

Evaluating the benefits and barriers of Lifelong Learning for older adults

Panayiotis Alexandropoulos, *Philologist (BA, MEd) and Psychologist (BA, MA), Adult Trainer at Second Chance School (SDE) of Kalamata, sdealexandropoulos@gmail.com*

Abstract: Given the global concern about the increasing elderly population, adult learning has received widespread attention from many countries. Aged 65 and over or retired individuals who engage in lifelong learning are termed senior learners and their numbers are rising. The current surge in older learners reflects an increase in initiatives to promote quality of life (QoL). Older adult learners’ participation in learning activities is examined within the conceptual framework developed from literature on active aging, successful aging, optimal aging, and engagement theories. Engagement in learning activities is posited to contribute to increased awareness and overall well-being, a realization that aged learners play an active part in their communities. Older learners who actively take part in third-age learning programs have the potential to enhance their psychological and psychosocial well-being. This type of learning program promotes physical activity, cognitive growth, leisure, and social contact.

Keywords: Adult Education, Lifelong Learning, Third Age, Psychology, Skills

1. Introduction

The “third age”, usually defined as “the stage of proactive retirement”, has begun or is about to begin for the baby boomer generation. Baby boomers are seniors who were born between 1946 and 1964. They have the chance to widen their comprehensive knowledge and hone specific skills as they are no longer tied to full-time employment and child-rearing responsibilities (Talmage, Lacher, Pstross, Knopf, & Burkhart, 2015). It is worth noting that there is currently no established social norm that defines the boundaries of retirement. This period of retirement due to greater life expectancy has the potential to redefine the conventional notion of aging for the baby boomer population (Rothstein & Schull, 2010).

The baby boomer population, which is about 75 million in the United States, is a significant demographic force to be reckoned with. Furthermore, today's older people have a higher education level than their predecessors. Although there is no commonly acknowledged definition of the age at which a person is considered an “older adult”, the Reference and User Services Association of the American Library Association considers anybody 50 years of age or over to be an older person. It is worth noting that older people have historically had limited opportunities for higher education. However, data suggests that older people have a great desire to learn. A poll of 2,645 Australians aged 50 years or older found widespread interest in educational activities (Findsen & Formosa, 2012).

Laslett's concept of life can be divided into four distinct phases: first, second, third and fourth age, with retirement marking the beginning of the third age. This stage is often seen as the culmination of life, characterised by a reduction or cessation of many domestic and family responsibilities. Such a change allows people in this age group, who are no longer actively employed, the flexibility of time and environment to pursue their passions and interests. It is crucial to note that the third age does not have a specific chronological definition, as it represents a profound and distinctive stage of psychological development that varies from one community and individual to another. The third age is a period characterised by a higher level of discretionary income and may involve a longer period of retirement due to increased life expectancy. During this time, people focused on maintaining their vitality and well-being, which is why Laslett referred to it as the “crown of life”(Laslett, 1989).

Canadian research, based on focus group discussions with older people, shows that 81% of retirees consider learning opportunities after retirement to be of paramount importance. Gender, age, mental and physical health, income and educational attainment are all factors associated with increased enthusiasm for lifelong learning (Sloane-Seale & Kops, 2004). Furthermore, according to the findings of Sloane-Seale and Kops (2004) and Cross (2014) (J. Cross, 2014), women and those with higher academic qualifications are more likely to engage in lifelong learning programmes. Furthermore, statistics show that women (52%) are more likely than their male counterparts (39%) to have visited a library in the previous year (Horrigan, 2015). Furthermore, those with higher levels of education, such as university degrees, prefer structured educational experiences (60% of those with advanced education compared to 49% of those with a high school diploma or less). Despite the relative lack of focused attention from libraries on this issue, research suggests that people in the third age are eager to participate in library programmes. They see libraries as a preferred avenue for continuing education (Yamashita, López, Soligo, & Keene, 2017).

