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## Lifelong Learning as an Important Element of the Social Integration of the Elderly

**SUMMARY** Education is now being more and more frequently considered as an area that is important not only for children and young people, but also for the working-age and retirement-age populations. Rapid socio-economic growth, characterised, e.g., by the development of new technologies, requires individuals and communities to continuously acquire and broaden their knowledge and skills. Social groups that fail to follow this trend often find it difficult to fit in with the contemporary knowledge society. This situation not only marginalises a large number of citizens but also denies their needs. Continuous education, provided, e.g., by universities of the third age, not only prevents this, but also provides the elderly with opportunities for full participation in socio-cultural life and social integration with their environment. This article explores the issue of education in late adulthood, addressing it from two angles. Firstly, it presents education as an element of active and happy ageing, and secondly, as an area for the social integration of the elderly during the changes in their social roles, characteristic for the old age.

### **KEYWORDS**

OLD AGE, ACTIVE AGEING,  
LATE ADULTHOOD  
EDUCATION, FUNCTIONS  
OF EDUCATION,  
CONTINUOUS LEARNING,  
SOCIAL INTEGRATION

## **Introduction**

When addressing the education of the elderly, it is important not to build on the popular understanding of the word “learning”. Indeed, the education of the elderly is not about “making them go back to school”, but about supporting their skills and broadening their knowledge to facilitate their broader participation in social and political life. Lifelong learning minimises many risks associated with socio-economic progress. In knowledge society, there is a need for lifelong learning and continuous improvement of one’s skills, especially given that many professional skills, possessed by older employees, have already become obsolete. It is also important to note that educational activity is conducive to the exchange of experiences and helps bridge the generation gap. Adults who assume the role of a student are socially active and able to work in harmony with other members of the team. Adults, and the elderly in particular, approach education as an opportunity to achieve four major life goals, i.e., to facilitate change, to participate in social and political life, to hone their skills, and to grow as a person. Adults decide to take up learning in an organised form when they believe that the obtained knowledge will help them solve their personal, health-related or social problems, or because it will give them satisfaction. The presented article serves as a review and it attempts to describe the concept of active aging and lifelong learning in the context of the role of education as one of the significant factors of social integration of the elderly.

## **The Concept of Active Ageing**

In the late 1990s, the World Health Organisation (WHO) proposed a new approach to the process of ageing and old age, introducing the concept of active ageing into the domain of politics and economy (Kalachea, Kickbusch, 1997, pp. 4–5). According to the definition proposed by the WHO, active ageing “is the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age” (WHO, 2002). This definition implies the maintenance of fitness and ability to do professional work by the elderly for as long as possible, as well as their active participation in the social, economic, cultural and civil life. In the approach proposed by the WHO, active ageing goes beyond any previous domains, such as professional work or physical activity, and refers to all spheres of life – social, cultural, spiritual, civic, and economic. This holistic approach proposed by the WHO assumes that the elderly should participate in the socio-economic life as much as they can, which means that they are expected to:

- learn throughout their whole life;
- work longer;
- retire gradually and at a later age;
- be active as old age pensioners, taking actions to support their health and fitness;
- be active, fulfilling their family duties and taking care of their children;
- be active, getting involved in the life of their local community and voluntary service;
- be active, resting through sport, tourism, and the pursuit of their own passion (Jurek, 2012, p. 9).

Therefore, the activity of old people is associated with their need for personal growth, self-esteem, sense of belonging, pursuit of their goals, adjustment to the changing conditions, social expectations and, last but not least, their own abilities. As noted by Stanisława Steuden (2014), the types of activities undertaken by the elderly not only depend on their

personal preferences, health or skills, but also, to an equal degree, reflect their social context and expectations of their milieu.

