prevented by maintaining a diet rich in calcium and vitamin D, which are essential for healthy bones. Heart disease risk can be reduced by following a low-fat diet rich in omega-3 fatty acids, which supports heart health and helps prevent heart attacks.



Improving cognitive function – one of the most common health issues among seniors is cognitive impairment, such as dementia or Alzheimer's disease. Numerous studies suggest the benefits of a diet that supports cognitive function. According to Gonzalez, M., & Webb, M. (2022), regular consumption of foods rich in omega-3 fatty acids, vitamin B12, folic acid, and antioxidants (e.g., vitamins C and E) can help maintain mental acuity and slow down the development of dementia. According to Tudor-Locke, C., & Braselton, A. (2019), foods such as fish, nuts, fruits, vegetables, and whole grain cereals are excellent sources of these nutrients.

According to the European Commission (2024), supporting senior health through nutrition education, providing them with knowledge about appropriate dietary choices, and ensuring access to healthy food is essential to improving their quality of life. Regular consultations with dietitians and promoting healthy eating habits are necessary for preventing age-related diseases.



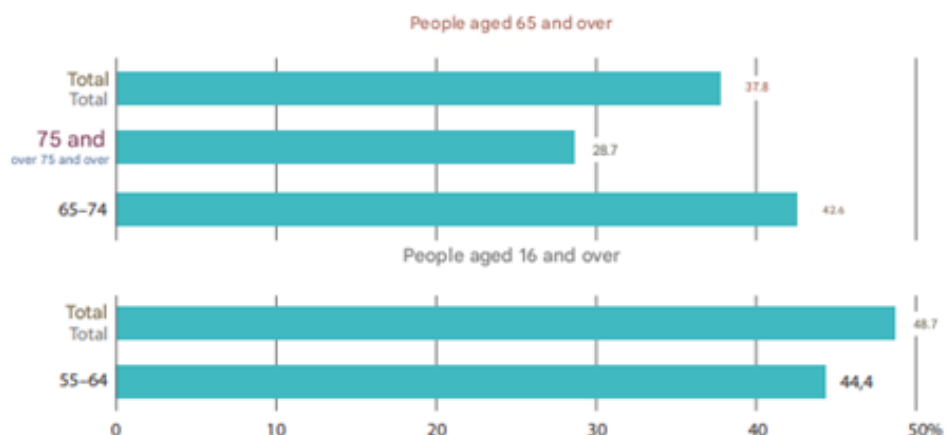


Mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety, and cognitive decline, are increasingly common in seniors, affecting their overall well-being and quality of life. Educational programs focusing on mental wellness can be highly beneficial in addressing these concerns and promoting healthier aging (Amir Jalali, 2024).

The results of the 2018 Social Cohesion Survey indicate that approximately 38% of people aged 65 and over in Poland reported a good sense of well-being. The conducted analysis confirms that age significantly differentiates emotional state levels (GUS, 2018).

Young people, in particular, tend to experience better well-being. The difference in the well-being index between the extreme age groups (16–24 years and 75 years and over) was nearly 32 percentage points. Among the "older seniors" aged at least 75, the well-being index reached just under 29%. This was about 14 percentage points lower than among seniors aged 65–74, where it stood at approximately 43% (Główny Urząd Statystyczny Statistics Poland, 2020).

Figure 6.12. Composite index of well-being by age in 2018 (% of people)
Chart 6.12. Aggregated indicator of good emotional well-being^a by age in 2018 (% of people)



^a Percentage of people who never experienced symptoms of poor well-being during the month preceding the survey and who observed at least 5 out of 9 symptoms of good well-being.
^a Percentage of people who did not experience any symptom of bad emotional well-being and experienced at least 5 of 9 symptoms of good emotional well-being within one month preceding the survey.



Depression is one of the most common mental health disorders among older adults. Studies show that nearly 7% of people aged 60 and over suffer from depression, and many more experience anxiety or mood disorders. Educational programs focusing on mental health can provide strategies for coping with these challenges, such as relaxation techniques, stress management, and social engagement. A study conducted by the European Commission found that seniors who participated in regular mental health and wellness programs experienced lower levels of depressive symptoms and improved overall life satisfaction (WHO, 2023).

Cognitive decline is a significant concern as people age, with dementia affecting an estimated 10–15% of people aged 65 and older. According to the Global Burden of Disease, dementia is one of the main causes of disability in older adults. It contributes to 11.2% of all years lived with disability compared with stroke (9.5%), musculoskeletal disorders (8.9%), heart diseases (5%), and cancer (2.4%) (Mathers. C. Leonardi.M, 2006) (WHO, 2013).

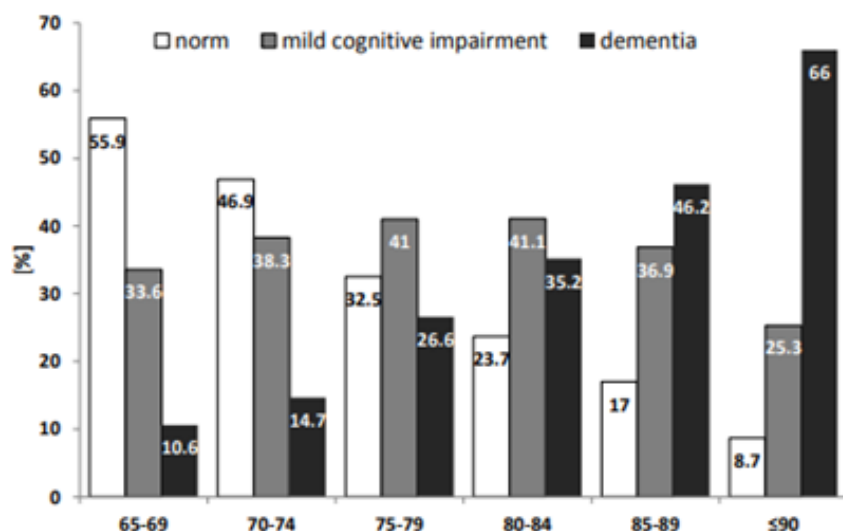


Figure 2. Cognitive status of older Polish population divided into age groups – results of the PolSenior study

Source: Klich-Rączka A, Siuda J, Piotrowicz K, Boczarska-Jedynak M, Skalska A, Krzystanek E, et al. [Cognitive impairment in the elderly]. In: Mossakowska M, Więcek A, Błędowski P, editors. [Medical, psychological, sociological and economic aspects of population aging in Poland]. Poznań: Termedia Wydawnictwa Medyczne; 2012. p. 114 (in Polish).



Due to the rapid increase in the number of older adults in the Polish population, there seems to be an urgent need for early diagnosis and treatment of dementia (Karczewska, 2019).

However, there is strong evidence that mental stimulation through lifelong learning and cognitive training programs can help delay the onset of dementia and maintain cognitive function. The World Health Organization (WHO) has long advocated for cognitive training programs that include activities such as problem-solving exercises, memory enhancement, and language learning as a way to reduce the risk of cognitive decline.

Memory loss is a natural part of aging, but there are various programs and strategies that can help maintain cognitive health. Many universities of the third age offer memory training programs, which include exercises to improve memory retention and recall. Additionally, cognitive exercises are often incorporated into health and wellness initiatives that encourage seniors to engage in mentally stimulating activities such as reading, puzzles, and games (WHO, 2019).

Preventive health education is key in reducing the risks of both physical and mental health problems that often emerge as people age. Improving people's health literacy is one of the most basic, effective, and economic measures to improve the health of the whole population (Ishikawa, et al., 2018), (Geboers, de Winter, Spoorenberg, Wynia, & Reijneveld, 2016).