Populations worldwide are aging at an unprecedented rate. According to research from notable scholars, the figures indicate that elder citizens aged 65 and beyond will shortly outnumber young people under 5 years old (Flood & Phillips, 2007; Leung, Chi, & Lui, 2006; Narushima, 2008). As a result, various governments have recognized the necessity of implementing initiatives to safeguard and boost the well-being of older demographic groups (McCaughan, 2007). Extensive investigation has highlighted the manifold advantages of active scholarship in later life for the overall welfare of senior citizens (Scourfield, 2006; Seals, Clanton, Agarwal, Doswell, & Thomas, 2008). These benefits encompass amplified social involvement, improved coping mechanisms, heightened cognitive and physical participation, and enhanced resourcefulness.

According to Leung et al. (2006), older adults who have engaged in lifelong learning see it as a means of strengthening their social ties and achieving personal fulfilment. At the same time, they acquire new skills that can contribute to employment opportunities (Leung et al., 2006).

2. Benefits of Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning refers to both academic and informal education for the elderly. As outlined in the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning of the European Communities, the primary objectives of lifelong learning are to enhance employment opportunities and to promote community engagement (Allert, Richter, & Nejd, 2004). Adult learners and society as a whole can derive many benefits from lifelong learning, including improved well-being, social change, reduced unemployment and a reduction in domestic violence (Hammond, 2002; Jarvis, 2006). For older adults, education can serve as a reliable pathway to successful aging. Transformative education, which emphasises cognition, self-expression and active participation, has been found to produce significant and profound improvements in individuals' life satisfaction compared to developmental learning, which aims to improve personal and professional life (Bennetts, 2003).

Self-efficacy, the belief in one's ability to perform a task or behave in a certain way, is a key concept in this context. Those who meet the challenges of the educational process effectively can experience increased self-esteem and self-efficacy, which in turn influence their psychological well-being (Kubzansky, Kawachi, & Sparrow, 1999). Fraser (1991) found that women returning to work experienced a restoration of self-esteem after returning to school (Fraser, 1991). In other words, regardless of learners' initial levels of life satisfaction, the process of learning and its outcomes can be conducive to their well-being, increasing their self-confidence and overall quality of life (Hammond, 2004).

There is ample evidence to support the claim that older people become less of a burden on their families, and consequently on society's resources and amenities, when they are more energetic, sociable, healthy and intelligent (Findsen & Formosa, 2012). Positive links exist between social participation and both mental and physical health. These social interactions can take many forms, including group activities, productive endeavours (defined as those that result in the creation of goods or services), acts of kindness, formal and informal education, and leisure activities. In addition, quality of life is closely linked to any form of activity, be it physical, social or a combination of both. Those who lead more active lives tend to enjoy a higher quality of life than their more sedentary and isolated counterparts (Herzog, Ofstedal, & Wheeler, 2002).

While social ties have long been linked to well-being, a comprehensive analysis of nearly three hundred studies found those with quality connections to others tended to enjoy life more overall (Pinquart & Sörensen, 2003). During this time of life, many elders participate in cross-generational and civic endeavours that uplift the shared welfare of their neighbourhoods. Scholars have coined frameworks to depict the interlaced ties between advancing years, education, contentment, and communal prosperity. Meanwhile, some opt to connect through local community centres or religious groups, finding fulfilment through service and solidarity with a range of ages. However, for various reasons including loss or isolation, some in their twilight years lack such relationships and resources, left to face life's complexities with diminished support (Merriam & Kee, 2014).

The increasing number of people in the third age seeking opportunities to acquire new knowledge and skills is a notable trend. This trend is driven by the growing proportion of older adults and the myriad benefits that continued learning offers to the overall well-being of this population (Hazzlewood, 2003). A significant proportion of third-age people remain in good mental and physical health and are actively seeking ways to engage in intellectual pursuits and maintain cognitive vitality. Education in the third age includes recreational, social, psychological and academic benefits (Prieto, 2009). In addition, engagement in diverse activities that include academic, social and recreational dimensions is positively associated with improved health and increased life satisfaction among older adults. These benefits serve to mitigate the escalating healthcare costs associated with an aging population (Hanna & Perlstein, 2008). In addition, a sustained commitment to lifelong learning through a variety of cognitively challenging activities promotes greater overall happiness and a productive retirement (Sabates & Hammond, 2008).

