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**Third Age Education and Participation of Older People in the Local Community**

**Relationship between older people and the local community. The local community belongs to older people.**

Progress has brought a significant prolongation of the third age to human life. Demographers claim that centenarians have been one of the two fastest growing age groups in the world in recent decades, the second being - the young will be pleased to hear - young millionaires, aged 25 to 30. If we look at the data for Slovenia we will see that the number of centenarians in 1995 was twenty nine, but in 2013 it has risen to two hundred and twenty four, an almost eightfold increase (Statistical Yearbook of Republic of Slovenia, 1995; Statistical Yearbook of Republic of Slovenia, 2013).

Today the third age lasts between 30 and 40 years. It has special features and characteristics, special principles and rules (Krajnc, 1992). Most of these are still being studied, since the reality is changing continuously.

The local community is the only community older people truly belong to. The family nest has been abandoned - the children now have their own families. Widowhood and single person households are common. Once retired, older people lose touch with their former work communities. As is the case with all other individuals, psychic and social equilibrium of older people depends on how well they get integrated into a new social community.

It could be said that before retirement people tend to have too little time for the local community, but after retirement they realize it is the only community they can actually join and be part of. In the neighbourhood, in the local community, in the place where they live they will be able to make new social contacts and develop more permanent interpersonal relations. This will give rise to regular ritual meetings, chats over coffee at a neighbour's place, offers of help with transportation, interest-based gathering of horticulturalists and garden owners, joint actions for renovation of local monuments, participation in cultural clubs or initiation of new cultural activities, cleaning campaigns, organization of grandchildren's care etc. All this adds value to the locality in which they live, for which the middle-aged adults and the youngest generations have no time and, therefore, no interest.

In Slovenia third age education saw its beginnings in the eighties of the previous century, in a social environment that differed from today's. At that time practically everybody was working, the younger generations were attending schools and preparing themselves for a career, which they later pursued. Life went on at a regular pace and it was older people who actually left an imprint on their home town. This was especially visible in smaller places. The young and the middle-aged population would leave for school or work every morning, whereas older people stayed behind and were closely connected - in good and bad - with their home town. That is why

they felt the need and wish to effect changes and improvements. As they were closely connected to the place in which they lived, their local community, they understood what projects were most important and should be prioritized.

The youngest identified with the social community of the school, the middle-aged with their job and company. This type of towns used to be referred to as “bedroom communities”, since the majority of people would return home from work only in the evening. The rhythm of social interaction was monotonous and repetitive. Roads were crowded during rush hours in the morning when people were going to work and school and again towards the evening when they were coming home. During the day the town belonged to older people. Here they satisfied their primary psycho-social needs, creating interpersonal relationships. They depended psychologically and socially on the local community. Consequently, the older generation developed a greater sensitivity for the requirements and events of the local community,

Today the observations made 30 years ago when we were working on the conception of third age education in Slovenia are still fairly valid, although we are in the process of transition from an industrial into an information society. The social behaviour patterns have undergone substantive changes. There are changes in family life, there is unemployment, new forms of work, and the educational process is prolonged to include the tertiary level. New types of more dispersed work are appearing, followed by more individualized forms of socializing in the public throughout the day.

The space where one can look for and get gainful employment has expanded internationally - to other European countries and beyond. It is similar with young people’s educational possibilities; they are marked by multiculturalism and globalization. If in the past people would be going to work to the nearest factory and the children to the nearest school, today many go far from home. It has become quite common that many are absent the whole week and return home only for weekends. Therefore, we could say that in the present social situation the local community and locality also belong to older people, as was the case in the past, perhaps even more so.

There are many cases showing how study circles organized by Third Age Universities have responded – to the needs of local development through education and other activities. They reveal different types of cooperation between older people and the local community. The ethnological study circle of a Slovenian Third Age University, for instance, included research education into its activities. They investigated the many chapels that used to be built in their rural region (date of erection, votive intention, authors of the paintings and sculptures, investors etc.). They explored a new aspect of the local history and produced an extensive publication. It is now being used in regular university studies because it is the only existing study of this particular locality. The study circle’s work has brought local inhabitants, schools and the tourists visiting the region a new cultural benefit.

