

PROMOTING SUCCESSFUL AGEING THROUGH LIFELONG LEARNING IN THE USA

Abstract

Rapid scientific-and-technological advance and socio-economic development in the United States have led to the significant change in characteristics and intensity of demographic process in the country. The elderly is forming a considerable and important fraction of the American population. Since older people adaptation is realized harder under present-day conditions of social-economic and technical development, continuing education and lifelong learning are recognized as a successful adapting and developing means, which is mutually advantageous and helpful for both the individuals and the society. It helps the old age generation of people to save themselves from social isolation and turn themselves for socially active and creative members of society.

It is important to provide the opportunity for the elderly to be active participants of the community, including their engagement in both education and labor market. Encouraging older adults to learning activity may be an effective resource for social, economic and intellectual growth of the country and this idea should become one of the strategic directions of the state policy.

It is also emphasized that higher education sector should redefine its role in human capital formation by retraining older people, teaching new life skills to cope with late-life problems, and offering opportunities for personal enrichment through lifelong learning. For this sector it is strategically important to adapt new educational philosophy and make changes in the policy, fundamental structure, financing, and curriculum.

Key words: ageing of the population, elderly, lifelong learning, older adult education, successful ageing.

The demographic ageing of world population, especially in more developed countries, can be considered among crucial issues of a long-range social and economic planning. In historical terms ageing society is recognized to be a new unprecedented and continuing phenomenon which advanced countries have not experienced before. In terms of social composition, seniors represent a considerable and significant fraction of population. Ageing has an impact on all aspects of human life including the political, economic, social and cultural domains. Older adult cohort is turning into a prominent social force that will definitely influence the society's development in the near future. Understanding and providing for ageing is, therefore, an important issue of 21st century.

Rapid growth of elderly population in the United States has been also influenced by the fact that the "baby-boomer generation" is moving to their senior years and this makes therefore the shift towards the elderly generation in terms of age composition of the US population. The table bellow represents the dynamic of significant increase in population and dramatic ageing of population (facts and prognosis) during 1950-2050.

Table 1. Population distribution by age groups, 1950-2050. UN Population Division.

Geographic area	Popula-	1950	2050
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	tion, thousand	% of total population					% of total population				
		Total	0-19	20-59	60+	70+	80+	0-19	20-59	60+	70+
World total	2.523.878	43.9	48.0	8.1	2.9	0.5	27.4	51.9	20.7	10.4	3.4
More developed regions	812.687	35.7	52.6	11.7	4.8	1.0	22.6	46.2	31.2	18.6	8.0
Less developed regions	1.711.191	47.8	45.8	6.4	2.1	0.3	28.0	52.7	19.2	9.2	2.8
Europe	547.318	34.6	53.3	12.1	5.1	1.1	21.6	45.6	32.8	19.2	7.9
Northern America	171.617	34.4	53.2	12.4	4.8	1.1	24.7	47.9	27.4	16.1	7.4
Australia/ New Zealand	10.127	33.8	53.6	12.6	4.9	1.1	24.5	47.8	27.7	16.6	7.1

Source: [4].

The elderly population in the USA is expected to comprise 27, 4% of the nation's total population. This projection of age composition has implication for all providers of older adult services, including education. One of the main issues in the context of the US social policy concerning population ageing is to contribute overcoming the problems of social isolation of the elderly; this cohort should be developed into a powerful force, in terms of human potential – intellectual, economic and cultural.

The stereotypes towards seniors have been changed significantly. Several authors report on a long history of discrimination towards ageing in the United States (Clark and Gallatin, 1967; Fischer, 1977; Cole, 1992; Thane, 2005; Thomas, 2007) [18]. People of old age were largely ignored and disengaged from social life, workplace, culture and education (Hochschild, 1973; Fischer, 1977; Friedan, 1994; Thomas, 2007) [19].