According to the research made in Poland, the level of health literacy of seniors aged 65+ is insufficient. These results imply an important message that there is a need to create initiatives and programs improving health literacy targeted at seniors living in rural areas, those with lower levels of education, and those with poor access to activities organised by institutions supporting seniors. Preventive health programs focus on early intervention, healthy lifestyle choices, and risk management to prevent diseases and promote overall well-being (Kosicka B. D.-M.-R., 2020).





Vocational and professional development

Seniors who wish to re-enter the workforce or continue working later in life often need to acquire new skills. With rapid technological advancements, re-skilling and up-skilling are essential for older adults to remain employable. Programs focused on emerging sectors like technology, healthcare, or customer service are particularly valuable. These fields often offer part-time or flexible roles that suit seniors looking to extend their careers or start new ventures. Courses that focus on specific professional skills or certifications allow older adults to pursue new career paths, whether part-time or voluntary work. The OECD recognizes the importance of continuous professional development throughout life, emphasizing that adults aged 60+ can benefit from targeted skills training to remain competitive in the labor market. (OECD , 2024)





Best practices in the lifelong learning and educational guidance for people aged 60+ in Poland and in Europe



Education for people aged 60+ plays a key role in enhancing digital literacy, supporting social inclusion, promoting cognitive health, and providing opportunities for professional development. Both Poland and other European countries have implemented various lifelong learning initiatives, ranging from digital education programs to intergenerational learning and vocational training.

These initiatives help older adults remain engaged in society, improve their quality of life, and maintain independence. This paper explores the best practices in lifelong learning and educational guidance for seniors, focusing on innovative programs and policies that support active aging in Poland and across Europe.

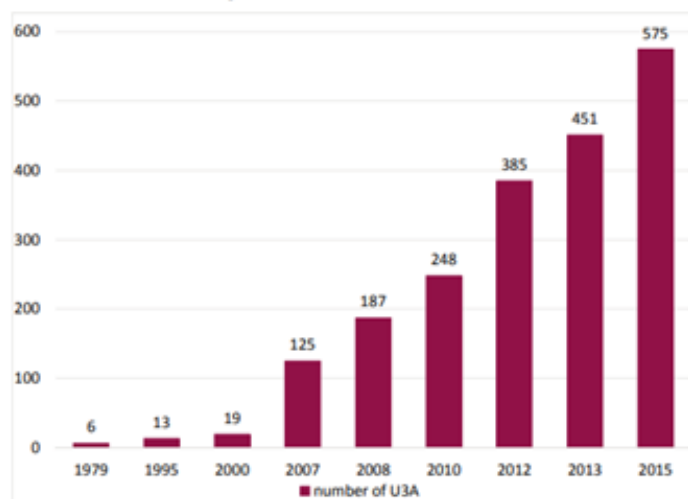


The University of the Third Age in Poland

After 2000, many highly educated individuals who graduated in the 1960s, during Poland's first wave of mass university education, reached retirement age. This group sought new opportunities for self-education, personal growth, and meaningful ways to spend their free time. As a result, they either became members of existing U3As or founded new ones. Although the group was relatively small, with only a small percentage of the population holding a degree in the 1960s, they gradually began to dominate in some U3As after 2000 (Kobylarek, 2018).

The breakthrough year for U3As came in 2007, when more were established than in the previous 25 years, driven by significant demographic changes and financial support opportunities, such as grants from the Polish-American Freedom Foundation (Gołdys, 2012).

Figure 1. The number of U3As in Poland in the years 1975–2015

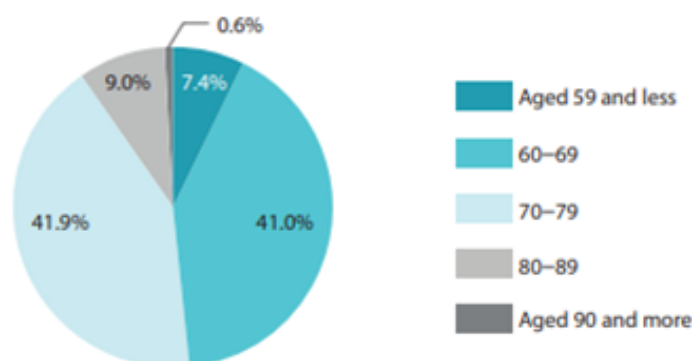


Source: author's own work, based on Konieczna-Woźniak 2001, the National Statistical Office 2016 and 2018, and the archives of the U3A at the University of Wrocław.



Currently almost 93% of University of the Third Age (U3A) students are aged 60 and older. The largest group of participants are those aged 70–79, making up 41.9% of the total student body, followed closely by those aged 60–69, who account for 41.0%. Nearly 10% of students are aged 80 or older. Overall, individuals aged 60 and above participating in U3A classes represent nearly 1% of the population in this age group (Statistics Poland, 2022).

Chart 48. Structure of students of universities of the third age by age groups in the 2021/2022 academic year



Senior Clubs in Poland

In Poland, the 'Senior+' program is currently being implemented as part of a broader initiative to enhance support for older adults. This program for the years 2021–2025 aligns with the objectives of the "Social policy towards older people 2030. Security – Participation – Solidarity", adopted by the Council of Ministers on October 26, 2018. (Uchwała, 2018).

The strategic goal of the program is to increase the active participation of seniors in social life by co-financing the expansion of support center infrastructure in local communities and increasing the number of places in "Senior+" support centers (Senior clubs) (Ministerstwo Rodziny, 2021). Through the implementation of the "Senior+" program, seniors have gained access to various forms of support that enable them to actively participate in social, cultural, and educational life, thereby improving their quality of life.



Senior clubs in Poland are designed for the city's oldest yet still active residents. Energetic and proactive seniors can meet in peer groups to spend time pleasantly and creatively. Participation in these clubs is free of charge (Urząd miasta Lublin). The primary offerings of these clubs include regular meetings for small groups that develop passions and interests, such as art, music, psychological workshops, and physical activity sessions like rehabilitative gymnastics. These activities aim to enhance physical fitness, cognitive function, and overall well-being among seniors.

The Support Centers Team is an organizational unit of the Municipality of Lublin and the team's mission is to support individuals and families who, due to age, illness, disability, or helplessness, require partial assistance in meeting their daily needs (Zespół Ośrodków Wsparcia, w Lublinie). The team consists of:

- ◆ 21 Senior Clubs
- ◆ 6 Day Care Centers for Seniors
- ◆ 4 Home Care Points
- ◆ The "Benjamin" Support Center for People with Disabilities
- ◆ A Day Adaptation Center for Children and Youth with Intellectual Disabilities
- ◆ A Collective Accommodation Point for Refugees
- ◆ A Care and Residential Center.

By the end of 2020, as part of the "Senior+", 971 support centers (309 Day Homes and 662 Clubs) were created throughout the country, most of them in the following voivodship: Masovia, Lesser Poland, Podkarpackie, Silesia and Pomerania (Najwyższa Izba Kontroli, 2022).





In the 21st century, Poland has recognized the critical importance of adult education in fostering a knowledge-based society and addressing the challenges of globalization and technological advancement. The country has implemented comprehensive strategies to promote lifelong learning, aiming to enhance the skills and competencies of its adult population. These initiatives are designed to support personal development, social inclusion, and economic growth (OECD, 2019).

A key component of Poland's approach is the integration of adult education into the broader framework of lifelong learning. This encompasses formal, non-formal, and informal learning opportunities, ensuring that adults have access to diverse educational pathways that cater to their varying needs and circumstances. The emphasis is on creating flexible learning environments that accommodate the unique challenges faced by adult learners, such as balancing education with work and family responsibilities (European Commission, 2024).