Let me give you another example - the study circles (historical, ethnological, photography, film-making) from one of the Slovenian Third Age Universities, which operates in a region where hop production has been the main industry since the 19th century. The members have studied and explained hop production, the pride of the place, from many different angles. They have presented their newly gained knowledge in publication as well as through pictorial and film presentation. In the past hop pickers used to pour into this place from more distant, poorer neighbouring regions. The young women would often become local brides and stayed in the

place for good. They influenced the culinary tradition and the mixing of cultures and rituals. The film they produced, showing modern mechanical hop production, illustrates the economic development of this industry and indicates future trends, which must interest all generations.

Equally well-received were the study circles dealing with interpersonal relations, psychology, child care and education. The members of Third Age University undertook day care of school children during holidays while their parents were working so as not to leave the children unsupervised at home. They prepared a programme of games, excursions, cultural and sports activities and thus gave a structure to the children's free time. In this way this Third Age University gained some social power and became a major social subject in the community. The parents, children and the study circle members shared the satisfaction. Their knowledge was enhanced through active participation and had a positive impact on their self-image and self-confidence, which tends to falter and shrink after retirement.

Let me give you another illustration of older people's involvement in the local community. A stone-cutting study circle working within a folk high school has connected people of different generations in the community. The First World War anniversary was approaching when this group decided to rebuild a monument dedicated to a young officer, a Hungarian Hussar fighting for the Austrian Empire, who was after the enemy's victory brutally murdered and cut into pieces by Napoleon's soldiers. When later the territory came again under the Austrian Empire, a big symbolic monument was erected in his honour and remained there for the next 150 years until the Italian occupation following the First World War. When fascists destroyed the monument, the local people hid its parts in their gardens because they saw it as their own cultural heritage. The members of the stone-cutting circle went for help to the regional museum and so a faithful replica of the original monument was created. The members of the circle devoted all their free time to this task. They contacted the Ministry of Defence and they sent the honour guard to the opening ceremony. Through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs they established cooperation with the Hungarian Embassy, which also supported their efforts by providing the Hungarian honour guard in traditional Hussar uniforms for the occasion. Apart from this, there were other pressing details to be taken care of, such as purchase of stones of the right size, transportation, provision of the crane to raise the monument, liaison with local authorities, preparation of the programme for the celebration, invitations and posters, public campaign. Schools now arrange excursions to the monument, where children can learn a lot about their history. The study circle has also issued a publication to explain the historic significance of the monument.

The members have developed strong bonds, feelings of belonging and self-confirmation, which each of them experience in their own way. The town has acquired an additional cultural and historic value, which all inhabitants are proud of. The achievement of the study circle has become the achievement of the whole community. Intergenerational cooperation can begin when social exclusion of older people is overcome and each individual in the society has a mission; when different generations operate on the principle of complementarity. Divided responsibilities bring enrichment and a higher quality of co-existence to all generations in the community.

**The premises underlying the conception of third age education at the Slovenian Third Age University**

Since its beginnings the aim of the Slovenian Third Age University has been putting education in the service of the people. Besides learning objectives, all educational activities should lead to real life activities and the satisfaction of personal and societal needs. Third age education thus has three main goals: acquisition of new knowledge (educational goal), application of the knowledge through active involvement (action goal) for the benefit of the individual and the community (community goal). Adults do not learn like children - »accumulating knowledge for later life«. Adults want to know because they know exactly where and how they will be needing and using this knowledge (Krajnc, 2007).

When planning third age education in our institution, we had in mind three basic goals, described in the work by R. Kidd as education for being, becoming and belonging (Kidd, R., 1973). People need education and knowledge for their existence and it should circulate among them. In the process of education they become somebody they have not been before. They use their potential for full self-realization. By acquiring personal views and values they choose who they are and who they wish to belong to in the society. People gain knowledge partly in the interaction with other people and in interpersonal relationships. A high level of primary learning motivation in older adults makes their education effective and opens up possibilities for practical application of the knowledge acquired through specific activities (Krajnc & Ličen, 2002, pp. 34-40).

