

The Role of University in Seniors' Education: A Romanian Perspective

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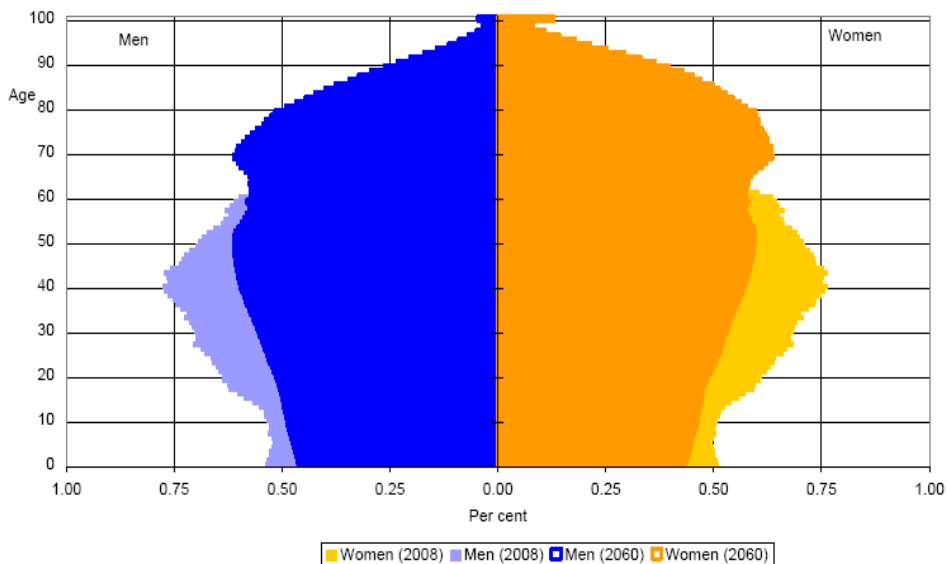
Abstract

The continuous education of university professors gets new valences and supplementary elements of quality and innovation, if it is studied from the perspective of the university mission to initiate, organize, and launch seniors' education projects. In this study, using the method of comprehensive interviews, we analyzed the state of the art of the cooperation between universities and seniors education providers in Romania with the aim of identifying the best practices and suggesting new ways of approaching this field, unjustly ignored in education sciences literature. The conclusions highlight the fact that, although the educational infrastructure may be available to seniors, consistent efforts must be done in the direction of strengthening the cooperation between seniors' education stakeholders, at both European and Romanian level.

Keywords: seniors' education, popular universities, qualitative research, adult education, digital competences

1 Introduction

Whether the education for seniors is a well-developed research area or not, the importance of studying the education of seniors has compelling arguments. First, let's take into account the aging process of European population and its ramifications in economy, technology and education: EUROPOP Convergence Scenarion by Eurostat shows a *rapid growth of the seniors' age group* (EUROSTAT, 2008). The same report shows that the *old age dependency ratio* is growing proportionally. This demographic phenomenon suggests that in the next decades we can expect a massive change in the European education as well: education for seniors will be the *next important challenge in adult education* and there will be a great demand for specialists working in this field. Of course, in order to create the offer we must know the educational demand of seniors (the desire of customers for goods and services they wish to buy or use) i.e. we must investigate curriculum preferences. We think that this particular type of research is a *sine qua non* condition for the adult education providers if they want to successfully adapt to the educational market (Strunga, 2009).



Source: Eurostat, EUROPOP2008 convergence scenario

Figure 1: European Population Projection for 2060 according to Eurostat

These developments have been observed by the European Commission and other experts working in this particular domain, key events being: First World Assembly on Aging held in Vienna (1982), United Nations Assembly (1991), European Year of Older People (1993), European Year of Lifelong Learning (1996), International Year of Older People (1999), Madrid World Congress on Aging (2002), and web4seniors Conference (2007). The International Plan of Action on Aging was created to support the Madrid World Congress on Aging (Cámara & Eguizábal, 2008; Osorio, 2003).