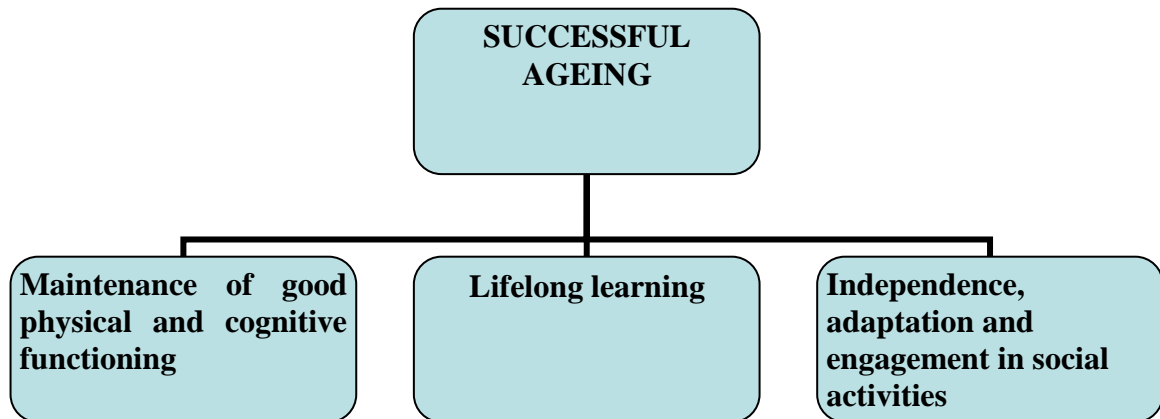
The mid-1960s can be recognized as time of change in American society which was caused by the development of the theories and growing legislation, political and social activism around ageing issues. This provided a deeper understanding of the ageing process and “reconceptualizing later life” [14].

For the last decade the American society has seen a new kind of older adults: healthier, better educated and more financially secure, and this tendency seems to increase as baby boomers generation will be reaching retirement age. According to the US Census Bureau, between 2010 and 2020 the percentage of the people aged 55 and older is projected to increase by 28 %. As a result, older adults will represent about 30% of the total US population [4]. This demographic shift has significant implications for the role of lifelong learning programs and educational institutions as well: a new generation of older adults and retired people will look for continued personal growth and demand more diverse and intense educational programs and services for the elderly. Several studies have shown that a number of older adults who wish to participate in learning activities are growing. Leading researchers on educational gerontology agree, “...the more education people have, the more education they want” [2, p. 214].

Striving for self-development, self-actualization and social integrity in later stage of life has risen the promoting a concept of successful ageing in the United States, which aim is to set the links between ageing, learning and quality of life. According to Rowe and Kahn (1997), “successful ageing consists of three factors: avoidance of disease and disability, maintenance of high physical and cognitive functioning, and sustained engagement in social and productive activities” [15,

p. 435]. Successful ageing therefore is strongly connected with learning. It has been proven that learning in later life facilitates to maintain an active and enquired mind, to broaden the world-view of the elderly which in turn contribute for social engagement and intergenerational interaction. Thus, among the determinants of successful ageing we can refer to physical and emotional health, learning and education, and social inclusion.

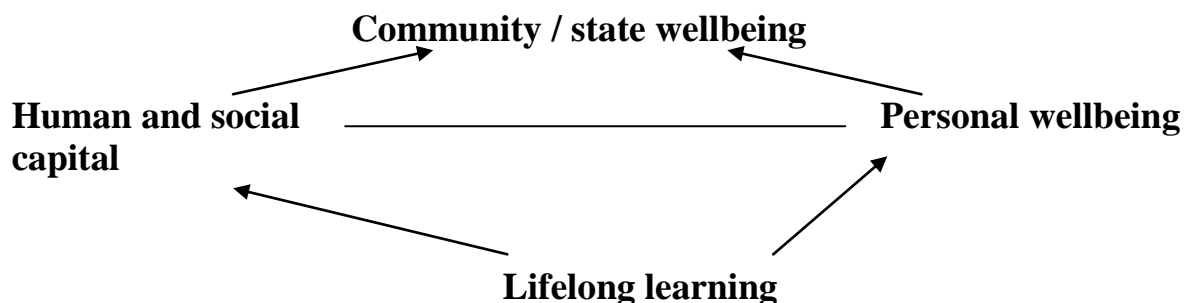
Table 2. Determinants of successful ageing.



In the United States older persons themselves define successful ageing as multidimensional including physical, functional, psychological, and social health [2, p. 214].

Many researchers in the area of educational gerontology argue that lifelong learning makes a perfect link between personal and community wellbeing of older adults. Learning activity of older adults leads to broadening their horizons; they become more knowledgeable and socially engaged. Thus, their participation in learning “tends to enhance social capital, by helping develop social competencies, extending social networks, and promoting shared norms and tolerance of others” [8]. As social capital is believed to be a major component in community wellbeing, we can consider learning and education in later phase of life as the main factor of improvement of both personal quality of life and the welfare of society as well.

Table 3. Interconnection of lifelong learning and state wellbeing



Older adults can contribute to community wellbeing by participating in volunteer work, caregiving, civic and intergenerational activities. Lifelong learning opportunities for older persons help show the potential of seniors and thus engage them to such types of activities, which can give a door into social integration of the

elderly. Besides, the healthier, more active and socially engaged older adults are, the less drain they are on community services.

Given the link between older adults learning activity and the society wellbeing, it is worth mentioning the essence of lifelong learning. In European Commission Report lifelong learning is defined as “all learning activity throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competencies within a personal, civic, social, and/or employment-related perspective” [7, p. 9].