As part of this effort, there are currently 591 Vocational Education and Training Centres (VETCs) across the country, offering a wide range of programs aimed at enhancing the professional qualifications of adult learners. These centers focus on providing vocational qualifications, including specific skills for various professions, and general competence courses that help individuals stay competitive in the workforce (Centra kształcenia i doskonalenia zawodowego w Polsce, brak daty).



Best practices in Poland

As a good practice in Poland, we can consider the project, focusing on senior's mental health "Memory Gym – Trainings for seniors". This project was developed by the Stocznia Foundation and was co-financed under the Human Capital Program for the period 2014–2020. The project aimed to enhance the independence, comfort, and safety of the elderly by focusing on maintaining cognitive functions such as memory, logical thinking, spatial orientation, attention, and planning. In collaboration with experts in psychology, occupational therapy, and gerontology, free materials and tools for mind training were developed. These exercises engaged various brain functions, including logical reasoning, memory, creativity, concentration, and hand-eye coordination, as research indicates that regular cognitive training can improve mental efficiency or maintain current cognitive states, potentially delaying dementia symptoms by 5 to 10 years (Fundacja stocznia, 2014).

In addition to the previously mentioned initiatives, the Stocznia Foundation has developed a pilot version of the "Siłownia Pamięci" (Memory Gym) materials, available in both Polish and Ukrainian. These resources are specifically designed to support Ukrainian seniors, providing cognitive function training exercises to enhance mental agility and overall well-being (Fundacja stocznia, 2014).





In the course of the activities Deinde Ltd. successfully implemented a project "Educational consulting for seniors" as part of the grant entitled "Innovation Generator. Support Network 2" implemented by PCG Polska in partnership with the Association of Creative Initiatives "ę" and financed by the European Social Fund under the Operational Programme Knowledge Education Development 2014-2020. Educational counselling served to identify the needs, expectations and educational possibilities of the seniors and then, from the services available on the market, the seniors were offered opportunities to undertake education (Deinde Ltd., 2022).

Deinde Ltd. has also implemented several projects in the adult education sector with the support of the Erasmus+ program. One such project is KK50+ (Erasmus+), which was carried out in partnership with institutions from the adult education sector in Poland, France, Norway, and Spain. The primary goal of the KK50+ project is to enhance access to the acquisition and strengthening of key competences, considering the specific needs of individuals over the age of 50.

Additional objectives of the project included: (1) Expanding access to personalized education programs for those over 50, tailored to their unique characteristics and requirements; (2) Supporting the development of key competences among individuals aged 50 and above in the participating countries; (3) Strengthening the skills of trainers and adult education organizers within the EU by providing them with high-quality, free materials to support the education process for those over 50 in key competences (Deinde, 2022).



Another prominent example of lifelong learning initiatives in Poland is the University of the Third Age at the University of Wrocław, established in 1976. As the second oldest institution of its kind in Poland and one of the first worldwide, It collaborates with local and international institutions, including universities, government bodies, and the European Federation of Older Students. The U3A offers diverse lectures, workshops, and language courses tailored to seniors' interests, covering topics such as journalism, technology, art therapy, and critical thinking. Additionally, it provides physical activities, relaxation programs, and discussion clubs to promote lifelong learning and social engagement (Uniwersitet Wrocławski, 2025).

Furthermore, the Erasmus+ program has significantly impacted the adult education sector in Poland. This EU flagship mobility program offers opportunities for education, training, and sport, contributing to the personal and professional development of adults. The program's actions aim to foster sustainable growth, social cohesion, and innovation within the adult education landscape (European Commission, 2024).





Digital education for seniors in Poland

Digital education for seniors has become an important area in educational and social policy in Poland, especially in the context of the development of digital technologies and the challenges related to the increasing number of elderly people in society. Supporting seniors in acquiring digital skills allows them not only to participate more fully in social life but also to access public services, entertainment, information, and online education. Digital education initiatives also help fight digital exclusion, which affects a large portion of the older generation.

In Poland, numerous programs have been launched to help seniors learn how to use new technologies, aiming to improve their digital skills and enhance their daily lives. One such initiative is the "e-SENIOR" program, which was first implemented in 2022 by the "Idea dla Ciebie" Foundation, as part of the "Aktywni+" Program for Seniors. This project was co-financed by the Ministry of Family and Social Policy and focuses on improving digital literacy among older adults, particularly in using computers and smartphones. The program has been successful in reaching out to many senior homes and organizations, distributing 600 guides designed to

help seniors navigate basic technology, from using computers to smartphones. In addition, the initiative promotes online safety by educating seniors on how to protect themselves from scams and frauds. To further enhance digital competence, the project offers instructional videos and practical guides on topics such as online shopping, email security, using Gmail, and exploring interesting apps. The guides also include helpful tips for using communication platforms like WhatsApp and Skype, as well as troubleshooting tips like finding a lost smartphone or removing unwanted elements from photos.



Through this initiative, seniors can improve their digital skills, become more comfortable navigating the internet, and learn how to use technology safely. The foundation's goal is to empower seniors to take full advantage of modern technologies to improve their quality of life and stay connected with the world (Informatyka dla każdego).

The e-Senior program is carried out as part of projects funded by the European Union and is aimed at people who previously had no experience with digital technologies. Seniors participating in the courses learn, among other things, how to operate computers, use the internet, messaging apps, online banking, as well as learn about internet safety. According to data from the Ministry of Digital Affairs, approximately 100,000 people were trained as part of this program between 2015 and 2020. The courses are held in person, but increasingly, remote courses are being organized, which allows reaching seniors in rural and less urbanized areas. (Ministry of Digital Affairs, 2020)

In addition to nationwide programs, there are many educational initiatives carried out by local governments and non-governmental organizations. In many cities and municipalities, digital education workshops are organized, often as part of Universities of the Third Age or senior clubs. One example is the "Z komputerem na Ty" (With the Computer on Familiar Terms) project, which is carried out in various cities in Poland, where seniors learn the basics of operating computers, using the internet, and utilizing social media platforms (FUNDACJA EKSPERT – KUJAWY, 2014).





Sports and nutrition education for seniors in Poland

Sports and nutrition education for seniors in Poland is an essential element of health and social policy, particularly in the context of an aging society. Through proper education, seniors can better take care of their health, maintain physical activity, and prevent chronic diseases.

The event "Wiosna w sercu seniora" (Spring in the Heart of Seniors) took place on April 17, 2024, at the Dom Kultury Kadr in Warsaw as part of the Third Senior Forum. This free initiative targeted seniors aged 60 and above from various cities in Poland. The participants were active and motivated seniors who were eager to learn and maintain their health and physical activity. During the event, nutritionists conducted expert presentations. The first focused on "Diets for Heart Health," emphasizing the principles of healthy eating and the importance of certain foods for preventing cardiovascular diseases.

The second presentation, "Healthy Lifestyle for Seniors," addressed lifestyle elements, including diet, hydration, and physical activity, crucial for health maintenance and the prevention of diet-related diseases. The presentations were well-received, with engaging graphics and infographics, and interactive discussions that increased participants' focus and understanding. Almost 300 seniors actively participated in the event. Additionally, experts provided body composition analyses and dietary advice, along with free educational materials, including brochures on the Healthy Eating Plate (Narodowe Centrum Edukacji Żywnościowej, 2024).