In Romania, there is no framework and no clear strategy for the development of the seniors (people with ages 55+) education. Initiatives that have reached this area have old roots especially since the interwar period, but *the first university of the third age - "University Nicolae Mioc"* worked for 10 years in Timisoara, offering courses such as: foreign languages, economics, Romanian literature, arts etc. After the closure of the university, seniors' education was conducted almost exclusively through traditional universities (without any curricular or institutional adaptation but), popular universities (without a substantial impact yet) and the rather less efficient and fragmented network of specialized NGOs (financed usually through European projects e.g. Grundtvig). Although in the National Education Law (published in the *Romanian Official Monitor*, part I, no. 18/ 10.01.2011) there is a section concerning *Lifelong Learning* (Title V), **seniors' education isn't mentioned**: 'Lifelong learning includes early education, pre-university education, higher education and professional education and formation of adults'. In the next paragraph, the law adds: 'Lifelong learning centers on the formation and development of the key competences and specific competences of a field of activity or qualification'. It is very clear that *the official representation of the lifelong learning doesn't include seniors' education*, even if a growing number of seniors seems to legitimate such a need. Also, *adults' education is rigidly reduced to the professional education and formation of adults* which doesn't include other learning possibilities which are not directly related to work, such it is the case of seniors education, where a significant part of the students are retired (and no longer active in their field). The omission of seniors' education from the National Education Law is very important because it regulates the *financing* of adults education and the immediate conclusion is that seniors' education programs and projects are not a priority for the Romanian government. According to the same documents, there are several *institutions responsible* for lifelong learning and these are (National Education Law, 2011, Title V, Article 343, first and second paragraphs): Ministry

of National Education; Ministry of Work, Family and Social Protection; Ministry of Culture and National Heritage; National Authority for Qualifications; Permanent learning community centers. These centers should be created by the local authority in cooperation with other institutions such as: education institutions, culture houses, continuous formation providers, social partners, NGOs. It is also mentioned in the Law that the activity of these centers is regulated by the National Education Ministry (Strunga, 2009).

2 Methodology

The methodological procedures used in this are two-fold: a) comprehensive interviews with 20 providers of seniors education from Romania (including university managers, NGO and project coordinators), including: Popular University of Timișoara and Culture House of the Municipality of Timișoara (represented by rector Pavel Dehelean); Popular University of Bucharest 'I. Dalles' and Culture House 'F. Schiller' (rector Mariana Dului and expert Ileana Boeru); University of Bucharest (vice-rector Professor Romița Iucu); Cultural Association 'Constantin Brâncuși' from Timișoara (President Professor Engineer Horia Ciocârlie, PhD); Liga Scriitorilor Români, Filiala Timișoara-Banat (President Doina Drăgan); Romanian Institute of Adult Education (Professor Simona Sava, PhD); 'V.A. Urechia' County Library from Galați (expert Zamfir Ilie); Orizont Cultural T NGO from Craiova (President Rodica Mială); EDUNET NGO (President Victor Dudău); Board of Seniors and Senior Association from Timișoara (President Nicu Vlad); Princess Margareta of Romania Foundation (President Mugurel Mărgărit) concerning the modalities university; b) we have also gathered data about the best practices in the field used especially in European projects in which Romanian institutions were partners or coordinators like: SEELERNEZ Project (IREA); Aging Well! Workshop (EDUNET); Colourful Ageing Workshop (EDUNET); Empowering Marginalized Elders Project (EDUNET); Computer Basic Traing for seniors over 50 years old ('V.A. Urechia' County Library); Grandparents School; GRU-09-GIVE-5-DJ-PT- "The Voice of European Seniors" (Orizont Cultural T); GRU-09- P-LP-121-DJ-CY "Audiovisual Languages in Social Inclusion Programmes for Disadvantaged Young Adults' (Orizont Cultural T)'; GRU-10-P-LP-57-DJ-TR - Mainstream of Integrating Adults through -Soul of the Music Energy" (Orizont Cultural T); GRU-10-GIVE-DK-DJ- "European Seniors Exchange Experience from a Social Café" (Orizont Cultural T); GRU-11-GIVE-12-DJ-IT/ Elder's

3 Results and discussion

The surveyed organizations are focused on the organization of social - educational, cultural - artistic and literary activities for seniors such as: shows, *cenacluri literare* (a particular Romanian form of artistic manifestation), conferences, book receptions, painting and photo exhibitions and so on; we observe a tendency among intellectuals, former professors and teachers, engineers for conversation-based educational activities instead of the traditional ones (focused on lectures, mostly). They like to discuss with young people, to offer advices (sometimes in a more informal form of mentorship) and to participate in various creative activities (poetry, music, dancing, translation and so on).