According to the II International Plan of Action on Ageing (UN, 2002), education has been recognized as a crucial basis for an active and fulfilling life, so that continuing education and lifelong learning are essential for extending development into old age. Recently, the US seniors demonstrate a clear interest in educational programs. The search for learning is related to:

- employment (continued, part-time, voluntary);
- gaining new knowledge and skills (especially in IT, psychology, art and culture, health and wellness);
- leisure and travel;
- personal interest, and development;
- communication and social inclusion [13].

According to Wolf (2009), education for older adults is essential for civilization, “... it allows them to make an important contribution to culture based on their knowledge and experience” [19]. On the other hand, some prominent researches confirmed that engagement in mental activities facilitates better health conditions, satisfaction with life and longevity, as well as reduce risk of disease and disability (Kotulak, 1997; Smits, 1999; Withnall, 2000; Butler, 2002) [12], [17], [18], [3].

Motivation is essential to learning activity at any age, and it is especially important when people choose education as one of the form of activity in later life. Many researchers have found out that older persons consider social engagement to be the main reason for participating in lifelong learning programs. The study of G. Boulton-Lewis (2010) proves self-fulfillment and pleasure to be among the dominant motivations of older adults’ learning activity. They learn in order to “keep the mind active, use the brain, stay mentally stimulated, grow, and constantly learn; to be an active participant in life, stay interested in life” [2, p. 219].

Regardless of various views on ageing and youth-focused cultural dynamic, the United States are lifting barriers to participation in education and making it open and more accessible for older persons. The US social policy is advocating education for all generation and promoting more lifelong learning opportunities for both retired people and older workers. A number of older adult learning programs are realized through non-formal programs (sponsored by community, civic, voluntary organizations or even businesses) and informal learning (“incidental learning”, day-to-day living or self-directed learning). Some programs are initiated and run by the elderly themselves; for the last two decades such non-formal programs for older learners have proliferated in the USA. But it should be taken into consideration the increasing demand of continuing education among older Americans which the society has been experiencing for the last few years. The growing interest made on formal learning (including higher education) by older people had been influenced by the

expansive baby-boom generation (77 mln), the first cohort of which turned retiring age in 2011. Nearly 89% of them have high school degrees, and 28% have a bachelor's degree or more [16, p. 69]. From all evidence, the American society has never experienced such well-educated on average retirement pensioners before.

Over the last decade the expanding learning needs of older Americans can be addressed through the well-known formal learning programs designed specifically for older adults: Institutes for Learning in Retirement (ILR), Lifelong Learning Institutes (LLI), Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes (OLLI), and Road Scholar (Elderhostel). Similar to the Universities of the Third Age in Europe, Australia, and New Zealand, these institutes are widely accepted in the United States; most of them are mainly affiliated with institutions of higher education. Lifelong learning institutes are usually member organized and run, and the trainers are from both educational environment and the participants' peers. Such model of lifelong learning provides the opportunities for a new stage of older adult development when some "have already retired, but still seeking purpose and productivity" [16]. LLIs are modeled as provided by the concept of successful / positive ageing, which consider learning "as a means of remaining active and contributing to society, as a means of accumulating the needed life-skills in later life and delaying the clinical symptoms associated with dementia and other diseases" [10, p. 120].

Some researches link up lifelong learning and continued education with rapid technological changes the American society has been recently experiencing. They find late-life education as an indispensable activity to adapt to modern informative world. Lifelong learning, as some state, would maintain the quality of older adults' lives "by enhancing their self-reliance, self-sufficiency, and coping strategies in the areas of physical, health, and social relationships" [2, p. 215].

Positive ageing focuses on learning "as an end-in itself that loses sight of the bigger picture. Older persons are not simply empty vessels for the deposition of liberal-arts knowledge but operate within a humanistic dimension that seeks to provide "meanings" to their respective social and personal environment" [10, p. 120].

Thus, older adults are searching for continuing education for both employment and personal reasons; they do demand wider access to university programs and expect educational services and learning programs to be quality, diverse, and meaningful. From the view of human capital, learning in later life is important, firstly, for workforce skill development and recreation; on the other hand, it allows people to adapt to the fast-growing changes in areas such as information and technology, finances and lifestyle.

Taking into account the recent researches findings on educational gerontology which prove that longer and more successful life after retirement influences older adults to participate in various activities, particularly those, that involve new knowledge and experiences, learning and communication, and contributions to society, we can assume that both existing and prospect formal learning programs designed specifically for the elderly will be extended and developed. Given the success of learning in retirement movements, this would seem an opportune time for higher education institutions to design and start learning programs for older adults in

order to facilitate meaningful and successful life of all generations in the ageing society.

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