

THE POLISH UNIVERSITIES OF THE THIRD AGE

Ideas and purposes

The **Third Age University** was an idea which originated in Western Europe and which has spread throughout the world. First organised in Toulouse in 1973, the idea was to enable older people, mainly pensioners, to live a better and longer life.

Gerontologists proved that there was a close link between intellectual and physical activity, and good health. In particular, systematic exercises to improve physical adroitness influence the maintenance of health and physical form, and thus the quality of human life. This in turn has a bearing on the length of active social life, independence and mental acuity.

For a long time the picture of an old, ill and disabled person dominated post-second World War fiction as the 'negative ageing model', and it has been necessary to counter this with the introduction of the 'competent ageing model' in which lifelong learning is considered to be an indispensable factor adding to quality of life. This model requires:

- adaptability of mind,
- activities which stretch the person intellectually, leading to acquisition of more knowledge and understanding,
- social success and personal growth,
- independence,
- support from legal and welfare systems.

The provision of education for retired people is currently of great importance. The conviction exists, as is shown in the literature on the subject, that 'health and adroitness is not only the privilege of youth', and 'life is a process of study'. There is no doubt that 'an old person can learn', because he/she has at his/her disposal a 'crystallised intelligence' of general knowledge, knowledge gained from experience and a vast store of vocabulary (Szwarc 1995).

The first third age university in Poland was founded in Warsaw in 1975. Today there are 15 such institutions and although we were not the first to promote this initiative the idea of 'regeneration through learning' was given popular support much earlier in Poland than elsewhere in the world. After the second World War, Aleksander Kaminski built on Helena Radlinska's research on ageing and

education and found a definite correlation between gerontological and pedagogical problems. He pointed out that 'the orphanship of old people now faced by society is worse than child orphanship' and advocated 'gerontological prophylaxis', *i.e.* the 'gaining of interests and aspirations, as well as skills and customs, which, when retirement time came, would help the person deal with the increasing years, lengthening the active life-span and bringing personal satisfaction' (Kaminski 1971). In other words, the universities for third age students are the means whereby older people can have a dignified and fulfilling life.

Tasks and functions. Rules of organisation

Third age universities are institutions for the social dissemination of science and knowledge to old people - those in the so-called 'third age', normally those aged 60 years and upwards (in Poland average life expectancy is 76 for women and 68 for men). A magazine produced by a voluntary group of senior citizens in one city gives the rationale for the creation of their society in these words: 'each of us is needed, and when you are willing to help others you help yourself'.

So groups were set up in the largest Polish towns to organise meetings of anywhere between 20 and 300 people to offer educational, cultural and social activities and opportunities for comprehensive, authentic and constant activity in the fields of knowledge, science and the arts. There are links with universities and educational societies such as the Association of Polish Universities, the Association of Polish Adult Educators. Organisers and contributors include the universities, higher and further education institutions, educational associations, institutions for medical education, providers of health and social care and voluntary senior citizens' associations. Besides the commitment to lifelong learning, the third age universities have a broader range of activity than mainstream universities in that they provide physical as well as mental activities for the older student, making them true educational and social centres.

Although initially set up with financial support from government sources, since 1989 they have been largely self-financing. This has led to the formation of co-operatives in which lecturers disseminate their work on a voluntary, unpaid basis and students pay a nominal fee for their classes. Only rarely do local government sources provide any funding, although the linked mainstream universities offer free use of their facilities where possible.

Access to the third age institutions has always been very open, with no barriers of age, health, or educational qualifications. Some pensioners are comparatively young, even in their 40s or 50s, whilst others are much older, well into their 80s. Former occupations, marital status or levels of education are not considered important: it is the commitment and interest of the individual student which determines the level of study. No qualifications are awarded which would lead to career advancement or to the membership of professional bodies, but students are given certificates of attendance. The main reward, according to recent academic research, is the personal growth derived from participation in learning at a higher education institution at a similar level to that of a mainstream university, as well as from interaction with other students (Kiferacińska 1994).

The admission process for the third age institution is the same as that for the traditional universities, but a council of students, called the 'Social Council' or 'Council of Students' Body' is responsible for the organisation, with curriculum development being carried out by a 'Programme Council' made up of representatives of the universities, backing institutions and students' representatives.

The organisation of the school year is similar to that of other Polish universities, with the year divided into semesters. Lectures and seminars, offered monthly or weekly depending on the course, resemble those offered to traditional students and can be roughly divided into three broad themes: education; creative or self-development courses; and physical education. These are delivered through popular lectures, complemented by seminars and laboratory work, designed to expand the students' knowledge as they progress through the academic year.

Subjects vary considerably but include medicine, psychology, social sciences, history of art and culture, law, religion and even parapsychology. Courses on medicine are particularly well received,

perhaps understandably considering the average age of the students, and language courses offered on a mainly voluntary basis by retired teachers have recently become very popular. There is also considerable interest in the social sciences and world affairs, with students taking part in excursions whenever this is possible given the financial restrictions of living on a pension. It is interesting to note that the older students prefer to learn about current affairs by direct contact with a lecturer - they are less willing to watch television.

Third Age Universities in Scientific Research in Poland

In Poland, senior citizens are considered a separate social group. This is not intended in any negative way, but is a reflection of their age, social, financial and personal circumstances. Recent research parallels raise questions in relation to the elderly of nutrition, hygiene and lifestyle, and their links to psychosocial behaviour and mitigating the negative effects of ageing. The correlation between the ageing process and mental activity, and the role of the third age university, is a very popular area of research, with investigators unanimous about the positive effects of lifelong learning. Such institutions offer the senior citizen the opportunity for a full life of mental and physical activity, in company with others of their own social group, and satisfy intellectual, social and recreational needs.

References

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