Nutrition education for seniors in Poland aims to raise awareness about healthy eating, which contributes to improving the overall health of older individuals. A proper diet at this age is important not only for maintaining an appropriate weight but also for preventing chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, and osteoporosis.





a) The "Healthy Senior" campaign is an initiative that provides active seniors, as well as those needing support, with expert advice on nine key areas essential for their health and well-being. These areas include diet, exercise, activity, safety, medication, mental health, barriers, trends, and collaboration. The campaign is funded by the Silesian Voivodeship and aims to promote a healthier future for seniors. The campaign encourages seniors, caregivers, and those approaching senior age to explore and benefit from expert insights.

It also emphasizes the importance of healthy lifestyle choices and positive aging, highlighting factors such as stress management, cognitive exercises, and the avoidance of harmful habits like smoking and obesity to prevent chronic brain diseases. The initiative is supported by ambassadors, who demonstrate the campaign's principles in practice. By following the guidelines of this campaign, seniors can lead a more active and fulfilling life (Akademia Humanitas, brak daty).

b) In many cities and municipalities, workshops and educational meetings on healthy eating for seniors are also organized. The "Tasty and Healthy" culinary workshops for seniors took place on October 11, 2019, under the theme "A Healthy Body, A Free Spirit." The event brought together the oldest residents of the Telatyn Municipality, who explored Polish cuisine while preparing healthy meals.

The workshops aimed to encourage seniors to adopt healthier eating habits. Participants learned how to prepare dishes suitable for older adults, such as saffron millet, mixed vegetable salad, kale with apples or tomatoes, cauliflower in parsley sauce, and Russian borscht. The workshop provided an opportunity for seniors to not only learn new cooking skills but also enjoy a social experience and discover how to create nutritious and affordable meals (Biblioteka Publiczna Gminy Telatyn, 2019).





c) Additionally, both non-governmental organizations and state institutions run campaigns to promote healthy eating among older adults. Programs like „Mniej cukru, soli, tłuszczu? Kupuję to!” (“Less sugar, salt, fat? I’m on board!”) aim to raise awareness among seniors about how avoiding excessive salt and sugar intake and regularly consuming the right nutrients can positively impact their health and well-being. The campaign’s goal was to encourage Poles to read and compare product labels, promoting a more conscious approach to nutrition. Research shows that only one in three Poles reads labels, primarily checking expiration dates, indicating a lack of awareness that could help in making healthier food choices. The campaign focused on three key ingredients: sugar, salt, and fat, aiming to educate consumers that products in the same category and price range can vary in nutritional value. The initiative was part of a project funded by the Swiss-Polish Cooperation Program, focusing on preventing overweight, obesity, and chronic diseases through education on nutrition and physical activity (Urząd Marszałkowski Województwa Małopolskiego, 2017).





Sports education for Seniors in Poland

Physical activity for seniors is extremely important for maintaining health, physical fitness, and improving the quality of life. In Poland, programs and initiatives promoting physical activity among older adults continue to develop, offering various forms of exercise tailored to their needs and abilities.



a) The "Lublin Strefa 60+" program is an initiative designed for residents of Lublin aged 60 and over, aimed at enhancing the social activity and well-being of seniors. The program seeks to increase access to a wide range of services, including culture, sports, recreation, education, and healthcare, with special discounts for seniors through the "Lubelska Senior Card." This initiative helps seniors pursue their passions, engage in meaningful activities, and improve their quality of life. Additionally, the program promotes a positive image of the elderly and supports their active participation in society, contributing to the local social policy and efforts to equalize opportunities for the city's senior citizens (Urząd Miasta Lublin, brak daty).



b) Within the framework of Universities of the Third Age and senior clubs, various physical activities are organized to promote seniors' health and well-being.

These activities include rehabilitation exercises, water aerobics, yoga, Pilates, dance, and corrective gymnastics, all tailored to the age and abilities of seniors. For example, Yoga classes help improve flexibility, posture, and muscle strength while providing relaxation through mindful breathing and movements.

These sessions are suitable for beginners and those already practicing yoga. Additionally, Tai Chi Qigong exercises focus on health and longevity, combining breath control and gentle movements to enhance circulation, reduce muscle tension, and improve mental clarity. These exercises are especially beneficial for individuals with joint issues, chronic conditions, or those looking to improve their overall health. Both yoga and tai chi qigong provide low-impact, yet effective ways to improve coordination, strength, and flexibility in a calm and supportive environment, making them ideal for seniors of all fitness levels (Fundacja "Espirit").

c) In addition to nationwide programs, many Polish cities, including Lublin, organize local initiatives that promote physical activity among seniors. One such initiative is the "Aktywny Senior" program, which is designed to help seniors stay active both physically and socially, enhancing their overall health and quality of life.

The program, which runs from March to November, offers a variety of free recreational and sports activities tailored to the needs of seniors aged 50+. Organized at the Orlik sports facilities, these sessions include activities such as table tennis, pétanque, gymnastics, badminton, tennis, Nordic walking, and team sports, depending on participants' interests and health conditions. The goal of the "Aktywny Senior" program is not only to improve fitness but also to foster community integration and provide an opportunity for seniors to connect with each other. With activities designed to cater to various fitness levels, this program encourages seniors to stay active while combating social isolation. Families and friends are also encouraged to participate, making it a truly inclusive initiative for the senior community (Urząd miasta Lublin).



d) Many non-governmental organizations in Poland are dedicated to encouraging physical and mental activity among seniors by organizing a variety of events, recreational meetups, and workshops. One great example of this is the “SeniorON” project, run by the Polish Red Cross. This initiative brings together older and younger generations through interactive workshops that focus on topics like local history, nutrition, floristry, and first aid. These sessions offer seniors a chance to share their knowledge and experiences while giving younger participants the opportunity to bring fresh energy and new ideas to the table. It's a wonderful way to combat isolation and ensure seniors stay active, both mentally and physically. The workshops also help promote a positive view of aging and provide a space for seniors to connect with their community. Through programs like this, senior clubs and NGOs play a key role in helping older adults stay engaged, learn new things, and lead a healthy, active life (Red Cross EU Office).





Best practice in Europe

The Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults is an initiative which was adopted by the Council of the European Union in 2016 to enhance the skills of adults with low levels of education and qualifications. This initiative encourages EU Member States to provide flexible learning opportunities to help adults gain basic literacy, numeracy, and digital skills or progress towards higher qualifications (European Union , 2016). In July 2023, the European Commission assessed the Upskilling Pathways initiative. The evaluation found the initiative to be moderately effective, with implementation varying across Member States. Although some positive trends were observed, challenges like funding shortages and low awareness remained, especially impacting vulnerable groups. (EAEA, 2024)

An example of good practice in Europe is the Lifelong Learning Platform. It brings together 42 European organizations representing over 50,000 educational institutions and associations covering all sectors of formal, non-formal and informal learning (Life Learning, Platform , 2025).

As an another example of good practice we can consider the “Crosstalk” project, which helps women, senior citizens, schoolchildren, young people, and migrants develop the skills and confidence to communicate effectively and share their stories on local radio. The project has also produced a handbook to assist local initiatives in setting up similar programs (University of Education, 2010).





Best practices in teaching adults / people 60+

According to the World Health Organization, the global population of individuals aged 60 and older is growing rapidly. In 2019, there were 1 billion people in this age group, a number expected to rise to 1.4 billion by 2030 and 2.1 billion by 2050. This demographic shift is happening at an unparalleled rate, with the most significant increase projected to occur in developing countries in the coming decades (Organisation, brak daty).



The increasing aging population in Europe presents both challenges and opportunities in the realm of adult education. As life expectancy rises and demographic shifts occur, societies are compelled to adapt their educational frameworks to meet the evolving needs of older adults.