An important component of these institutions' activity is the organization of courses in the field of foreign languages: English, German, French, Italian (in Timisoara) and English, German, Arab and Chinese (in Bucharest). These courses are organized in 2 modules: spring (march - may) and autumn (october - december); at the request of the students it can be organized intensive courses by summer (june, july and august). At each module (from both Popular University of Timisoara and Popular University of Bucharest) have participated about 500 students (and from these, 100 seniors); the courses were taught by teachers from the state education through the system of payment by hour. Popular education institutions do not have tenured staff, except the administrative and technical personnel. One of the most successful projects of the Popular University of Timisoara was '*Grandparents School*', with hundreds of participants, and here the courses were taught by experts from the Romanian Institute for Adult Education (and we want to particularly mention one of the best Romanian experts in this field - Professor Simona Sava, PhD from the West University of Timisoara). Popular Universities are also organizing all kinds of conferences with subjects ranging from: oriental religions, paranormal phenomena, gerontology and other medical themes (for example, the diet for people with heart conditions), international tourism, dog and cats care etc. These institutions usually have several classrooms (in Timisoara 2 rooms and a big hall and in Bucharest a classroom and a hall/auditorium) but if they need additional space, they can easily rent other rooms. The Popular Universities have usually 5-7 old and used computers and most of the time some beamers, audio and video hardware, illumination equipment and so on). In the same time, *cenaclul* seems to be one of the most important form of artistic expression for seniors: catalyzed by

intergenerational learning activities, this rather local event is intensively used by many cultural organizations from Timisoara like: Cultural Association 'Constantin Brâncuși' from Timișoara, Liga Scriitorilor Români, Filiala Timișoara-Banat and many others. The participation of seniors in such kind of events is largely the result of a steering group of volunteers, themselves authors, painters and composers. The people who are participating to these courses are mostly women; men don't seem to be interested so much with the possible exception of *cenaclul* who is an intergenerational learning event that includes both men and women, young and old, in a more genderwise adequate approach. Seniors are often proud to be Europeans and to be able to travel free in Europe. They are very interested to know writers and artists from other European states (Germany, United Kingdom, France) and this could be a great opportunity for organizing virtual conferences (like those from DALEC1 and DALEC2), artistic activities and *cenacluri*.

The surveyed institutions, especially popular universities from Timisoara and Bucharest are organizing courses certified by the National Qualifications Authority of the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Work, Family and Social Protection and Ministry of Culture and National Heritage. One of the most frequently organized courses includes: photography, floral arrangements, ambiental design (ikebana), hairstyling, tailoring. These courses had a great success especially at Popular University of Bucharest 'I. Dalles'

One of the most important conclusions is that, even if the above institutions organize courses for seniors, the use of ICT is still relatively low, very fragmented and depending a lot of the institutions' technical infrastructure and financing and also of the instructional design (especially trainer's pedagogical strategy). Intensive ICT courses were organized especially by 'V.A. Urechia' County Library, Culture House 'F. Schiller' and Popular University of Timisoara.

The initiatives for seniors' education are not included in a national or county strategy; rather they are the result of local communities which try to offer some educational opportunities for the large number of population which is represented by the seniors; some of the time the institutions that are organizing the courses are *public* (as it is the case with Popular Universities and Culture Houses, County Library 'V.A. Urechia', Romanian Institute of Adult Education) but most of the time they are *private* (Seniors' Board of Timisoara, Seniors' Association of Timisoara, Cultural Association 'Constantin Brâncuși' from Timișoara, Liga Scriitorilor Români, Filiala Timișoara-Banat, Orizont Cultural T

and so on). The latter category is also the most active in developing and promoting European projects and included many seniors who are, of course, interested to promote the interest of their social and demographical group. The involvement of private institutions is reinforced by the participations in many European projects, most of the time using the sectorial programme Grundtvig.

One of the most important issues that plagues seniors' education is *financing*. From the discussions we had with the above mentioned persons, public institutions receive very little money to organize seniors' education courses: the ICT dimension is even more neglected, since it needs rather large investments in technical infrastructure (computers, monitors, beamers etc). Private institutions get their money from European projects (Grundtvig or European Structural Funds available for the sector of human resources).