### **Determinants of Active Ageing**

So, what determines successful ageing, and, consequently, a fuller integration of the elderly with their milieu? Human development potential depends on a number of factors, such as genes, health, socio-economic situation, life experience, and whether or not the individual can and wants to be active. It is their lifestyle and previous attitude to health, as well as the habits developed over the years and the available financial resources, that largely determine their active attitude to life during middle or late adulthood. The World Health Organisation has identified two factors that are particularly important for determining active ageing, namely gender and culture. The traditional division between male and female social roles has significant implications for the ageing process. In Polish society, the consequences of casting women in the role of the carer for the dependent members of the family (the elderly, the sick, the disabled and children) are clearly visible. As shown by a study conducted by the Central Statistical Office (GUS), Polish women, who retire earlier than Polish men, spend a lot of their time providing support – raising grandchildren and taking care of their old parents. On average, women aged 55–64 spend 46 hours (1/4 full-time equivalent) on helping the family they do not live with – this is almost two times longer than recorded for men this age, and the longest for all age groups, both when it comes to men and women. Median (30 hours) and mode (40 hours), too, are the highest for women this age. The relationship between the early retirement of women and their role as childminders in relation to their grandchildren is also suggested by the data on the reasons for their lack of professional activity (GUS, 2012). Men resign from their job mainly as a result of their bad health in old age, caused by the risks associated with their profession, as well as unhealthy lifestyle (alcohol or tobacco abuse) (Jurek, 2012, p. 10). In addition to those primary determinants, there is a number of secondary ones, such as health and social services, behavioural determinants, personal determinants, physical environment, social determinants, and economic determinants (WHO, 2002, p. 19).

### **Activity and Lifestyles of the Elderly**

Activity at any age is one of the prerequisites for a good life. It is a way of communicating with other people and the environment. Activity becomes particularly important during late adulthood (Szarota, 2004). Engaging in activity by the elderly is desirable, however, as Janusz Czapiński and Piotr Błędowski (2014, p. 64) point out, it is unjustified to expect that seniors will prefer a particular form of activity, e.g. education or activity for the benefit of the local community, over other forms of activity. It is crucial for the elderly to present active attitude in the selection of free time activities, which should be conducive to the development of seniors, improve their health and physical condition. Barbara Szatur-Jaworska (2006) identifies three different types of activity among the elderly:

- formal activity, which means the membership of various organisations and associations, work for the local community or the environment, and involvement in politics;
- informal activity, involving interactions with family and friends, and engagement in work for the neighbourhood community;

- solitary activity, which involves any behaviour that excludes social meetings and activities for the environment; is characterised by spending one's free time alone, e.g., reading, pursuing one's interests, or enjoying one's hobby (p. 161).

Old age adaptation theories suggest that the old age allows the elderly to continue their previous activities in social, family and professional lives (Wiśniewska-Roszkowska, 1989). However, it needs to be borne in mind that whether or not the elderly undertake such activities depends on many factors, such as their education, local community, family, health, fitness, and living conditions (Kijak, 2013, p. 93). As Czapiński and Błędowski (2014, p. 7) indicate, the level of seniors' activity is significantly influenced by the state of their health and family situation. The state of health, as well as education, may considerably affect the activity undertaken by the elderly. Grażyna Orzechowska (1999) identifies six areas of activity among the elderly:

- household/family activity involving the running of a household and involvement in family affairs;
- cultural activity, which includes behaviour connected with the involvement in culture;
- professional activity, which is the least popular activity among Polish seniors;
- social/educational activity;
- religious activity, which, due to the specific nature of Polish society, is rather widespread in Poland;
- sport and tourist/recreational activity (pp. 28–29).

All of the above-mentioned areas of activity are important not only for the process of adaptation to old age, but also for social integration after the change in social roles, e.g., as a result of retirement. Activity in old age shows significant correlation with high quality of life. It is the condition, element and effect of successful ageing (Czapiński, Błędowski, 2014; Marchewka, Jungiewicz, 2008). The term that is associated with activity is the promotion of active living, a process undertaken for the achievement of specific objectives, and the results of this process. The promotion of active living is also referred to as support for and encouragement of action and changes (Chabior, 2011). The promotion of active living can take various forms, depending on the individual characteristics, such as age, education, place of residence, interests, mental state and physical state. External factors also come into play here (Chabior, 2014). Mogielnicka (2007) suggests the following functions of the promotion of active living among the elderly:

- keeping the elderly fit and healthy;
- making the elderly independent and encouraging resourcefulness on their part;
- fostering interactions and relationships within groups and in the environment;
- being able to spend their free time, spending time with peers and establishing neighbourly relations;
- maintaining and encouraging a sense of purpose in life;
- developing their personality (pp. 372–373). In addition, active living by the elderly serves a number of functions, such as adaptive, integrative, compensative, educational, recreational and psychogenic functions (Kijak, 2013, p. 94).