Lifelong learning has become an essential tool for fostering active aging, promoting social inclusion, and enhancing the overall well-being of individuals aged 60 and above. By engaging in continuous education, older adults can bolster their autonomy, develop new skills, and stay socially connected, thereby improving their quality of life (Formosa M. , 2019).



The education of older people includes a number of specific nuances. Aging naturally leads to structural and functional changes in the brain, including reductions in brain volume, neuron count, neurotransmitter levels, and vascular flexibility. These changes contribute to cognitive decline, motor impairments, and an increased risk of neurodegenerative diseases.

However, the brain retains some plasticity and compensatory mechanisms, allowing for adaptation. Preventive measures such as mental stimulation, a healthy diet, and social engagement can slow cognitive decline and help maintain brain function in old age (Łęć, 2013).



Regardless of the deficits that appear in the human life cycle, individuals can prepare for old age and aging. However, people should learn about positive and active aging before they get old, and ideally, they should be able to learn throughout their lives. This, however, requires proper education, aimed at both individuals and society (Kawińska M. , 2018).

Long-term participation in informal, non-assessment-based activities, which shape individual characteristics and enable integration with the environment, is a particularly valuable strategy to compensate for changes resulting from aging. Lifelong learning is not only possible but is a necessary condition for staying fit into old age (McFarlane, 2019).

The education of seniors aims not only to provide knowledge but also to stimulate mental activity, promote social integration, and improve quality of life. According to research conducted by Altman and Everhart (Altman, 1986), the main goals of senior education include:

- ◆ Personal development: the knowledge that seniors acquire can serve as a tool for developing interpersonal skills, self-awareness, and self-esteem.
- ◆ Increasing adaptive abilities: senior education can help individuals adjust to life changes such as retirement, illness, or the loss of relatives or close friends
- ◆ Social activation: through participation in educational activities, seniors have the opportunity to build social relationships, share experiences, and engage in community life.





One of the main differences between senior education and adult education is the life context of the participants. Adult education includes individuals ranging from young adults to middle-aged individuals, who often learn due to the need to acquire new professional skills or for personal development. In contrast, senior education focuses on older adults who may already be past their professional careers, and whose motivation for learning includes personal growth, social integration, or satisfying intellectual curiosity (Kawińska M.).

Learning is a lifelong process, but older adults have unique physical, psychological, and social needs that require tailored instructional methods. This concept is referred to as geragogy, which adapts adult learning strategies to support older learners, particularly those who are post-work, post-family, or facing physical and cognitive limitations (Findsen, 2011). According to the works of H. Mieskes and F. Pöggeler, termin "geragogy" comes from the Greek word gerón = old man, agein, agoge = to lead. Geragogy is a leading field (discipline) of educology and gerontology, which deals with the theory, practice, methodology and profession of educating people in senior age (Mieskies, 1970), (Pöggeler, 2004).

According to L. Veelken, geragogy is a scientific discipline about theory and the practice of educational and cultural work with older people. Its goal is "growth identity' over the course of life. Geragogy is not only a narrow scientific field about aging, but covers the entire course of life, acting as intergenerational learning in the context of pedagogy and andragogy. Geragogy examines the relationship between culture, society and the individual and combines gerontology with social science-oriented education (educational gerontology) (Veelken, 2003).





Globally, it can be stated that the primary goal of geragogic practice is the stabilization, socialization, cultivation and development of the personality of an adult in senior age through further professional, civic and interest education, social-educational care and cultural-educational activities (Határ, 2011).

It is also crucial to highlight that that early childhood education and care (ECEC) should go hand in hand with adult education, as adults play a crucial role in children's learning and lifelong educational development. European policies emphasize the importance of integrating formal and informal learning, promoting intergenerational learning, and fostering social inclusion. By educating adults—especially parents and caregivers—about their role in children's education, societies can enhance both early learning experiences and long-term educational outcomes. This approach is vital for addressing demographic challenges and creating a more inclusive society (Raffaghelli, 2014).

Teaching adults, especially individuals aged 60 and above, requires a tailored approach to meet their unique needs and abilities. The key to successful adult education, including for older learners, lies in applying specific strategies that accommodate their cognitive, physical, and emotional characteristics. Here are some best practices in teaching adults, particularly those aged 60+, with supporting sources.





Active learning and engagement

Active learning is an instructional approach that encourages learners to actively engage with the material rather than passively absorbing information, as emphasized by Knowles (1980).

For older adults, this method is particularly beneficial as it helps maintain cognitive functions and strengthens social connections. Techniques such as group discussions, role-playing, and problem-solving tasks allow learners to apply their life experiences, making the learning process more relevant and personal. According to Brookfield (1986), these methods foster collaboration, enabling students to share perspectives, ask questions, and enhance understanding through social interaction (Brookfield, 1986). For older adults, active learning provides an opportunity to stay mentally engaged and combat feelings of isolation, which can be common in later life. Additionally, active learning supports self-directed learning, as older adults tend to be motivated by practical goals and real-life applications (Knowles, 1984).

It also caters to different learning styles, making it inclusive by appealing to visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners (Sharan B. Merriam, 2014). Furthermore, active learning encourages a growth mindset, helping older learners believe that they can continue to develop their abilities (Dweck, 2006). The integration of technology into active learning, when used appropriately, can further enhance engagement by offering interactive and dynamic tools (Michael Reynolds, 2004). In conclusion, active learning strategies not only improve knowledge retention but also foster personal growth, confidence, and social interaction among older adults.





Linking content to life experiences

Linking course content to life experiences is a critical strategy when teaching adult learners, particularly older adults, as it enhances relevance and engagement. As Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) highlight, adult learners often have a wealth of practical, real-life experiences that should be acknowledged and used as the foundation for learning. By connecting new information to these experiences, instructors can create a more meaningful learning environment where learners can see the practical application of what they are studying (Merriam, 2007). Older adults are particularly motivated by learning that has direct relevance to their everyday lives, such as improving health, managing finances, or navigating technology (Knowles, 1984).



This approach not only makes the content more applicable but also validates the learner's prior knowledge and life experiences. It encourages learners to reflect on and integrate new information with their existing knowledge base, which deepens understanding and improves retention (Brookfield, 1986). According to Jarvis (2004), making these connections also increases learners' confidence, as they realize that their past experiences are valuable assets in the learning process (Jarvis, 2004). When educators incorporate real-world examples into the curriculum, they ensure that learning feels less abstract and more practical, addressing immediate concerns and interests of older learners.



Additionally, this approach fosters a collaborative learning environment where learners can share personal insights and learn from one another. In conclusion, by linking course content to life experiences, educators can create a more engaging, relevant, and effective learning experience for older adults (Michael Reynolds, 2004).



Respect for pace and flexibility

Respecting the pace and flexibility of older learners is a crucial aspect of effective adult education. According to the OECD Report (2019), older learners may experience slower cognitive processing and may need more time to absorb and retain new information. This is especially true for those who may face physical or cognitive challenges such as vision or hearing impairments, memory issues, or reduced stamina. To accommodate these needs, it is essential for educators to provide flexibility in the learning process. For example, extending the time allowed for completing tasks can help learners absorb material at their own pace without feeling rushed (Merriam, 2007).

Additionally, offering more frequent breaks during lessons can help learners maintain focus and prevent fatigue, particularly for those with physical limitations (Brookfield, 1986). Scheduling classes at different times of the day also allows older adults to participate at times that suit their individual needs, whether they prefer mornings, afternoons, or evenings (Knowles, 1984).