Apart from specifying the general goals of adult education, we included into our concept the specific goals for third age education. The acquired knowledge should help to prevent older people's social exclusion, contribute to their active ageing, and stimulate new activities (cultural, social and economic) in the local community. This is a precondition for intergenerational cooperation and a joint social action of all generations.

In our conception third age education and related activities are seen in the context of the local community. The practice has confirmed this orientation. Action oriented education and connections with the local development are a vital aspect of third age education in that they give the participants the possibility to actually use the newly obtained knowledge in their environment. Without the connections with the local community it would not be possible to realize the fundamental societal and individual goals of third age education, overcoming social exclusion, intergenerational cooperation and active ageing.

### **Training of Third Age University Mentors and Staff**

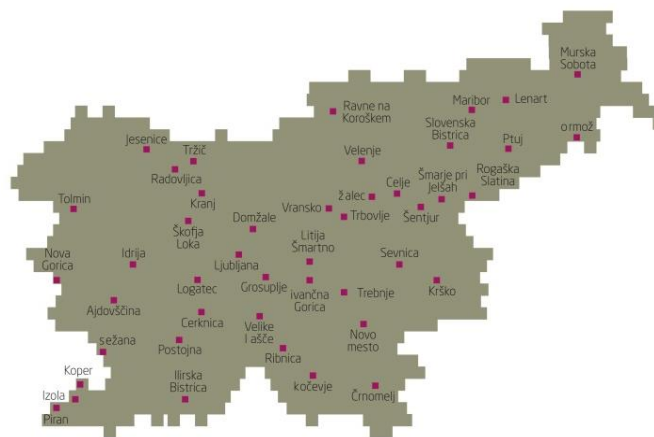
The importance of training of the future mentors and leaders of Third Age Universities has always been well understood by the promoters of third-age education, starting with the first experimental study group in 1984. Continuous education of professionals working in adult education remains one of our main goals. Thirty years ago when we were beginning to develop a network of Third Age Universities in Slovenia we introduced two-month training for the future mentors and local leaders of these organizations (school year 1985/86). Invited to participate in the training programme were also the local communities' personnel. Among the participants were pedagogues, psychologists, directors of homes for older people, physiotherapists, journalists, teachers, social workers, etc. (Krajnc, 1992).

The training programme was designed by the Department of Pedagogy and Andragogy of the University of Ljubljana. It dealt with social, economic and psychological changes experienced by people after retirement, andragogy and andragogical didactics, psycho-dynamics of small

groups, sociology of the local community and the development of the concept of the Third Age University of Ljubljana, its establishment (Pierre Vellas, Toulouse, France) and specificity of the Slovenian model. This provided a professional foundation for expansion of the Third Age University network. Involved in this training programme were 44 professionals. There was a great deal of public interest for the education of older people and we did not have the facilities to accept all applicants for the course.

The training programme paid a lot of attention to the cooperation of Third Age Universities with the local community. We elaborated local propositions to serve as a starting point for the education and activities of older people. Several areas of interest were suggested: cultural heritage, natural heritage, major local institutions (companies, schools, galleries, museums, local clubs, etc.) and »important local personalities«. The participants themselves made choices for their locality. The local authorities' plans could not be used as they were not enough concrete and specific. The future Third Age University leaders obtained here ideas for the educational programmes of individual study circles, recruited future mentors and thus opened up the way to the education and activities of the elderly. In this way the Third Age University grew roots in the local community and became a significant social factor in the local environment.