Active living is also associated with the issue of old age lifestyles. An interesting typology of the lifestyles led by the elderly is proposed by Olga Czerniawska (1998), who identifies six major styles. The first lifestyle she identifies is a completely passive lifestyle. Generally, people adopt this lifestyle for two reasons, either their general health is poor, making active living impossible; or this is consistent with their personality. Individuals, who have

been passive and withdrawn throughout their lives, will only become even more so when they grow old. As Maria Braun-Galkowska (2015) once said: “In the old age we are more likely to explore our inner life, but in order to have something to explore, we need to have had such an inner life before. Old age can be the *pièce de résistance* of our life, but it can hardly be its beginning” (p. 15). Another lifestyle is a family lifestyle. Individuals who prefer such a lifestyle, dedicate themselves to taking care of their family and grandchildren. Such an attitude can be adopted for a number of reasons, such as lack of self-confidence, fear of being rejected, lack of own interests, and a dependent personality. In a gardener/allotment holder lifestyle, work becomes an essential element of life. This lifestyle is very often chosen by people who have been rejected or feel unwanted, but have the need to be active. Work in the garden makes them feel satisfied and fulfilled. In addition, it allows them to keep in touch with friends, and sometimes make new acquaintances. Their allotment becomes something more than just a hobby, it becomes a lifestyle. An association-based lifestyle manifests itself in more than one form of activity, such as volunteer work, local community work, senior club work. A stay-at-home lifestyle is something between the passive and family lifestyles. The elderly are reluctant to leave their houses, grow flowers on their balconies, do crossword puzzles, and look after their grandchildren. The last lifestyle listed by Czerniawska (1998) is a religious lifestyle, in which life focuses on the Church and matters associated with it.

### **Education of the Elderly**

One of the basic pillars of active ageing and social integration of the elderly is education, which serves four major functions at this stage in life, namely regular, substitute, social and psychotherapeutic ones (Richert-Kaźmierska, Forkiewicz, 2012). Regular education is about the continuous updating and broadening of the knowledge and skills of adults, especially in respect of the areas not covered by the school curriculum but required for the fulfilment of professional and social obligations and roles (Aleksander, 1996, pp. 263–264). Regardless of the stage in life they are at, people need to be provided with appropriate skills and qualifications to meet the needs of the changing reality. The elderly have not only adult skills, but also other skills, characteristic of the late adulthood period. Regular education makes it possible to update those skills. Anna Brzezińska and Piotr Wiliński (1995) identify three types of skills, namely personal skills, interpersonal/organisational skills, and implementation skills. The first type is related to the quality of one’s individual functioning, the second one assists the individual in social life, and the third covers various skills necessary for practical and effective action (pp. 19–20).

As part of its substitute function, education provides adult people with the information and skills they have not learned during their school education. By acquiring and updating knowledge, and developing new skills, the elderly continue to be attractive employees. In this sense, education reduces the economic and social exclusion of the elderly (Jedlińska, 2014; Piłat, 2014; Solarczyk-Szwec, 2011).

In addition, the continuation of education by the elderly has a social function. Firstly, their participation in educational programmes and projects makes them feel included, and provides opportunities for establishing new, and maintaining previous, social bonds. Secondly, learning improves their health awareness and knowledge, and allows them to learn how to use new everyday technologies (e.g., the Internet, online banking), which supports their independence and autonomy. Education related to new technologies allows the elderly to

fully participate in social life, and comprehensively use their knowledge and experience, which is of key importance (Jedlińska, 2014, p. 127). Moreover, the educational activity of the elderly influences the perception of this age group in their environment. The integration of the contribution the elderly could make to society through such activity will undoubtedly help overcome the stereotypical image of the elderly as dependent, infirm, socially excluded and isolating themselves (Jedlińska, 2014, p. 127). The third crucial aspect of the active education of the elderly is about bridging the generation gap to connect with the young generation and prevent the reversal of the traditional master-student roles, which have been disturbed as a result of rapid socio-economic progress (technological advancement).