Flexibility in assignment deadlines and assessment methods can also reduce stress and provide learners with the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge in a way that reflects their capabilities. By adapting the learning environment to accommodate these needs, educators help build an inclusive and supportive space where older learners feel valued and respected. Ultimately, respecting the pace and providing flexibility not only improves learning outcomes but also helps older adults build confidence in their ability to succeed in education.



Use of technology

The use of technology in adult education is becoming increasingly important, especially for older adults, as digital literacy plays a critical role in their ability to engage in modern society. According to Czaja and Lee (2007), while older adults may initially face challenges in learning new technologies, providing them with foundational technology training can significantly enhance their engagement and confidence. Digital skills are becoming essential for various daily activities, such as managing finances, accessing healthcare, and staying connected with family and friends (Czaja, 2007).

As Czaja and Lee (2007) point out, even though older adults may be intimidated by technology at first, structured and supportive instruction can help them overcome these barriers. Many seniors are motivated to improve their technological abilities to participate more fully in the digital world, particularly as online services and resources become more prevalent. Educators can foster a positive learning environment by incorporating technology into lessons in a way that is accessible and engaging for older learners.



This might include using simple, user-friendly devices or offering step-by-step tutorials to help build confidence and competence (Merriam, 2007). Furthermore, as digital literacy becomes an increasingly critical skill, older learners who improve their technology skills can enhance their independence and quality of life (Brookfield, 1986). Offering technology training also supports the lifelong learning goals of older adults, providing them with tools to continue learning and engaging with the world around them. Ultimately, by integrating technology into adult education, educators can empower older adults to participate in the digital age and overcome the challenges of technological barriers.



Building a supportive community

According to Thomas and Ranzijn (2017), older adults benefit significantly from learning in supportive, social environments that foster interaction and collaboration. Social learning opportunities, such as group discussions, peer feedback, and collaborative tasks, not only enhance the educational experience but also promote a sense of belonging and connectedness among learners. This is particularly important for older adults, many of whom may face social isolation due to retirement, family dynamics, or physical limitations. By creating opportunities for older learners to engage with their peers, educators can help combat feelings of loneliness and foster a supportive learning community (Brookfield, 1986).



Furthermore, collaborative learning encourages sharing of life experiences and knowledge, which enriches the educational process and allows learners to learn from one another. As Thomas and Ranzijn (2017) emphasize, the social bonds developed in these environments can improve learners' emotional well-being, enhancing motivation and confidence. The social aspect of learning also supports cognitive functions, as discussions and teamwork encourage problem-solving and critical thinking skills. Additionally, peer support systems can provide encouragement and reduce anxiety for learners who may feel overwhelmed or hesitant about their ability to succeed (Merriam, 2007). In conclusion, fostering a socially supportive and interactive learning environment is essential for older adults, as it not only enhances their educational outcomes but also helps mitigate the risks associated with social isolation. By prioritizing social interaction, educators can create a more inclusive and motivating atmosphere for older learners.



Emphasizing practical skills

Older adults often prioritize learning practical skills that can directly enhance their daily lives and well-being. According to Formosa (2019), skills such as managing personal finances, maintaining health, or learning how to use technology like smartphones are highly valued by older learners. These types of practical skills offer immediate, real-world benefits, making the learning experience more relevant and engaging for seniors (Formosa M., 2019).



By focusing on functional knowledge, educators can create courses that directly address the needs and interests of older adults, increasing motivation and participation in the learning process (Brookfield, 1986). For example, a course that teaches financial literacy can help older adults better manage their retirement savings or understand healthcare costs,

thereby improving their financial security and independence. Similarly, teaching health-related topics, such as exercise routines or nutrition, can empower older learners to improve their physical well-being and manage chronic conditions.

Formosa highlights that providing these kinds of practical courses fosters a sense of accomplishment and mastery, which are crucial for maintaining self-esteem and confidence. Furthermore, as many older adults may be unfamiliar with newer technologies, offering courses on digital literacy—such as smartphone usage—can help them stay connected with family and friends and access essential online services. By emphasizing practical skills, educators can make learning not only valuable but also empowering, giving older adults the tools they need to improve their quality of life. In conclusion, courses that focus on practical, functional knowledge can significantly enhance older learners' engagement and help them navigate various aspects of daily living with more confidence (Formosa M., 2019).



Addressing physical and cognitive needs

Rowe and Kahn emphasize that older learners may experience sensory impairments, such as reduced vision or hearing, and may also face cognitive challenges that can impact their learning (Rowe, 1997). To effectively support these learners, it is essential to adapt teaching methods to accommodate these needs. For example, using clear, large fonts and high-contrast colors in printed materials can help learners with visual impairments access course content more easily (Merriam, 2007).

Additionally, providing auditory support, such as offering recorded lectures or using audio-enhanced materials, can assist learners with hearing difficulties and improve their understanding of the content. Rowe and Kahn also recommend offering course materials in various formats, including print, digital, and audio, to ensure that learners with different preferences and needs are supported. This approach helps create an inclusive learning environment where all learners, regardless of sensory or cognitive limitations, can participate fully (Rowe, 1997). It is also important to provide additional time for completing tasks and assessments, as cognitive processing may be slower for some older adults (Brookfield, 1986).



Tailoring lessons to individual needs, such as simplifying instructions or repeating key concepts, further ensures that older learners can engage with the material at their own pace. By addressing these physical and cognitive challenges, educators can make learning more accessible and effective for older adults. Ultimately, adapting teaching methods to meet the specific needs of older learners helps foster a more inclusive and supportive educational experience.



Positive reinforcement and encouragement

Providing positive reinforcement and encouragement is essential in fostering motivation and engagement among older learners. As Brookfield highlights, frequent positive feedback and recognition of achievements are crucial for maintaining the confidence and motivation of adult learners, particularly seniors (Brookfield, 1986). Older adults may have different approaches to learning, shaped by their life experiences and prior educational backgrounds, so encouragement becomes a powerful tool to keep them engaged.



Acknowledging even small successes helps learners feel valued and reinforces their belief in their ability to learn new skills. This form of reinforcement is particularly important for older adults who may face self-doubt or feel uncertain about their capacity to succeed in educational settings (Merriam, 2007).

When educators offer consistent praise and constructive feedback, they help build a positive learning environment where learners feel supported and encouraged. Brookfield also notes that recognizing achievements fosters a sense of accomplishment, which is critical for older adults who may otherwise feel overlooked or undervalued. Furthermore, encouragement helps maintain interest in the subject matter by linking learning outcomes to personal goals and interests, ensuring that older learners remain motivated throughout the course. Positive reinforcement can also help reduce anxiety, particularly when learners face challenges or struggle with new concepts. In conclusion, by providing regular encouragement and acknowledging successes, educators can boost older learners' motivation, confidence, and sustained engagement in the learning process (Brookfield, 1986).



Promoting Autonomy

Promoting autonomy in learning is essential for enhancing motivation and engagement among older learners. According to Knowles, allowing learners to have control over their educational process significantly boosts their sense of ownership and investment in their learning. Older adults, in particular, appreciate the opportunity to choose topics that resonate with their personal interests or align with their life experiences. This autonomy makes the learning process more meaningful, as learners can connect new information with their goals and needs (Knowles, 1984). By giving learners the freedom to decide how they want to demonstrate their learning—whether through projects, presentations, or written assessments—educators empower them to express their knowledge in ways that best suit their strengths and preferences (Merriam, 2007).



This approach not only increases motivation but also promotes a deeper understanding of the material, as learners take an active role in shaping their educational experience. Knowles emphasizes that self-directed learning, which encourages independence, is particularly effective for adult learners, who tend to be more self-motivated and goal-oriented.