There is a substantial body of evidence from both subjective accounts and empirical studies on learning in later life. It suggests that it doesn't just reduce dependency on publicly funded care, but also promotes the wellbeing of individuals and society as a whole. The study “Well-being and Happiness: Investigating the Future of Lifelong Learning” makes a significant contribution to understanding the potential links between learning and older people's well-being. Field (2009) emphasises that the evidence for the claim that education enhances well-being is robust, even if we tend to prioritise its economic benefits (Field, 2009). Analysis of this evidence suggests that lifelong learning is especially effective in increasing the well-being of our most vulnerable populations, such as elderly men and women, and that it has a small but significant, quantifiable positive impact on well-being. The area also associates lifelong learning with social capital, claiming that “engagement in education generally promotes social value by facilitating the development of social skills, expanding social networks, and promoting community values and acceptance of others.

While there is little empirical evidence - primarily correlational - for the idea that education in adolescence or later in life can delay cognitive decline, the value of lifelong learning goes beyond cognition. It keeps elderly people involved in their lives, contributing to cognitive maintenance, physical well-being, technological literacy, social connectivity and intellectual advancement. It also has the potential to improve neuroplasticity, fostering new neural connections and engaging new areas of the brain. Older adults have a key role to play in transferring knowledge to newer generations and sharing their principles and beliefs as lifelong learning initiatives gain momentum. The idea that a fulfilling life is one of continuous learning is strongly influenced by the personal narratives of older people. This provides more opportunities for intergenerational exchange of knowledge and skills, enhancing the sense of community among older people and enabling them to age in a healthy and cognitively active manner (McDonough, 2013).

Depression can develop when a person's sense of isolation interferes with regular functioning (De Jong Gierveld & Hagestad, 2006). This mental health condition is common and can

manifest itself at different stages of life, including childhood, adolescence and old age, as a result of the multiple challenges that aging presents to the older population. The numerous tragedies and transformations that older persons face during their lives can be particularly difficult to cope with (Mirowsky & Ross, 2002). These events can include issues related to physical health, autonomy, employment, financial security, family dynamics, social connections, housing and environmental conditions (Van Baarsen, Snijders, Smit, & Van Duijn, 2001). The burden of such circumstances can weigh heavily on older people and increase their vulnerability to depression, especially if they utilise ineffective coping techniques (Shahbazzadegan, Farmanbar, Ghanbari, & Roshan, 2010).

Educational programmes specifically tailored for the third age group have effectively addressed this important issue. Multiple investigations have underscored a link involving educational efforts focused on older people and advantageous consequences for mental wellness. Such educational involvements have proven to further older grownups' overall standard of living, self-regard, and means of addressing difficulties while reducing emotions of trouble, unease, and cognitive reduction (Aldridge & Lavender, 2000; Formosa, 2010).

3. How the World is Addressing Adult Education

The lifelong learning environment is rich and diversified, with a large choice of activities and initiatives accessible to individuals wishing to continually develop their knowledge and abilities. Comprehensive information about this topic is easily accessible through published studies and government policies. Lifelong learning activities take place in a variety of settings, including public and private educational institutions such as primary and secondary schools, hospitals, leisure centres, various organisations, libraries, museums, sports facilities, specialised institutions, businesses and workplaces. While some educational institutions have set up special departments for lifelong learning, others have integrated it seamlessly into their main curriculum. In addition, the rapid growth of online learning resources in recent years has greatly expanded the range of options available to students (Weinstein, 2004).

A historical viewpoint indicates a long tradition of offering chances for continuing learning. For example, Boston University initiated evening and weekend courses for educators as early as 1904 (Fitzgerald, 2001). Furthermore, recent breakthroughs in the subject have led to the establishment or expansion of various programmes. The Division of Extension Education (EXTED) is a new entry to the area, offering to provide non-credit educational and lifestyle activities for people aged 60 and over. Another notable institution is the College for Lifelong Learning (CLL) of the University System of New Hampshire, which has been serving the educational requirements of seniors since 1972, with over 4,000 students annually. As their mission states, “As you get to know us, you will find that every offering, every program, and every curriculum is designed with you, our mature learner, in mind”.