For the elderly, education also has psychotherapeutic value, as it allows them to keep an agile mind. Continuing education puts off biopsychosocial ageing processes, which is why it is so important to implement institutional measures, such as a wide range of courses and new universities of the third age. All such measures increase the social acceptance of the old age with its peculiarities as a natural stage in life (Tylikowska, 2013, pp. 20–21).

The education of adults, including the elderly, has three main forms:

- formal (school) education – provided by school and training institutions, based on the adopted curriculum, and ending with a certificate confirming the obtained knowledge and skills,
- non-formal education (learning by practising), which takes place outside the main education system,
- informal (incidental) education, which is part of our life, although sometimes it is not considered learning; it includes all types of conversations and social meetings, which provide knowledge and shape our image of the world through the exchange of information (ISCED, 1997, pp. 9–12).

Education of the elderly differs from the education of younger people in terms of its content and methodology. This is due to a number of factors, such as the age of learners and the associated mnemonic skills, the professional and life experience they have, their educational needs, interests, and expected benefits of learning, differences in the social roles of the elderly, and the impact of education on such roles (Richert-Kaźmierska, Forkiewicz, 2012).

The elderly use mainly non-formal and informal forms of education that allow them to acquire new knowledge and learn new skills through practical application. Methods used in non-formal and informal education include:

- receiving help from family members, friends, colleagues, e.g., by obtaining advice, watching someone perform a task, consulting somebody and asking them for their opinion,
- using printed materials, i.e., reading specialist literature published in traditional, printed form (books, textbooks, specialist journals) to broaden one's knowledge. Learners use such materials on their own initiative, and this is not part of any educational programme of a course, recommended by a teacher or instructor (nor part of homework),
- using computer programmes and the Internet – acquiring knowledge from various online guides, books, specialist journals, language courses, etc.
- watching/listening to educational programmes broadcast on radio and television, as well as guided museum tours,
- visiting educational institutions, such as libraries, and using their information resources (GUS, 2009, p. 18).

In parallel to the efforts designed to increase the social involvement of the elderly, this age group should be encouraged to be more educationally active. As Elżbieta Dubas (2014) points out an adult often expects and needs changes, and uses learning process to cause them.

This is because such activity allows them not only to broaden their knowledge and learn new skills, but also to update the skills and knowledge they already have. In addition, educational activity plays a crucial role in the development of social bonds, which makes it necessary for a successful, active and happy old age. There has been a growing trend in the educational activity of people in Poland. A comparative analysis of the involvement of people aged 45–64 in such activity in 2006 and 2011 shows an increase by 4.2 percentage points. In addition, there has been an increase in the number of people involved in informal and non-formal education (from 18.6% in 2006 to 21% in 2011, and from 25.4% to 29.0%, respectively). Participation in formal education has been stable, with 5.5% in 2006 and 5.4% in 2011 (GUS, 2013, p. 16). Formal education is defined as learning that occurs in an organised environment, e.g., in a general or vocational education institution, or on the job. As such, it has specific educational objectives (CEDEFOP, 2008, p. 86).

The situation looks different when such activity is analysed separately for individual age groups. Indeed, age proves to be a very important variable that differentiates participation in different forms of education. Apparently, the older the individual, the less likely he or she is to raise/change his or her qualifications. For obvious reasons, this applies especially to formal education. Among people aged 18–24, this form of education was used by 68.1%, and among those aged 25–49 only by 8%, while among people aged 50–64, this was less than 1% (0.65%). From the point of view of active ageing and measures designed to improve the capacity and readiness of Poles for activity in this area, the proportions of people involved in informal and non-formal education are important. Those proportions, too, are lower for the older groups.

Table 1

Persons aged 18–69 by their participation in formal, informal and non-formal education. Data for 2011

Age group	Total (thous.)	Including persons participating in %*				Persons who do not participate in any form of education
		any form of education	formal education	informal education	non-formal education	
Total	27,483	44.0	13.6	20.9	30.0	56.0
18–24	3,713	79.2	68.1	27.5	41.5	20.8
25–49	14,498	47.1	8.0	26.0	33.2	52.9
50–64	8,254	27.7	0.7	12.3	21.9	72.3
65–69	1,472	16.6	–	2.8	15.6	83.4

\* Data do not sum up to make a total, as each person could participate in many forms of education at the same time.