Furthermore, promoting autonomy fosters a sense of responsibility and confidence in learners, helping them view themselves as capable and capable of managing their own learning.

As older adults often have a wealth of personal experiences and knowledge, allowing them to guide their learning ensures that their wisdom is respected and incorporated into the educational experience. In conclusion, promoting autonomy helps create a more engaging and personalized learning environment for older adults, leading to improved motivation and a sense of accomplishment (Knowles, 1984).



Integrating physical activity

Integrating physical activity into the learning process for older adults offers numerous benefits, particularly for cognitive function, stress reduction, and overall well-being. According to Sherrington et al. (2019), engaging in physical activities such as stretching, yoga, or even short walks during lessons can significantly enhance seniors' cognitive performance and physical health (Catherine Sherrington, 2019). Regular movement improves blood flow to the brain, which is associated with better memory retention and cognitive function, making it easier for older learners to process and retain information (Merriam, 2007). Moreover, physical activity helps alleviate stress and anxiety, promoting a more relaxed and focused learning environment. For older adults, this combination of physical and mental engagement can help combat fatigue, increase energy levels, and improve mood, all of which contribute to a positive learning experience (Brookfield, 1986).

Activities such as gentle stretches or simple yoga poses can be easily incorporated into lessons, making learning both more interactive and physically beneficial. Sherrington et al. suggest that even short bursts of activity during classes can help improve concentration and motivation, as it allows learners to refresh and refocus. Encouraging movement throughout lessons also helps promote social interaction, as learners can engage with one another while participating in activities.

Additionally, the incorporation of physical activity reinforces the connection between mind and body, emphasizing the holistic approach to learning that benefits older adults. In conclusion, integrating physical activity into educational settings not only enhances cognitive abilities but also fosters a healthier, more dynamic learning environment for seniors (Catherine Sherrington, 2019).





Summary

Teaching adults, especially those over 60, requires understanding their specific needs and preferences. Best practices in adult education emphasize the importance of engaging, practical, and supportive learning environments that respect their pace, provide autonomy, and promote social interaction. Tailoring educational experiences to the unique characteristics of older learners ensures that education remains a valuable lifelong endeavor, ultimately contributing to healthier and more active aging.





Conclusions and recommendations for further work on the results

The research conducted within the framework of the "Golden Horizons" project has provided an in-depth analysis of lifelong learning opportunities and educational guidance for individuals aged 60+ in Poland and across Europe. The findings confirm the increasing necessity of accessible, well-structured educational programs that cater to the evolving needs of older adults. As demographic trends indicate a continuous rise in the number of people aged 60 and above, ensuring their active participation in learning remains a key challenge and opportunity for policymakers, educational institutions, and social organizations.

One of the most significant conclusions drawn from the study is the critical role of lifelong learning in enhancing the quality of life for seniors. Engaging in educational activities has proven to support cognitive health, promote social inclusion, and enable older adults to maintain independence in their daily lives. The research also highlights that while a growing number of initiatives are emerging across Europe, significant disparities exist in terms of access, funding, and participation rates among different countries and social groups. Addressing these gaps requires a multifaceted approach that includes policy reforms, tailored educational programs, and the integration of innovative teaching methodologies.



A major challenge identified in the research is the digital divide among older adults, particularly in Poland, where internet usage and digital literacy levels remain lower than the EU average. Given the increasing digitalization of services, from healthcare to financial transactions, digital education for seniors should be prioritized. Programs aimed at improving technological skills should be widely available and adapted to the learning pace and preferences of older learners. Local community centers, libraries, and Universities of the Third Age can play a crucial role in bridging this digital gap by offering structured yet flexible training sessions that encourage digital confidence.

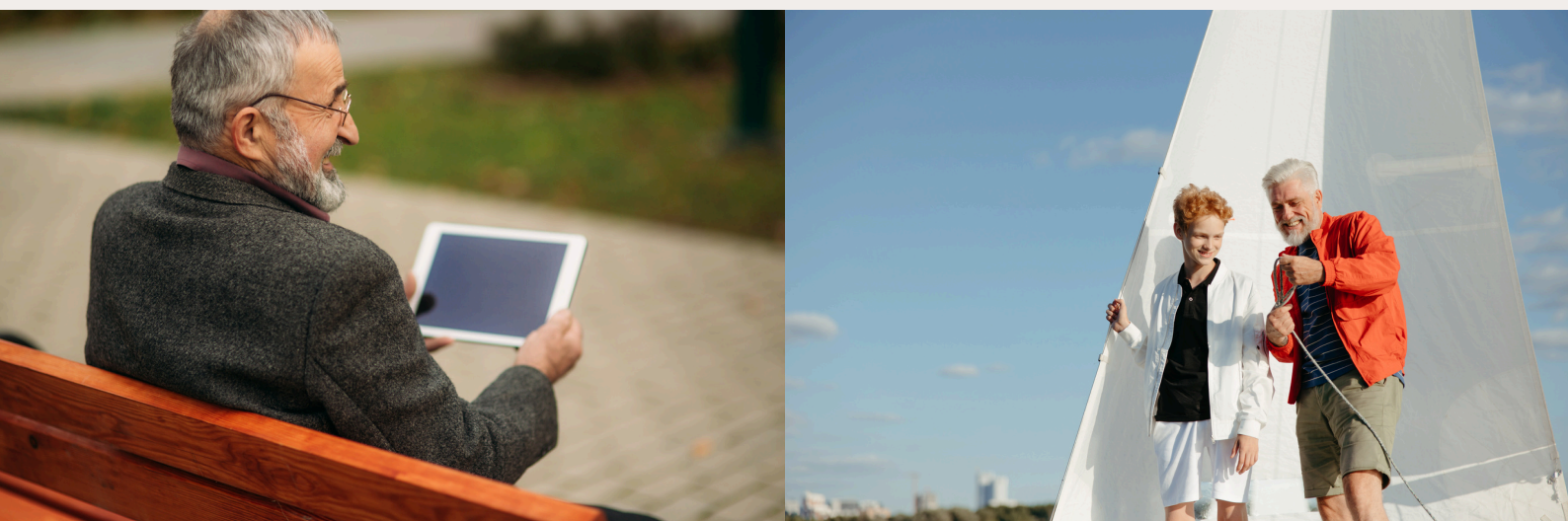
Another key finding underscores the importance of intergenerational learning as an effective means of knowledge exchange and social integration. Encouraging interactions between younger and older generations in educational settings fosters mutual understanding, strengthens community ties, and enhances motivation among older learners. Intergenerational programs, such as mentorship initiatives or collaborative projects, should be expanded and integrated into existing educational frameworks to provide meaningful engagement for seniors.



Despite the availability of lifelong learning opportunities, motivational and psychological barriers remain a significant issue for many older adults. Negative past educational experiences, fear of failure, or lack of confidence often deter seniors from engaging in learning activities. Therefore, future initiatives should focus on creating inclusive and supportive learning environments that emphasize personal development rather than formal assessment. Encouraging self-directed learning, offering informal learning spaces, and promoting peer support networks can significantly boost participation rates among older adults.

The study also reveals that health and wellness education is a crucial component of lifelong learning for seniors. Educational programs that address physical fitness, mental health, and nutritional awareness can significantly improve the overall well-being of older individuals. Policymakers and educators should collaborate to design curricula that integrate health education with practical activities, ensuring that seniors have access to holistic learning experiences that support both their cognitive and physical well-being.

