

## Reaching the Concept of Lifelong Learning in Programmes of U3A

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**Abstract:** *The study is aimed at the contextual characterization of education in general educational programmes of universities of the third age. The aim of the paper is to find out whether Czech U3A reach the concept of lifelong learning through their programmes. The introduction contains an existing overview of this issue. Partial results of selected parts of the research in the context of contents of the study will be presented in the text. The further part of the work will deal with analysis of present education offer of universities of the third age. The conclusion of the work includes the evaluation of reaching the concept of lifelong learning through educational programmes provided in universities of the third age.*

**Keywords:** *contents of education, lifelong learning, topic orientation courses, U3A.*

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### I. Introduction

Nowadays, educational reality is no longer focused on children and adolescents. A large group of students is also made up of seniors who have been entering the educational process through the concept of lifelong learning.

The concept of lifelong learning, unlike the previous traditional understanding of education, goes beyond the school-based education limited to certain age or certain educational institution. It involves all the education and cognitive activities of a person during the entire life, in its centre there is learning individual and his/her individual educational needs.

Beside the methodological aspect, the curricular aspect plays an important role in the educational process, too. While designing the curriculum, it is necessary to respect the specificities characteristic to education of seniors. The curriculum in education of seniors should be up-to-date and flexible, responding to the situation in society, to needs and interests of seniors.

From various approaches to the curriculum, we come from the typology of the curriculum while processing the subject of this study according to the degree of the officialness and the availability of the assessment – it is the formal curriculum [1], [2]. The formal curriculum is a “complex project of objectives, content, means and organization of education” [3].

It is a curriculum that has been drawn up by specialized committees, consulted at various levels, written down and approved in a form of an official document. Therefore, the formal curriculum also introduces the subject matter that is mediated in the educational learning process and that is involved in the official pedagogical documents. The subject of our interest in the further lines of the paper is focused on the content of education of seniors, in the comprehensive educational programmes of U3A.

### II. Review of Related Literature

#### 1. Lifelong education and learning

It involves purposefully formalized as well as informal activities related to learning. These activities are carried out on a continuous basis in order to achieve the improved knowledge, skills and qualifications. It is a continuous lifelong process involving the replenishment and overlap of these forms of learning. Today's preference of the concept of lifelong learning to the term of lifelong education is related to the responsibility of an individual to acquire and develop their abilities and skills, knowledge and competences. Lifelong learning can be divided into two stages, the initial education and further education [4].

#### 2. Lifelong learning and universities of the third age

Universities of the third age play a specific role in lifelong learning. Through the activities of U3A, seniors' rights to learning and education are fulfilled. From the very beginning, the primary objective was to improve the quality of life in people of post-productive age via educational programmes [5].

U3A are closely linked to universities and are open to the general public and its educational needs. They offer formal general, interest-based and unprofessional education to seniors at the university level, in a variety of disciplines.

The content of U3A education usually corresponds to the content specialization of the university, its specialized, intellectual and space and technical background. The curriculum designed in the comprehensive educational programmes – the content of education, methods, forms and means of education are adapted to the cognitive, spiritual and social goals and intentions of U3A. They also reflect the current development and knowledge in sciences of education of adults and are adequate to the target group – respecting the health condition of the senior population, their mental level as well as their life experience [6].

However, with the development of the society, requirements of the senior students for the content of education have been changed. Today the greatest interest is in education focused on medicine, psychology, history of art and computing technology [7].

The educational programme deals with the study of selected chapters in a certain discipline or disciplines and is designed right for the U3A students. The offer of the disciplines and educational programmes at Czech U3A is very varied and diverse today, each U3A ensures its regular modernization. The characteristics of the education offer is, incl. other information, involved in the curriculum documents of the institution.

### **3. Specificities of contents of seniors' education**

Education reality is formed and at the same time also affected by a number of factors. Essential factors of andragogic educational processes involve, and can therefore be a subject of the andragogic research, only the specified contents of education [8].

Petrková and Čornaničová also believe that the educational content is a significant factor of each education, no less of the seniors' one. Specifying the content of education is not easy, it must be in compliance with the educational goals. It should also respect the needs of the senior population and be in accordance with the educational intentions. The content focus of education usually corresponds to the actual interests of seniors (e.g. health issues, legal issues, healthy diet etc.), or is somehow associated with their study-based, artistic and creative or other desires from their youth [9].