Source: own work on the basis of GUS (2013).

Clearly, it has become necessary to take action in the area of such activity and support the idea of lifelong learning among the elderly, in relation to formal, informal and non-formal education. Another variable that differentiates participation in various forms of education

among people aged 50+ is gender. Women are more likely to engage in various forms of education.

Table 2

Participation in education among persons aged 50–69 by gender. Data for 2011

Age group	Total (thous.)
Total population	27,483
50–64	8,254
65–69	1,472
Men	
50–64	3,958
65–69	648
Women	
50–64	4,299
65–69	824

Source: own work on the basis of GUS (2013).

Lifelong learning, especially among people aged 50+, is the key element of active ageing, as it provides for the development of new skills until the end of one’s professional career and during retirement, thus supporting the social functions and well-being of seniors (ZDPS, 2014; ASOS, 2012; SRKL, 2013). Educational achievements of adults are considered to reflect the knowledge and skills available within the economy. This corresponds to the level of formal education attained by adults (EURYDICE, 2011, pp. 11–16). In addition, education improves the potential of the elderly for active participation in social life through employment, voluntary service, active involvement in civic life and resourcefulness in independent life. Participation in informal education markedly drops with age.

A significant drop in informal education can be observed among people aged 40+. Problems with self-improvement, knowledge extension and skill mastering start during the period of increased professional activity. The above-mentioned drop can result in inactivity at a later age. Failure to develop patterns for spending free time (here understood also as education) at earlier stages in life can translate into low activity levels among people aged 50+ and 60+. This can be due to various reasons, such as income level, expenditure level, and, importantly, behaviour patterns associated with cultural factors. It needs to be noted that recent economic growth in Poland has not been accompanied by an equally rapid development of citizen activity, whether among individuals or groups. Contemporary attitudes of Poles, especially in more advanced age groups, are very strongly influenced by their previous experiences. During the times of the Polish People’s Republic, the domain of social activity was controlled by the State, the operations of many organisations were deemed dangerous for the government and forbidden, and the remaining ones were subject to close political and administrative scrutiny. The government defined their objectives and influenced their operations (Gliński, 2008, pp. 188–189). Membership of many organisations was forced, and this approach to self-organisation did not provide actual and effective social networks that could encourage grassroots initiatives and actual involvement. This led to the destruction of “weak” social bonds, which are important for the development of social involvement skills and civil society in general (Adamczyk, 2013, pp. 71–84). There is a prevailing opinion that the political system of the People’s Republic of Poland

“was particularly unfavourable for the development of civil society, and limited social integration to small groups, mainly family and friends” (Zarycki, 2004, p. 57). This also caused bonds to become more private and restricted to small, closed family and friend communities, which is explicitly illustrated by the previously cited data on the social involvement of the older generation.

### **Educational Needs of the Elderly**

Learning is a lifelong process that allows the individual to prepare for the challenges ahead, regardless of the stage they are at in their lives. Learning is one of the things that sets them up for new tasks (Dubas, 2005). However, learning in the old age is different in terms of form and content from learning at earlier stages in life. Education of the elderly is a serious challenge, especially in relation to people who have poor education, come from disadvantaged backgrounds, or have a low economic status. Educational preferences and needs of the elderly are very diverse as well. Nevertheless, a few priorities can be identified:

- need-based education
- health-oriented education
- civil education
- education about new technologies (ZDPS, 2014, pp. 29–34).

However, education is not only the goal of being active, but also a tool for garnering new competences that facilitate growth and social inclusion. Artur Fabiś (2005) proposes an interesting model of education as a tool for autonomy and self-sufficiency in old age. The proposed model is based on three primary functions: emancipatory, altruistic and egotistical. The emancipatory function supports generation as a whole by making some room for the elderly in the community and giving them status. In addition, it facilitates continuous growth, freedom from dependence, stereotypes and prejudice, and moves the elderly up the social ladder. This function is also important from the point of view of independence, both in relation to individuals and population as a whole. As emphasised by Fabiś (2014), this approach to education brings fruit in the form of participation in social life through involvement in decision-making focused on establishing an important place within the social structure for seniors as a generation (p. 78).