In South Florida, a region with a large senior population, many local universities offer a variety of lifelong learning initiatives. These include Learning in Retirement at Nova Southeastern

University, the Institute for Retired Professionals at the University of Miami, the Institute for Active Adults 50 Plus at Broward Community College, the Lifelong Learning Society at Florida Atlantic University, and the College for Seniors at Palm Beach Atlantic University. Florida International University (FIU) founded the Elder's Institute two decades ago as the Centre on Aging, which evolved into the College of Continuing and Professional Studies. It was renamed the Academy for Lifelong Learning, a more politically acceptable name, after state funding was withdrawn in 2002. Originally designed for older people, the programme now serves learners of all ages, offering more than 100 courses, mainly enrichment programmes, in two six-week sessions each semester (Weinstein, 2004).

Professor Pierre Vellas created the University of the Third Age (U3A) in France in 1973, initially based at the University of Social Sciences in Toulouse. Today, most U3A clubs are linked with nearby educational institutions. This educational model has been implemented in several countries, especially in Europe. The U3A model offers several advantages, including access to highly qualified trainers and a wide range of subjects. It also provides opportunities for both trainers and learners to engage in studies that encompass the professional, cultural or historical dimensions of adult education. In France, the concept emerged in the 1990s, with the establishment of the University of All Ages (UTA) or the University of Free Time (UTL).

A study of 69 baby boomers in Australia discovered that they saw libraries as a “social hub” and expressed a desire for lectures and organised interest-based meetings. A poll of older adults in Canada found that 81% of them considered classes and conferences to be their preferred method of learning, and when asked about their participation in educational programmes, libraries emerged as the top choice with the highest percentage of respondents (52%). Older adults have a variety of learning options open to them, some of which are integrated into or sponsored by formal academic institutions. In Australia, several Universities of the Third Age (U3A) organisations have received institutional backing. U3As are socio-cultural settings where older people can assess their existing knowledge of various subjects or acquire new knowledge in a congenial environment using appropriate methodologies (Swindell, 1993).

In the UK, institutions are using university facilities to run summer courses for senior citizens. In addition, several American colleges have established retirement communities on their campuses to allow residents to continue their education by attending or auditing classes. The worldwide popular Elderhostel programmes contribute to this effort. The Senior Studies Institute (SSI) at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow has become a world leader in providing lifelong learning for older adults, with over 3,000 participants each year. The SSI is unique in Scotland and has gained international recognition for the quality of its academic curriculum, which emphasises lifelong learning, practical skills, widening access and research. It also plays a growing role in advising businesses and government on age-related issues and supports a programme of intergenerational education.

Over the past two decades, there has been a significant increase in educational initiatives for older people, most of which are informal (Jarvis, 2009). This proliferation can be attributed to several factors, including increased life expectancy, favourable physical and financial well-

being, and higher levels of prior education. It is also linked to the endorsement of the concept of lifelong learning, which emphasises the benefits of education, and the emergence of more opportunities (Henkin & Zapf, 2006).

These programmes have been promoted by societies in various ways. The most well-known include the creation of physical spaces and organisations for engagement, the shaping of older people's values and self-confidence through networking platforms, and the development of systematic initiatives aimed at increasing social cohesion and group participation. As a result, many grassroots organisations have sprung up in communities around the world, capitalising on older adults' eagerness to continue learning. The Toronto District School Board's Elder's Morning Program, which ran from 2000 to 2006, served some 1,200 new students in a range of courses. Similarly, the Elder Academy Programme in Hong Kong offers courses that operate in a variety of educational institutions, and primary and secondary schools and are open to individuals of all ages (Tam, 2012). The programme's mission statement emphasises its aim to inspire older adults to pursue lifelong learning, take charge of their health, cultivate a sense of dignity, and promote public engagement, intergenerational unity and cross-sectoral collaboration. It is also important that older people are represented on the boards of these institutions. It should be noted that the process of curriculum development within these institutions remains somewhat opaque.