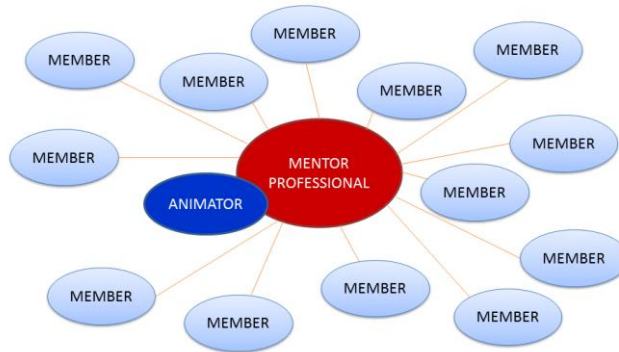
Picture 1: Network of Slovenian Third Age Universities



Third Age Universities around Slovenia (today fifty altogether) differ considerably in view of their local conditions. By attending courses and consultations, with an exchange of experience the leaders can improve their programmes and gain ideas for new forms of cooperation with the local environment. The framework for their activities is the uniform Third Age University model with study circles, mentors and animators, which actually represents one of the most democratic forms of adult education. The mentor is responsible for the implementation of the study programme, whereas the animator (one of the participants) takes care that the study circle's work is in tune with the local community and that the members are informed on current events. He or she investigates the possibilities for the use of the knowledge gained in the community. The mentor's and animator's tasks are clearly divided, with each of them assuming part of the responsibility for the work of the whole group. All members of the circle are involved in the activities connected with their education.

Picture 2: Model of study groups at the Slovenian Third Age University

- STUDY CIRCLE
- GOALS: Acquisition and use of knowledge (volunteering, work, culture)



In 2009 the Council of the Slovenian Third Age University ruled that all new mentors needed introductory training to learn about the characteristics of the third age, older adults' education and the basic concept of work. Within specific projects we managed to issue several professional publications, some of them in the electronic form. The Slovenian Third Age University also produces an electronic-news bulletin, which reaches practically every single student in the network and other institutions. Devoted particularly to the mentors of study circles is the electronic publication entitled *Mentor in Znanje* (The Mentor and Knowledge).

Several European projects, for instance the Norwegian Financial Mechanism fund, and the projects sponsored by the national Ministries have helped us to systematically foster practical application of older people's knowledge in their local environment. We have organized participation of cultural animators in museums and hospitals, gardening volunteers in botanical gardens, film creators in preparation of short films on active ageing, animators working on holiday programmes for children, narrators, leaders of workshops for young people with brain injuries, herbalists, environmental activists etc. Once a new action area is identified in the local community, we devote it our full attention so that our members can make the transition from acquisition of knowledge to its use in practice.

Picture 3: Forms of older people's participation in the local community



The highest level of training has been an 80-hour specialization of mentors for third age education, sponsored by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport. It was held in three Slovenian regions and performed in cooperation with the andragogues from the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ljubljana and didactical experts from the Faculty of Pedagogy of the University of Maribor. Our intention is to gradually upgrade this programme into a regular undergraduate study, comparable to the pre-school study programme (for nursery school teachers). Third age education, covering a period of 30 - 40 years, requires a special professional profile. The long-living society and the changes in the ways of life have brought about the need for this new type of profession. This entails overcoming social stereotypes concerning ageing and old people, which in the past may have had some substance, but have ceased to be valid (Krajnc & Ličen, 2002, pp. 34-40).

The conditions in which Third Age Universities work differ greatly from place to place, depending on the attitudes of local authorities. In some places the University is an important subject, enjoying local support, in others local authorities ignore them, thus blocking their own development. Once the society stops seeing education of older people as an unnecessary expense, the social status of the elderly and third age education will improve. We must be future-oriented and work for the good of people, the local and broader social community. We often feel that we are swimming against the current. Consoling is the thought of a Swedish colleague who said: »Only dead fish swim with the current«.

### **Education and activities in later life contribute to the development of the local community**

In an ageing society the elderly are the most numerous social group. This vast number of people should not dwell on the margins of society, resigned to spending their free time aimlessly, without any benefit for themselves or society. The elderly are becoming increasingly aware that they can retain or obtain an active role in society only if they keep developing and being active.

»As is the case with other people, the elderly can get reintegrated in the society only by being active. Research into the retirees' experience shows that deprived of their previous power and social status they do not want to return to work with their former employers; they no longer belong to the employees' community. However, they will get integrated successfully into new social groups if they join them on the basis of new activities« (Šantej, 2005, pp. 17).