“The concept of seniors' education can be understood as a specific system of findings, information, experience, opinions, forms of behaviour ... and activities that the elderly person is supposed to acquire and internalize during the educational process.” [10]

R. Čornaničová [11] distinguishes the content-topic based framework of education of seniors from these aspects, according to:

- set of new life roles – the problematic situations in particular stages in the period of senescence that can be taken as a challenge to learn (it is to understand, accept and provide an appropriate reaction);
- organizational system to provide education. Education can be provided in the field of teaching, social-educational care, counselling and other forms of educational activities designed for specific age groups;
- specializing aspects of the professional work of an andragogy specialist. Here it is possible to focus on particular specialized areas of andragogy, such as the professional area (professional andragogy), cultural-educational area (cultural andragogy), social area (social andragogy) etc.;
- generation-oriented education (pre-senior education, pro-senior trans-generation education and actual senior education), whereby, on the basis of this view, we can specify a certain sequence of educational needs that is determined by the continuity of age periods of a person. This classification then reflects the ontogenetic and biodromal concept of educational needs and related problematic and content-topic oriented units;
- components of education where she includes the content of the educational influence in each of its areas (e.g. intellectual, moral, aesthetic, occupational, ecological and environmental, physical and medical, economic, legal, language education etc.). It is to define knowledge, abilities and skills to be acquired so that the senior is able to live a rich and happy life in his/her senior age.

When designing the content, certain principles must be respected to make sure that selected knowledge is transformed into a didactic form:

- The content show relations to the situation of a senior – we take into account their needs and interests when choosing the subject matter;
- Model examples, linking the knowledge and experience of a senior, are an integral part of the content;
- The content is to be aimed at the learning activity – activities accompanying perception, understanding and memorizing;
- The content must be structured in a certain way, where individual parts make up a meaningful whole;
- The content corresponds with the current state of the scientific findings [12].

According to G. Porubská and C. Határ [13], while selecting the content of education, we draw on these three basic aspects:

- social aspect, emphasizing the perspective needs of community development, approaching an individual as so-called a human resource;
- scientific aspect, in which the content of education includes the specified and didactically transformed latest scientific findings, but usually with a certain time span;
- psychological aspect, respecting a human as a recipient and consumer of the education content, with regard to his/her focus, interests, dispositions, possibilities and specificities.

J. Průcha and J.Veteška [14], beside others, state that selection of the education content is also influenced by the ideology of the current policy, the cultural and historical traditions of the country etc.

Education of the senior learners is very different from that of other age groups. A senior accepts the presented content of education, he/she acquires it and then immediately transforms it into the real life. This is the main difference between the education of seniors and education of children that will use their gained knowledge later in their lives. Curricula in education of seniors (compared to curricula aimed at children and adolescents focusing on the content, it is on the quantity of knowledge – so-called from the theory to practice) focus more on the content, it is the quality of knowledge and its immediate use in practice – so-called from the practice to theory [15].

Differences in education of children and adult students, was also dealt with by Knowles, according to whom the transformation of a dependent personality into so-called self-directed personality occurs in adulthood. The same author further states that curriculum in children is focused on logic of matter and learning, whereas curriculum in adults focuses on the practical nature. The difference can be seen in motivation, too, while in childhood it is external, in adults the motivation is internal [16].

### **III. Research**

#### **1. Formulation of the research problem**

To what extent do Czech U3A reach the concept of lifelong learning through their programmes?

#### **2. Research objective**

The goal of the research is to find out whether Czech U3A reach the concept of lifelong learning through their programmes.

#### **3. Research questions**

The research is focused on the set of interrelated partial questions aimed at achieving the defined goal:

- What is the current U3A offer of education?
- What is the offer of U3A educational programmes according to the content-based orientation of education?
- What were the results of the research carried out in the context of the topic-based focus of this paper on the needs and interests of seniors?
- What results were achieved in researches carried out in the context of the topic-based focus of this paper on the focus-oriented education in the comprehensive U3A educational programmes?

#### **4. Research methods**

To reach the above goal, we study both the domestic and foreign sources.

The research is conceived as qualitative. The basic research method is: content analysis of documents:

- written (specialized monographs, specialized periodicals, contributions to proceedings, final thesis)
- combined (websites – links to U3A websites in the Czech Republic)

It should be stated that there are not many researches done in this area and it was not easy to perform the analysis of the partial outcomes of the research in the context of the topic-based focus of this paper.

The list of both the Internet and literary sources is given in the reference section.