Some older adults, as reported by Glanz and Neikrug (1997), have found their involvement in research on aging enlightening, motivating and empowering (Glanz & Neikrug, 1997). In addition, the Gerontology Institute at the University of Massachusetts at Boston has successfully encouraged older adults to become competent researchers, and certain branches of the University of the Third Age have gained considerable experience in training their members in research (Caro, 1999; Withnall, 2000). Such activities, often referred to as “neurobics”, are accessible for self-directed exploration. Resources such as the Memory Bible offer conceptual strategies for maintaining cognitive vitality, accompanied by research recommendations on fitness, nutrition and lifestyle. Similar books and brain training programmes, such as Keep Your Brain Active and 20/20 Thinking, are available online (Boulton-Lewis, 2011). One particular study stands out, which implemented Senior Odyssey, a group-based advanced problem-solving programme, and then conducted a field study to examine engagement outcomes. The study found that Senior Odyssey participants showed increased processing capacity, slightly improved cognitive skills, increased attention, and increased reasoning demands after their participation compared to control groups (Stine-Morrow, Parisi, Morrow, Greene, & Park, 2007).

Institutions dedicated to lifelong learning are proliferating, particularly in Europe, North America, and Australia (Hansen, Talmage, Thaxton, & Knopf, 2019). However, despite the expansion of lifelong learning opportunities, a significant proportion of older people still face barriers to access and participation (Jim Ogg, 2021). A study across 14 European countries found that adults aged 60-69 participated in educational opportunities at an average rate of 7%, while those aged 70 and over had a significantly lower overall enrolment rate of only 3%. This

observed trend of older people discontinuing their participation in lifelong learning as they age highlights the need to reverse this pattern in order to prevent the disappearance of lifelong learning opportunities in later life (Narushima, Liu, & Diestelkamp, 2018).

4. Current Barriers

Personal attitudes, organisational constraints and various real-life challenges can get in the way of continuous learning. For example, attitudes can manifest themselves as self-doubt, which makes someone question their ability to acquire new knowledge. When it comes to organisational constraints, issues such as uninteresting or inadequate programme offerings, lack of awareness of available learning opportunities and difficulties in coordinating class schedules can hinder the learning process. In addition, situational barriers such as time constraints, financial constraints, transport problems and other practical barriers can also act as barriers to participation in learning activities. Sloane-Seale and Kops (2004) identified common challenges faced by those seeking education. Their study of proactive, mature learners showed that time constraints, a limited range of programme options and insufficient knowledge were frequently cited as barriers (Sloane-Seale & Kops, 2004).

The discussion of barriers to adult learning has been ongoing for over fifty years, focusing on attitudes, institutional structures and personal situations. Cross's framework, which divides challenges into these three main categories, is widely used to understand these difficulties. Situational factors include the personal circumstances that prevent individuals from participating in education. These include the direct and indirect costs associated with education, time constraints, balancing work, family and community responsibilities, geographical barriers and health issues. Institutional factors include challenges within educational institutions, such as access to information, admission policies, timetables, adaptability to individual needs, research support and resources available for older learners. The third category, personal factors, concerns an individual's attitude towards education and motivation to participate, both of which are significantly influenced by previous learning experiences, whether positive or negative (K. P. Cross, 1981). A fourth category, academic factors, introduced by Potter and Alderman in 1992, includes an individual's skills, such as reading and mathematics, information technology skills and various transversal skills, all of which can either facilitate or hinder their educational aspirations. Educational attitudes are also included in this category of factors (Potter, 1987).

Descriptive data from Latvia in 2016 show that 47.5 percent of the population was enrolled in formal or non-formal education programmes within the previous year, a significant increase from 32.7 percent in 2011. Institutional factors appear to be more common barriers than situational constraints. Among those who wanted to participate but could not, the main obstacle was the cost of the programme (56.5%), followed by scheduling conflicts with work or family obligations (37.6%), lack of suitable training opportunities (28.7%) and geographical distance (28.3%). The survey categorised participants into different age groups, and for older working

adults aged 55-64, the most important barrier to training, according to respondents, was the cost of the programmes (Sloka, Buligina, Dzelme, & Tora, 2022).

The European Commission is actively promoting more opportunities for older workers and retirees to engage in lifelong learning. Participating countries face five specific challenges regarding adult learning for older people: (a) reducing barriers to participation to improve equity; (b) ensuring the effectiveness of programmes for older learners through professional development and effective teaching methods; (c) recognising learning outcomes from structured, non-formal and informal learning; (d) investing in the education of older adults and migrants; and (e) promoting a better understanding of the benefits of adult learning, the barriers to its uptake and the importance of improved data on providers, trainers and training (Communities, 2006).