Funding and policy support are essential for sustaining and expanding educational opportunities for seniors. Governments and educational institutions should work towards ensuring stable financial support for lifelong learning initiatives. This includes increasing funding for Universities of the Third Age, expanding digital education programs, and investing in senior-friendly learning infrastructure. Additionally, European cooperation in adult education should be strengthened, allowing countries to exchange best practices and develop joint programs that enhance educational accessibility for older learners across borders.





Looking ahead, future research should explore the long-term impact of lifelong learning on the well-being of seniors, particularly in areas such as cognitive resilience, emotional well-being, and social integration. Further studies could also focus on identifying the most effective teaching methodologies and technological tools to enhance learning experiences for older adults. In addition, continuous evaluation of existing programs is necessary to refine and adapt educational initiatives to meet the evolving needs of seniors effectively.

In conclusion, lifelong learning for individuals aged 60+ is an indispensable component of an inclusive and age-friendly society. The findings of this research emphasize the need for continuous efforts to expand, adapt, and improve educational opportunities for older adults. By implementing targeted policies, fostering intergenerational learning, enhancing digital literacy, and ensuring adequate funding, societies can empower seniors to remain active, engaged, and independent participants in their communities. The "Golden Horizons" project provides a solid foundation for further action, paving the way for innovative approaches that will shape the future of senior education in Poland and beyond.





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Final Conclusions

1. A need for tailored educational guidance for people 60+

Desk research in both Poland and Italy confirms a clear and increasing demand for educational opportunities among people aged 60 and above. However, these individuals often encounter specific barriers that prevent them from accessing or benefiting from existing educational services. These barriers include:

- Lack of awareness about available opportunities.
- Absence of dedicated guidance services tailored to their needs.
- Digital exclusion and low confidence in using technology.
- Limited mobility or transportation issues.
- Health-related constraints.
- Perception that formal education is no longer accessible or useful to them.

Importantly, the research shows that older adults are not necessarily uninterested in education; on the contrary, many express a desire to remain intellectually engaged, socially active, and independent. However, they need support that is empathetic, respectful, and responsive to their stage of life. The current absence of a structured, specialized system for educational guidance in both countries highlights the relevance of the project's objective to create a new, innovative service specifically aimed at people aged 60+.



2. Current gaps in educational guidance services

There is a notable lack of structured and targeted educational guidance for the 60+ population in both Poland and Italy. Existing initiatives for older adults often focus on social or recreational activities without linking these to a broader framework of lifelong learning. Moreover, guidance—when available—is typically informal, fragmented, and not part of a systematic offer within adult education institutions. This gap further reinforces the need for an innovative, coherent approach that builds on best practices and introduces dedicated tools and methodologies to support older learners in defining and achieving their personal learning goals.

3. Understanding the motivations and barriers of learners aged 60+

The motivations for older adults to engage in education differ significantly from those of younger learners. Key drivers include:

- A desire to stay mentally active and cognitively stimulated.
- Social interaction and avoidance of isolation.
- Increased sense of purpose and personal development.
- Interest in exploring new topics or hobbies.
- Willingness to contribute to family or community with new skills.

However, alongside these motivations, the research highlights a complex set of barriers. These include:

- A lack of confidence in one's learning ability, often rooted in outdated perceptions of education.
- Limited prior experience with structured learning environments.
- Challenges with digital tools and online platforms.
- Unclear or confusing information about available learning opportunities.
- Absence of a support system to help navigate the learning landscape.

These findings underline the importance of personalized, flexible, and empowering educational guidance that addresses both the cognitive and emotional needs of older adults.



4. The central role of adult education staff

The success of any guidance service hinges on the skills, attitudes, and preparedness of adult education staff. The research in both countries reveals a significant need for professional development in this area. Many educators lack specific training in working with older adults, particularly in areas such as:

- Age-sensitive pedagogy.
- Communication with older learners.
- Understanding age-related changes in cognition, motivation, and social dynamics.
- Addressing digital literacy challenges compassionately and effectively.

This clearly supports the development of the “Handbook for adult education staff” as a key project output. The handbook should serve not only as a set of guidelines but also as a capacity-building tool to increase the competencies, confidence, and motivation of educators working with the 60+ group.

5. Good practices exist, but are not scaled or systematized

The desk research identified several local or regional good practices in both Poland and Italy—for example, intergenerational workshops, University of the Third Age programs, and volunteer-based mentoring. However, these are often limited in scope, reliant on individual leaders or short-term funding, and lack coordination. There is no national framework or strategy that elevates such practices to a consistent, replicable model. This represents both a challenge and an opportunity: the project can synthesize these isolated successes into a structured, evidence-based approach to educational guidance for older adults.





Final recommendations for further work on the results

1. Pilot the educational guidance service in real-life conditions

The newly developed tools and services should be piloted with actual participants aged 60+ in both countries. This pilot phase should be carefully documented and evaluated. Key areas to assess include:

- Accessibility of the guidance process.
- Relevance of the guidance tools to individual learning needs.
- Effectiveness of communication methods.
- Outcomes in terms of increased engagement, satisfaction, and learning uptake.

The pilot should also gather feedback from the educators involved to ensure the service is practical, realistic, and scalable.

2. Ensure the service is flexible and personalized

Older adults have diverse life experiences, interests, and needs. Some may want to learn for leisure, others for practical reasons (e.g., digital banking), and some for social engagement. Educational guidance must be personalized to:

- Help identify individual learning goals.
- Recommend learning pathways (formal, non-formal, informal).
- Acknowledge and build on prior knowledge and life experience.

Rigid, standardized models will not work for this group. Guidance should instead promote autonomy, dignity, and respect for learners' choices.





3. Address digital literacy as a priority

While digital exclusion is a serious barrier, many older adults are open to learning digital skills if supported properly. The guidance service should incorporate recommendations for digital skills development (preferably in-person and step-by-step).

4. Enhance the competence of adult education staff

To ensure sustainable impact, it is essential to invest in the training and professional development of adult education staff. The “Handbook for adult education staff” should:

- Include clear goals and a program of the educational guidance.
- Provide theoretical foundations on adult learning and ageing.
- Offer organisational and logistical recommendations.
- Address inclusive and culturally sensitive approaches to working with diverse older populations.

5. Build local ecosystems for learning and guidance

Educational guidance for older adults should not be the sole responsibility of education institutions. It should be embedded within a broader community ecosystem that includes:

- Local institutions.
- Libraries and community centers.
- Senior clubs and pensioner associations.
- NGOs and volunteer organizations.

Establishing such networks will enhance outreach, reduce duplication, and support referrals between services. It will also ensure that guidance responds holistically to the learning, social, and emotional needs of older people.



6. Create a simple monitoring and evaluation framework

To demonstrate the effectiveness of the guidance service and support its improvement, a light and user-friendly monitoring system should be developed. This system could include:

- Learner satisfaction survey.
- Individual progress diary.

Collecting and analyzing this data will not only help improve the service but also support future advocacy, funding applications, and scaling to other regions or countries.



Final Remarks

The findings of the desk research validate the core assumptions of the project: that older adults are willing and capable of engaging in meaningful learning, but they require structured, respectful, and empathetic support to do so. The current absence of dedicated guidance services for the 60+ population in both Poland and Italy presents a strategic opportunity.

By developing a comprehensive guidance service and a practical handbook for educators, the project can make a significant contribution to the field of adult education in Europe. It can empower older people to remain active, connected, and fulfilled in later life—and at the same time, help adult education institutions to expand their relevance and social impact.

The upcoming phases of piloting, staff development, and outreach should be seen not only as project activities but as steps toward a new model of inclusive, age-friendly lifelong learning





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PROJECT: „GOLDEN HORIZONS: NAVIGATING LIFELONG LEARNING PATHWAYS FOR SENIORS”



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