#### **5. Research field**

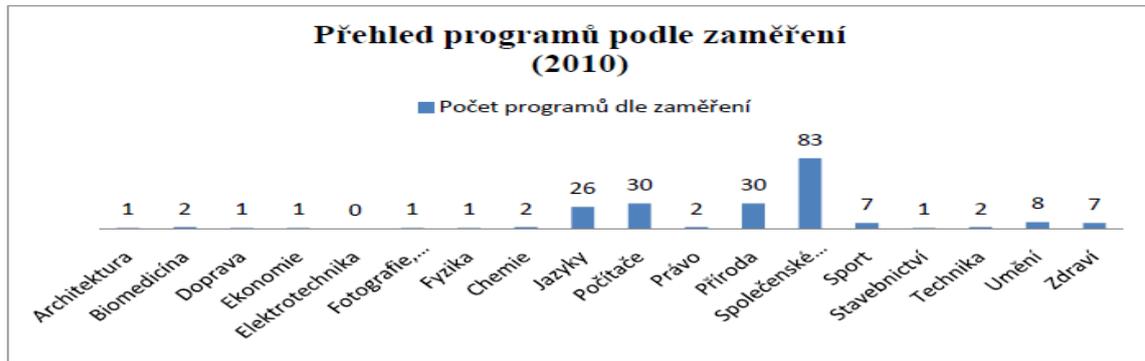
- U3A in the Czech Republic

### **IV. Presentation and interpretation of the research data**

The following part of this paper deals with mapping the offers of the educational programmes and researches carried out in this part of the Czech Republic. The overview will be a stepping stone to provide the detail examination of the extent to which the Czech U3A reach the concept of lifelong learning through their programmes.

1. Overview of programmes by content focus

Table 1: Overview of programmes by content focus



Chart, see table 1: Overview of programmes by content focus, shows the overview of U3A programmes (year 2010, 20 public universities) by their content focus. Most programmes include social and natural sciences, computer literacy, foreign languages, art and health. Programmes related to health, being crucial in the start of U3A, have been significantly reduced. Programmes with the technical content, such as transport, electrical or construction engineering, are not in the centre of interest, therefore, the offer has been minimalized [17].

2. Education offer of U3A at Palacky University Olomouc

Table 2: Education offer of U3A at Palacky University Olomouc

Year	Faculty	Education offer
1.		Lectures on history and the present of UP
		Philosophy and function of U3A
		Stress and psycho-hygiene in old age
		Selected lectures from the relevant specialized courses – see below
2. a 3.	Faculty of Philosophy	Social sciences
		Psychosocial studies
		Culture in the past and the present
		History and archeology
		Chapters from Czech history
		European culture and Christianity
	Faculty of Theology	Christianity and theology in change of time
		Chapters from humanities
	Faculty of Education	Selected chapters from 19 <sup>th</sup> and 20 <sup>th</sup> century history
		We – people and nature
	Faculty of Natural Sciences	Research in natural sciences
		A man in health and illness
	Faculty of Medicine	Movement – a journey to health
	Faculty of Physical Culture	Health sciences
Faculty of Health Sciences		

To analyse the current education offer, we have chosen, due to the space limit of this paper, only one example and it is U3A in Olomouc, a large city (101 thousand inhabitants) with a relatively rich and varied cultural, social and educational life.

Looking at the current offer of educational programmes of U3A, see table 2: Education offer of U3A at UP in Olomouc, we can find a great diversity. It includes almost all sciences, from humanities, natural sciences up to technology. The exception is not even a wide choice of physical activities [18].

3. Present state of investigation of this issue in the Czech Republic

B. Tallová and A. Petrová [19] carried out a survey at U3A in Olomouc focusing on various aspects related to people’s attending the education. The group comprised the total of 172 respondents. The research was carried out in a form of a questionnaire of the own design. The research in a form of open-ended questions, among other things, investigated whether respondents lacked certain topics and information when attending U3A. Most seniors, it is 117 senior respondents (68%), answered that the offer of the specialized courses and the overall information provided was varied and nothing was missing. Other 55 respondents (32%) stated that they lacked certain information in lectures. These areas/information included law and prevention from submission to deceptive advertisements, a wider choice of languages, painting and architecture, more psychologically oriented specialized courses, religion, geography, literature, economy and financial literacy, photography development and editing, more sociology, special pedagogy, pedagogy, journalism, mineralogy and geology, graphology and kurent font, politology, stomatology, alternative approaches to life, information about the universe, practical

information, latest findings in science and research. From the research results, it can be concluded that most respondents consider the information gained at U3A to be sufficient.