5. Future Plans

As lifespans lengthen globally, the graying of populations presents both challenges and opportunities for civic planners. In the United States especially, projections indicate that elders will comprise nearly a quarter of residents by 2060 - double today's figure. Already 15% of Americans fall into the 65-and-over demographic, and that share will balloon to 24% over the coming decades. Meanwhile, countries like Japan and Italy currently see over 20% of their individuals classified as seniors, with their ratios also set to rise appreciably. Such demographic shifts exert widespread impacts, demanding that governments worldwide rethink support networks for their growing contingents of older adults. Lifelong learning initiatives perennially require bolstering as populations age worldwide and individuals live increasingly active lives well into their later years (Mather, Jacobsen, & Pollard, 2015).

In addition to good physical health in later life, a fulfilling life for older people includes a sense of satisfaction and contentment. This study emphasises the need for lifelong learning initiatives that specifically target the social, psychological, economic and physical well-being of older people. It highlights the significance of thoughtful planning and the development of educational programmes that are not only effective but also practical, adaptable and timely. These well-designed programmes are critical to ensuring that older people experience an overall improvement in their health, as well as an increase in their level of productivity and satisfaction. According to research, community-based educational interventions for older people that enable them to maintain their independence, activity levels and social connections can help reduce the costs associated with an aging population. Therefore, both the government and the private sector need to formulate research-based comprehensive action plans that provide seniors with meaningful and life-enhancing opportunities for a healthy lifestyle and improved quality of life (Escolar Chua & De Guzman, 2014).

A nuanced assessment of the European experience in supporting lifelong learning in the context of aging populations yields a mixed conclusion. On the one hand, the entry of the baby boomer generation has increased the demand for educational and leisure initiatives, with several

successful examples deeply rooted in local and community contexts. However, there are significant differences between European countries in the uptake of lifelong learning initiatives specifically for older people. Lifelong learning in the workplace is crucial to meeting the challenges of an aging population. On the other hand, economic concerns for industry and business, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, pose a threat to the importance of learning for older people (J Ogg, 2021). While European universities have yet to fully accommodate older learners, implementing reforms could address the isolation faced by some elders and strengthen community ties. According to Mayo, the established education system neglects the needs of non-traditional students, prioritizing budgets over holistic development. A revised policy framework emphasizing continual growth through life's seasons rather than finances alone may better promote shared interests across generations. Connecting diverse groups within local neighbourhoods could counteract the risks facing those most withdrawn. Overall, adjusting approaches to equally serve all ages stands to benefit people and places in mutually supportive ways, as suggested by Mayo.(Mayo, 2018).

6. Conclusions

There are abundant chances for seniors to partake in enduring study ventures, no matter their physical well-being. These projects are accessible in differing areas and at fluctuating value runs, making them open to a wide assortment of more established grown-ups. In creating dynamic lifelong learning programs, instructors and well-being experts who interface with more established grown-ups ought to think about age-related changes and other explicit needs. Engaging in novel and fluctuating encounters has various advantages for more seasoned individuals. The proof proposes that showing and empowering more established grown-ups assists with expanding their self-esteem, life fulfilment and psychological well-being. Furthermore, giving progressed instruction opens doors and empowers more seasoned adults to remain cognitively enacted and associated with their networks. The assortment of programs accessible addresses the fluctuating requirements of more established grown-ups and permits them to pick exercises that intrigue and test them.

In addition, offering a variety of initiatives, such as health and lifestyle programmes tailored to the practical needs of older adults, promotes engagement as older people recognise the direct relevance of the information to their daily lives. On a global scale, aging presents both opportunities and challenges for public well-being. While considerable efforts have been made in the UK, US and Europe, as discussed above, there is still much to be done to overcome the barriers. Research shows that older people who remain physically and mentally fit make fewer demands on their families and society's resources and facilities. At the same time, physically and mentally fit older adults make valuable contributions to their communities through their acquired knowledge, skills and volunteerism.

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