**THIRTY-SIX YEARS OF SLOVENIAN THIRD AGE UNIVERSITY. WHERE DO WE STAND?**

“Those who are active do not appreciate those who are inactive” argues Simone de Beauvoir in her work “Old Age”(2019) even though those who are active may legally impose inactivity on older people. In 1984 Slovenian Third Age University was started with the wish of the founders ( Prof. Dr. Ana Krajnc and Dr. Dušana Findeisen) to enable older people to avoid social death after retirement, to continue their active life, to experience personal growth, to resist the social and cultural pressure put on them to become just observers of the true life passing by.

So, Slovenian Third Age University has been using education, culture, art to stimulate older people to remain socially included, to remain or become social actors. Ever since 1984 its educational programmes have been implicitly or explicitly focusing on: reaffirming older people’s personal and social identity, constructing their quality of life, their active position in society as well as increasing public awareness about social existence, position and value of older people. Consequently, U3A’s educational and other programmes stimulate older people’s *collective liberating from social stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination*. Moreover, they are a method enabling older people to collectively liberate from the type of policy discourse that supports their casual instead of their serious leisure time (Stebbins, 2015).

**Connectivity, organisation and mission of Slovenian U3A**

Slovenian Third Age University was established back in 1984 as a result of co-operation of two co-founders from two different types of educational institutions (Faulty of Philosophy and School for language education for adults) and an initial research carried on in the latter institution. A crucial impetus to the foundation of Slovenian U3A was given by lectures for potential leaders of potential third age universities.

Two years ago, Slovenian Third Age University joined *Pass-It-On,* one of the international organisations , networks or structures of which it has become a member. Over years *connectivity* has become one of its well-developed characteristics. Slovenian U3A has been connecting with other NGOs, public institutions, companies, national, international and world-wide set networks or has become a founding member of some of them. ( Forage, EMIL, DANET).

Slovenian U3A has changed its organisational structure several times, due to its exponential growing. It has often modified its main programme focus (from cultural education, to education for personal growth, social and economic participation, active citizenship) ). It has also changed or expanded its vision, but it has never changed its mission; to better older people’s life, to raise public awareness about the quality life in old age due to education and culture, to impact the shaping of old age policies.

Today Slovenian U3A is a national NGO and a national network of 52 universities with 21 000 students more than 1000 volunteers and about 1000 mentors, teachers specialized in older adult education.

**Holistic approach to older adult education**

Over Europe one can find many interesting and well developed educational and social practices, formats, organisations and institutions meant for older people’s education , but it needs time, continuity, constant informed efforts to establish, maintain and develop a holistic approach and practice of such education; to develop educational programmes for older people’s personal growth but also *socially engaged older adult education* (education targeting major social issues and leading to local social practices where older people appear in public space, where they act as sociologists, anthropologists, politicians) as well as *socially engaged art and culture of older people.*

Personally, I am not informed of any holistic older adult education organisation similar to Slovenian U3A in European countries nor elsewhere. Over years, our responsibilities and functions have grown; besides *education of older people* there is also *education about older peopl*e; *education of specialists in older adult education*; education of different professional audiences and *policy makers* dealing with issues of older people and civil society, *education of undergraduate and postgraduate students* of adult education sciences, architecture, social and political sciences, social work, economics etc.

So far, Slovenian U3A has acted as an expert for Age Platform Europe, European Commission, EURAG. It has been engaged in about 30 European transnational projects. In the composition of the *Four elements* partnership is also the highly traditional *Instituto dei Sordi* from Turin meant for deaf people and those with hearing impairments. It was established in the 19 th century to enhance the life of deaf people. Meeting members of this institute made me better understand our own holistic role in the field of older people I have found some analogy between *their* history, structure and functions with what has become Slovenian Third Age University over 36 years. The initial situation of the two institutions was the same: at the beginning there was a real-life problem which had to be dealt with; there was scarce theoretical knowledge, no practices to model on. Today Instituto des Sordi educates deaf people and professionals dealing with them, carries out research, searches for innovative solutions, publishes studies. It has established a specialized library, has been conducting education of specialists, has been raising public awareness by constant campaigning, has developed educational and social practices making deaf people involved in economic and social development. It acts as a consultant, co- shaping political policies. Slovenian Third Age University as well has been active in all these fields while addressing older people. Moreover, it runs its International *Festival of Knowledge and Culture in Later Life* doing something for society and in the way that it is good for society as a whole.

**36 years of building right and a positive image of older people and old age**

Slovenian U3A has been struggling against stereotypes that depict older people as helpless, passive, poor learners, poor workers, rejecting innovation and new technology, their education allegedly being of no other use than their “killing time”. Therefore Slovenian U3A has been engaged to legally ensure the right to both lifelong education and lifelong work, focusing on innovative programs like exploratory research programmes in the field of urbanism and architecture (learning and acting), computational thinking and programming, transactional analysis, visual literacy, featured and socially engaged documentary films, digitalisation of older adult education, silver economy, cultural geragogy, critical geragogy, festival of knowledge and culture in later life, etc. Basic educational format are *study circles* with cognitive and activity goals, with shared responsibility, but also structures supporting the principle of each-one-teach-one of their members.

Expectations towards older people and their position in society are dependent on stereotypes, prejudices, social, economic, political and historic representations
that may lead to social unfairness on several levels: distributive, socio-cultural and symbolic level, to discrimination. This is a vast field in which Slovenian U3A has been active ever since 1984, the year when it was established. Are are A oh

Dr. Dušana Findeisen

Slovenian Third Age University

dusana.findeisen@guest.arnes.si

URL: www.utzo.si