Further research on the education of seniors at U3A was carried out with the bachelor's thesis by V. Fišerová [20]. The research was performed in a form of a questionnaire of the own design with students of U3A at UTB in Zlín. Altogether 265 students participated in the survey. The closed-ended questions asking what new content focus of courses the respondents are interested in were answered by respondents in various ways, only one from the options was answered by more than 20% of respondents. The most frequently answered item was learning foreign languages 27.9%, then working with computers 16.5%, law – civil code 14.9%, medical area – providing healthcare (nursing) with 14.1% and area of technology 12.9%. Courses focused on the area of pedagogy – social pedagogy and andragogy would be welcome by 6% of respondents. At least 1.6% was gained by the option of management and economy. In the option called “other”, respondents provided answers, such as: history, history of art, literature.

In 2010 U3A at Masaryk University performed a research among the elderly population, above the age of 55, living in the South-Moravia region. The aim was to identify the attitude of seniors towards further (interest-based) education with a special regard to U3A. The method to be used was a questionnaire made up of open-ended and closed-ended questions that were again focused on various aspects related to people's attendance in education. The questionnaire was distributed to respondents in personal contact by trained interviewers. The total number of respondents was 418, they were chosen randomly. In the survey 54.5% of respondents were represented by people aged 65, 36.2% aged 66-75 and 7.9% over 75 of age. Seniors that showed the interest in U3A education (more than a fifth of the interviewed) replied to an open-ended question “Which areas or fields would you like to expand your knowledge and skill within U3A education in?” as following: humanities – history, sociology, film, psychology, art, etc. (38%). Other areas include: medicine and health, general specialization, natural sciences, IT courses, language courses, economy, architecture [21].

K. Radvanová [22] carried out a research in her final thesis focusing on assessing U3A at Masaryk University by its students. The survey was aimed at finding out whether students are satisfied with the offer and what they would like to be changed. The research was carried out again through the questionnaire of the own design with open-ended as well as closed-ended questions. The survey was attended by 196 students. The question trying to find out what specializations of U3A would comply with the students provided 6 statements. Respondents assigned each statement with points from 0 – do not like it at all, to 4 – really like it. Results were evaluated using the arithmetic mean. The results show that seniors prefer the lectures to be focused on various sciences and areas (and not to focus only at one selected) with the arithmetic mean of 3.18, on bringing knowledge from classical sciences (such as philosophy, history, mathematics...) with the arithmetic mean of 3.01, and on dealing with topics related to the senior age – with the arithmetic mean of 2.73. Even these results show that the current offer of U3A is satisfactory for the students.

## **V. Discussion**

The analysis of the current education offer of U3A can show that the content structure of the educational programmes of U3A corresponds with the research results given above and the list is very varied and rich.

The above-described results of the research can be compared to results of the research carried out by the international organization AIUTA (Association Internationale des Universités du Troisième Âge). The research was focused on various aspects related to people's attendance at education in U3A. The results of the research were published at the European congress of AIUTA with the title “30 years later: Who are we? What have we done?” that was held in Reims in September 2006. The document provides results of the questionnaire that was filled in by 2200 respondents worldwide. The participants included 73.5% of women and 26.5% of men. Data related to our issue show that 52% of respondents were educated in the field of sciences, 25% participated in art courses and 23% of respondents participated in rehabilitation and sport courses [23], [24]. Results of the research by AIUTA can be compared to the results described above.

## **VI. Conclusion**

The primary function of U3A, beside the social and activation function, is to provide the university findings, knowledge and skills to the widest possible circle of people in the post-productive age. The purpose of their programmes is to provide the students with the opportunity to learn about the latest findings in the field of their interest.

As far as the topic is concerned, the paper is aimed at the content focus of education in the comprehensive educational programmes of U3A. The goal of the research was to find out whether Czech U3A reach the concept of lifelong learning through their programmes. The introduction of the paper dealt with the position of U3A in the concept of lifelong learning and with the specificities of contents of seniors' education.

The attention was also drawn to analysing the current education offer at U3A. Furthermore, intermediate results of the selected researches were presented in the context of the topic focus of this study.

In the end, we can suppose that Czech U3A play an irreplaceable role in the concept of lifelong learning in the Czech Republic and in their offer of the educational programmes they reflect the needs and interests of senior generation in today's world.

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