The study circle of the Third Age University is a form of community education and life, into which older adults bring their knowledge and experience. They »put« it all together under the mentor's guidance, choose a topic of learning, roughly define their goals, find the resources and engage in a joint study. The responsibility for learning and other activities is in the hands of the mentor and the members of the study circle. Learning gets transformed into activities, aiming at an improvement of the life in the community (Findeisen & Šantej, 2013, pp. 9). Education is not an end in itself. Older people learn in order to effect changes, on themselves and in the community.

Third age universities can contribute a great deal to local development. The communities supporting civil initiatives, with a high number of activist groups, are likely to develop faster and will not end up on the brink of society. Informal education of older people is very valuable for this type of work and for social mobilization since it tends to respond quicker to the needs of the local community.

According to Carl Gustav Jung retirement brings a »cultural afternoon«, the time when the importance of material goods diminishes and one can devote one's time to one's inner needs, feelings, relations, culture and community. »Older people are interpreters of culture«, he argues. »Education and culture are mechanisms enabling the elderly and other social groups to change the world around them - the world they can adapt to better and change easier by means of knowledge and culture. This will also bring them a better understanding of themselves and others« (Findeisen, 2010, pp. 2).

### **Types and forms of the active participation of the Slovenian Third Age University's members in the local community**

A survey of the forms and types of activities of our older students in their local communities show that around 65 % are involved in various activities in the local community; some of them regularly, some of them only occasionally. The data was collected from reports, programmes and announcements about local activities and events, prepared by the Universities in the network (archives of the Slovenian Third Age University).

The most older students (55.4 %) are involved in the activities connected with local history, culture and folk traditions. Some take up research and investigation of local history and cultural and ethnological heritage; others work in museums and galleries as cultural mediators. This type of activities comprise also public presentations of research findings, organization of exhibitions and other public events, issuing of monographs and manuals, making of films on the chosen research topics, local theatre performances and other manifestations of amateur culture.

Next in frequency are various forms of intergenerational liaison and cooperation (17.4 %), intergenerational festivals, preparation of holiday activities for children, storytelling in nursery schools, organization of workshops for the young, etc.

Following are the activities in the field of natural sciences and environmental protection (16.2 %), e.g. gardening volunteers in the botanical gardens, herbology study circles with publications on medical herbs and their effects, organization of cleaning campaigns, etc.

Then comes involvement in various humanitarian activities (11 %), such as cooperation with UNICEF (rag doll project, preparation of exhibitions and sales) and hospital volunteers.

Other types and forms of older people's involvement in the local community are occasional or isolated events, with a lower rate of participation.

Table 1: Types and forms of older students' participation in the local community

Types and forms of older students' participation in the local community (in %)	
local history research, study of cultural, ethnological and industrial heritage, mediating in culture in museums and galleries	55.4
intergenerational cooperation	17.4
activities in the field of natural sciences, sustainable local economy	14.2
humanitarian activities, support for self-sufficiently and independency of older people	11.0



other	2.0
total	100.00

### **Festival of Knowledge and Culture in Later Life as an Example of Community practise**

Older people possess knowledge, pragmatic or experiential knowledge, and knowledge about relationships. Older people belong to several cultures simultaneously: the culture of the past and culture of the present, their views are important for anticipation of the future. In addition, there is no active ageing without cultural bridges between generations. These were the basic assumptions on which the Slovenian Third Age University based its International Festival of Knowledge and Culture in Later Life, a festival that has become both an important *community practice* and *a community of practice*. It involves learning as participation in the practice of social communities thus establishing both individual and social identity.

The participants of the festival (members of Slovenian Third Age Universities, associations of pensioners, members of non-governmental organizations from other countries) have established first, a common field (culture and knowledge), inspiring them to participate and to give meaning to their activities, secondly, a community, functioning as a social fabric in their learning and thirdly, the practice itself, i.e. the International Festival of Knowledge and Culture in Later Life.