The second, altruistic function is about satisfying the need for providing help. Learning makes it possible to understand others better and provides the knowledge and skills necessary for supporting other people. Such activities help the individual open up to others and become involved with the world around them. By learning from and for others, the elderly can assume new social roles, such as volunteer, childminder, local politician, and activity organiser within the local community (p. 78). The egotistic function serves the needs associated with personal development. This function refers to the individual, their needs, self-fulfilment, and ambitions. In this aspect, adult learning broadens their horizons and leads to spiritual improvement. It prepares them for meeting life’s challenges, and, in a way, also for embracing the wait for the inevitable death (pp. 78–79).

The analysis of the situation of the elderly in relation to the opportunities afforded by education must also take into account the barriers that prevent them from actively engaging in education. These include, in particular, health problems, poor vision or hearing, and motor problems. Knowledge and information acquisition also becomes impaired. Education of the elderly will not produce results as quickly as could be expected from, e.g., young people. Access to education can also be restricted by the lack of motivation, lack of financial

resources and mental barriers. When these are overcome, the education of the elderly will certainly improve.

## Conclusions

The assessment of the situation of the elderly largely depends on the adopted approach. From the perspective of inevitable biological changes, deteriorating health, professional inactivity, etc., this is a traumatic period. However, if this period is considered as one that has a specific goal to achieve, then, first of all, it will become the sum of all the previous experiences and lifestyle. And secondly, it will be a period when new activities are undertaken, including new forms of education, adjusted to the abilities and needs of people at this stage in their lives. Education, as a method of adjustment to old age, strengthens the elderly's individual and social competence to act. Numerous studies reveal that mental activity and necessity to acquire knowledge constitute factors which allow to understand others and reinforce self-image and, as a result, improve the quality of life (Dzięgielewska, 2009; Skowrońska, 2009; Halicka, 2004). This period in human life must not be considered unidimensionally, since old age is the time of rapid changes and many untapped resources, such as social and intellectual capital. For some time now, the quality of life among the elderly has been the more and more popular subject of sociological, psychological, demographic, and other research. Society ageing creates the need for the provision of medical and psychological care for the elderly. However, it is important to take care not only of their physical condition, but also, if not primarily, of their satisfaction with life, complete social integration and utilisation of their resources. Indeed, those resources improve the quality of life of the elderly and communities as a whole. The area where such measures can be implemented is education.

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## **UCZENIE SIĘ PRZEZ CAŁE ŻYCIE JAKO WAŻNY ELEMENT INTEGRACJI SPOŁECZNEJ OSÓB STARSZYCH**

**STRESZCZENIE** Edukacja postrzegana jest dziś coraz częściej jako obszar niezwykle ważny nie tylko dla dzieci i młodzieży, lecz także dla osób starszych. Szybki postęp cywilizacyjny, charakteryzujący się np. rozwojem nowych technologii, wymusza na jednostkach i całych społecznościach stałe zdobywanie i poszerzanie wiedzy oraz umiejętności. Grupy społeczne niepodążające za tym trendem mają problem z odnalezieniem się w społeczeństwie opartym na wiedzy, co może doprowadzić do deprywacji ich potrzeb. Edukacja ustawiczna, realizowana m.in. przez uniwersytety trzeciego wieku, nie tylko przeciwdziała takiej sytuacji, lecz także daje osobom starszym szansę na pełne uczestnictwo w życiu społeczno-kulturalnym i integrację społeczną ze środowiskiem. W artykule podjęto próbę przybliżenia problematyki edukacji w okresie późnej dorosłości w dwóch wymiarach: przedstawiając ją jako element aktywnego i pomyślnego starzenia się oraz jako płaszczyznę, na której przebiega integracja społeczna osób starszych w sytuacji przemiany ról społecznych charakterystycznych dla starości.

### **SŁOWA KLUCZOWE**

STAROŚĆ, AKTYWNE  
STARZENIE SIĘ, EDUKACJA  
W OKRESIE PÓŻNEJ  
DOROSŁOŚCI, FUNKCJE  
EDUKACJI, UCZENIE  
USTAWICZNE, INTEGRACJA  
SPOŁECZNA