Most of the time, the trainers who are responsible for this courses are teachers themselves, as it is the case with almost all the interviewed organizations. Most of the time seniors, they devote their time to develop this field but without keeping in touch with each other (which is unusual, because some infrastructure still exists - as it is the case with ANUP, National Agency of Popular Universities). One exception could be Principess Margareta of Romania Foundation and Adam Muller Guttenbrun House which receive support from abroad.

The participation of adult to educational activities is still *very low* in Romania (with a several percent figure); the participation of seniors is *even lower* and the penetration of ICT in seniors' education seems to be *casual and fragmented* across institutions and organizations. Thus, in our opinion, there is a *great potential* for a joint project in this field. We could strenghten the existing infrastructure, developing in the same time more interest and exchange of best practices from Germany and other states that are more advanced in this field; a major point in this effort would be to connect the existing institutions: Romanian Institute of Adult Education, 'V.A. Urechia' County Library, Popular University and others in a national umbrella network that supervises and coordinates the seniors' education framework. This could be done in a European project only if we develop in the same time the ICT dimension because all this organizations are in different cities, regions but are, however, led by people who appreciate the potential of the new medias. This is the way in which we see the role of ICT in regional networking which adds, of course, to the formative dimension of ICT courses for seniors. A strong point in the Romanian setting is that the President of the Cultural Association 'Constantin Brâncuși' from Timișoara - Professor

Engineer Horia Ciocarlie is also the Dean of the Faculty of the Computer Sciences from the West University of Timisoara. This could be a great opportunity to make intergenerational learning activities in the ICT field and to make use of the existing infrastructure to organize courses for seniors Saturday or Sunday when the regular students don't use them (or maybe an Academic Week in the summer holiday). Another opportunity would be to buy several computers for the institutions that are in need of such equipment in the framework of a larger European project (e.g. Erasmus For All).

The role of ICT for seniors was best described by one participant of the study from Craiova as follows: 'Technology and advanced communication have transformed the world into a global community, and its main roles are: to help adults, senior citizens and volunteers to reflect and acquire competences necessary; to become effective educators, and the impact their actions can have on future learning; to provide adults, senior citizens and volunteers with creative languages to generate opportunities for intergenerational learning; to train adult's trainers to adopt methodological approach, becoming aware of the role that adult's as educator can have on social cohesion, and hence, reconsidering the value of adult's training institutions; to give the seniors the chance to be informed, to work with partners at local, national and international levels who support and share this vision; to create a world where every learner has access to a standard of education which can help them to improve their lives, a knowledge society for all; to improve a better quality of adults' learning, an easier integration in community life; ITC tools represent nowadays the key for an active involvement on everyday life as active European citizens; ICT is by itself an interesting and important educational theme, one of the necessary 'keys' for 'unlocking' understanding and participating in the world; use of ICT tools can enhance, promote and extend the practices of a human and democratic educational setting'. Even more, 'the acquisition of Digital Competence is an important element of supporting active ageing, opening up new learning opportunities for this group, either in formal or in informal settings. Using ICT is also a privileged means of learning while creating benefits across different generations, bringing young people and seniors together and tackling the "digital divide" or digital gap'.

4 Conclusions

The participation of adult to educational activities is still *very low* in Romania (with a several percent figure); the participation of seniors is *even lower* and the penetration of ICT in seniors' education seems to be *casual and fragmented* across institutions and organizations. One of the most important conclusions is that, even if the above institutions organize courses for seniors, the use of ICT is still relatively low, very fragmented and depending a lot of the institutions' technical infrastructure and financing and also of the instructional design (especially trainer's pedagogical strategy). Thus, in our opinion, there is a *great potential* for developing numerous European projects in this field. We could strengthen the existing infrastructure, developing in the same time more interest and exchange of best practices from Germany and other states that are more advanced in this field; a major point in this effort would be to connect the existing institutions: Romanian Institute of Adult Education, 'V.A. Urechia' County Library, Popular Universities and others in a national umbrella network that supervises and coordinates the seniors' education framework. This could be done in a European project only if we develop in the same time the ICT dimension because all this organizations are in different cities, regions but are, however, led by people who appreciate the potential of the new media. This is the way in which we see the role of ICT in regional networking which adds, of course, to the formative dimension of ICT courses for seniors. This could be a great opportunity to make intergenerational learning activities in the ICT field and to make use of the existing infrastructure to organize courses for seniors Saturday or Sunday when the regular students don't use them.

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