The Festival of Knowledge and Culture in Later Life grew within the Slovenian Third Age Universities' network after 2011, when the number of member-organizations had risen to 45 and they became present in practically all major places in Slovenia. We saw the Festival as a possibility for the Universities in the network and other organizations dealing with older people to present to the wider public the results of their learning and creativity in culture and other fields. The various study activities in these institutions have resulted in numerous admirable achievements, supporting the development of their communities and bonding their generation to their environment.

For the Slovenian Third Age University the festival is an opportunity to establish connections, get to know one another, compare achievements in the local environment, learn about good practices in intergenerational and other types of participation in the local community. The festival enhances the older generation's visibility through their public appearances and connects them with other generations.

The aim of the Festival is decentralization of the Slovenian Third Age network. In order to enhance involvement with the local environment, it is always held in a different Slovenian region.

The first festival of this kind was held in Škofja Loka, in the north-western part of the country in 2011. On this occasion the members of different Third Age Universities presented their various achievements: the local theatre called Žar, a study on the Ter Valley (Terska dolina) based on the investigation of the life of Slovenes living in Italy, the culinary tradition in a former mining community. One of the organizations set up a small library, which features significantly in the local cultural life.

The second festival took place in Nova Gorica, the south-western coastal region of Slovenia in 2013. The regional organization here showed the results of their investigations, research and learning, such as the study of local dialects, research into the life of the women from Šavrinija (an area in the Slovenian Istria), who used to collect eggs from the farms in the region and sell them in towns, especially Trieste; a study of the life of the Slovenian women called Aleksandrinke, who in the 19th century used to emigrate to Egypt to serve as maids and nurses, connections and joint cultural activities with the Slovenian communities in Italy and the Italian community in Slovenia.

This year (2015) the Festival has brought together the Third Age Universities of the eastern part of the country in Velenje. One of the organizations has set up a brass band, a nice contribution to local cultural life; another presented their study on local castles and the possible contribution they could make to local cultural and tourist development. We were introduced to a non-governmental organization from Bosnia, connecting older people by means of cultural and humanitarian activities, and the international activities of the Third Age University from Zagreb, Croatia. The University from Ljubljana showed several short films on the topic of active ageing, produced within the European CINAGE project.

With time the Festival has gained greater prominence, as shows this year's honorary sponsorship by the President of the Republic. As a rule the event is accompanied by a prominent public campaign aimed at increasing the awareness of both professionals and lay persons on the importance of third age education and active participation of the elderly in the local and broader communities.

## **Abstract**

The Slovenian Third Age University has been operating for thirty-one years. Since its beginnings it has intended to be rooted in the local environment. Cooperation with the local community is the basis for involvement of older people, active ageing and application of older peoples' knowledge for the benefit of the local community. Educational goals should reflect the needs of the local environment and individual participant's interests.

The basic unit of the Third Age University is the study circle as the most democratic form of adult education. The main responsibility lies on the mentor (the professional aspect) and the animator, one of the group members, liaising between the group and the local community on the one hand and the national Third Age University on the other.

Training for establishment of third age education organizations all over Slovenia was initiated by The Department of Pedagogy and Andragogy of the University of Ljubljana already in 1984 after the first experimental study circle had been set up. Decentralization greatly enhances democratization in third age education. In its beginnings third age education was seen as a rather strange novelty as it was not in accordance with the established stereotypes on inactive old people.

The Third Age University is an important social subject in the local community. So far a number of fields in which older people's knowledge can be employed have been identified: cultural mediating in museums and hospitals, volunteering in gardening in the botanical gardens, preparation of holiday programmes for school children etc. The level of local community cooperation differs from place to place, and depends too much on individual mayors and local

councils. Once education ceases to be regarded as an unnecessary expense, but rather as an excellent investment, new opportunities will arise also for third age education and the use of older people's knowledge.

The International Festival of Knowledge and Culture has been organized since 2011 as a biennial event by the Third Age University. It presents to the widest public older people's achievements in education, culture and other fields as well as their participation and its results in the local community. The Festival is therefore an important instrument for raising public awareness of the significance and value of the education and participation of older people - for them and the community they belong to.

### **Key words**

Third age education, older people, local community, local development, Slovenian Third Age University, later life, community practice, study circle, active ageing, culture, festival, knowledge

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