

# NEWSLETTER 9

## The Future of Learning for Older People in Europe: Learning from Experience The 2<sup>nd</sup> ForAge Pan-European Conference – A Review

ForAge is a European multi-lateral network with the central aim of communicating and promoting experiences of learning for older people. Its second international pan-European conference was held in Budapest, Hungary, from 30 September to 1 October 2013.

The event was organised locally by Trebag Property and Project Management Ltd, Hungary and coincided with the UN International Day of Older People on 1 October. The conference examined trends and developments in later-life learning and what can be learned from the experiences of European initiatives in this field. A wide range of interesting presentations and lively workshops made the conference particularly productive and useful.



After a welcome to the attendees by **Professor John Benyon** from the University of Leicester, UK (the co-ordinator of ForAge), the conference was introduced by **Peter Kövesd**, Managing Director of Trebag Ltd, and **Zoltán Loboda**, Head of the Educational Authority, Legal and Administration Department, Department of International Relations of the Hungarian Government.

### Setting the scene

‘Modern world governments concentrate funding more and more on initial education and labour market preparation. Does this leave education for older people as a luxury investment in affluent countries?’ This was one question posed by **Dr Alan Tuckett**, President of the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE), during his presentation and he tried to provide some answers. He talked about youth and adult learning needs, adult literacy and the World Social Forum and said that ‘another world is possible’. **Dr Michael Sommer**, project manager of European Infonet Adult Education, Germany, spoke of his experience of sharing information about adult education and older learners across Europe.

**Dr Koen DePryck**, Vrije Universiteit Brussels and the Centre for Adult Education Antwerp, Belgium, argued that the traditional linear models of formal education are no longer sufficient and that a non-linear system-based approach to the future of learning for older people is necessary, including, for example, community-based learning, open learning, non-formal and intergenerational learning.

### Later-life learning in Europe

**Jim Soulsby**, ForAge Facilitator, UK, spoke on the importance of later-life learning and the place of the ForAge network. He mentioned that statistics on later-life learning were often only collected up to the age of 64. Only 4% of older people in Europe are engaged in learning. There are many testimonies from older learners about the benefits of learning, but few analyses of learning projects. One of the aims of ForAge is to create a long-term platform for

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accessing data and its analysis in Europe to ensure that later-life learning is represented and representative.

**Stefanie Steinbauer** and **Claudia Unger**, from the Austrian Federation of the Blind and Partially Sighted in Vienna, made a striking presentation about the project VISAL – Visually Impaired Seniors' Active Learning. **Roger Estelle Curto** from the Escuder Mollon Senior Citizens' University in Castellón, Spain, introduced a toolkit for the evaluation of older peoples' education called 'EDU Improving Seniors' Quality of Life'.

#### Focusing on Hungary

The next plenary session focused on later-life learning in Hungary. **Bálint Boga MD**, from the Hungarian Hospice Foundation in Budapest, argued that the extension of life meant that older people need to learn and data showed that they can learn. One benefit of learning is that older people become less dependent and more self-reliant. In Hungary life expectancy is 23.4 % higher than ten years ago. Up to 15 % of people over 60 suffer from dementia, while up to 18 % have symptoms of depression. 4.5 % of people in the age group 55 to 64 years take part in extracurricular education. This falls even lower for the 65 to 72 age group to 2.2 %.

**Katalin Vámos**, marketing and fitness trainer, presented data about internet usage among people over 50 in Hungary. Only 20 % of people 50+ use the internet regularly, but 61 % of them have social media profiles.

To conclude this final conference session **Professor József Jászberényi**, Director of the Research Centre for Gerontoeducation from the King Sigismund College in Budapest, gave a presentation about older people and education in Hungary. One issue he identified was that this education does not take place in colleges or universities, as they are mostly not interested in older people, but in community

centres. The first day of the conference ended with questions and discussion followed by a reception.

#### Celebrating the UN Day of Older People

The second day of the conference began with a presentation by **Zsófia Pustztai MD**, Head of the World Health Organisation Hungarian Office in Budapest. The theme of this plenary session was 'Active ageing adds healthy life to years'. For the WHO those who are very old constitute one of the two most vulnerable age groups. The WHO Action Plan on Healthy Ageing brings active ageing into focus. For the WHO, chronological age is not the marker for ageing and it argues that policies should take that into account. The UN report 'A Life of Dignity for All' highlights the benefits for society from the contributions of older people.



The next session was a keynote address from **Professor Franz Kolland**, University of Vienna, Austria, who spoke on the benefits of learning in later life. He reported that learning is a continuous occupation through life and that lifelong learning can change the image of growing older. A number of studies have shown the positive effects of education on episodic memory and also that lifelong learning improves health. Those in education are likely to seek medical assistance sooner and to avoid

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self-diagnosis. They also recover better from diseases. Lifelong learning promotes social inclusion, counteracts the risks of poverty, improves equal opportunities and challenges negative images of ageing. The main constraint on later-life learning is poverty. It is also true that learning can be uncomfortable for older people and that education can bring back painful memories.

#### Workshop sessions

The second afternoon of the conference was dedicated to parallel workshops, led and facilitated by ForAge partners.

**Post-conflict Learning and the Role of Older People:** There were examples from Ireland, Portugal and Hungary. Participants stated that everyone in the EU was in a post-conflict situation, either directly or indirectly, and older people have a central role in building bridges with the younger generations.

**Older People and Erasmus+:** The workshop participants observed that the EU Grundtvig Programme was very successful, not least in addressing and including older people. But there are fears that in the new Erasmus+ programme older people will be less included. The role of ForAge was seen as networking, raising awareness through lobbying, and co-operating with other networks.

**The Learning Needs of Older People from Minority Ethnic, Migrant and Roma Communities:** The participants came to the conclusion that while one should be careful about grouping these different minorities together older people in these groups all experienced social exclusion and disadvantage. The exploration of their roots, history and experiences would help to make connections between minority groups and cultures. Adult education should help to facilitate this.

**Learning and Training for and about Older People in Care Settings and Mental Improvement:** There were three interesting contributions from across Europe on the training of trainers in work with older people in care settings. Participants suggested that ForAge could collate and publish learners' stories with reflections from care-providers.

**Intergenerational Learning:** Three examples of good practice were presented. The common theme was that learning should not be seen as being just *for* children as there is a range of subjects that older people can learn *from* children, such as ICT, factual learning and socio-cultural learning. An additional finding from the discussion was that varied and non-formal learning environments are often more inspiring than educational settings.

**The Role of Information Technology in Later-life Learning:** During this workshop ICT usage from seniors in Europe and the expansion of projects to new European countries was discussed.



#### Listening to the Learners

Following the workshops, there was a plenary session about learners' voices. **Mariana Matache**, from Asociate Euroed in Bucharest, Romania presented the project 'The Citizen Comes First'. The project ran local seminars on democracy and partnerships with the aim of

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empowering Romanian citizens to self-organise projects. There was a local action plan and the self-organised projects were, for instance, about street cleaning, establishing older peoples' groups and scholarships for children from low-income families. **Professor Ionut Popa**, from Asociate Euroed in Bucharest, Romania, explained that in the post-communist era change occurs and people learn to take charge of local initiatives for themselves. There was, for example, a local newspaper group, an older peoples' club and a cultural centre.

**Sean Dillon** from Age and Opportunity, Dublin, Ireland explored the project 'Count Us In'. The aim of the project was to evaluate how older people could be engaged to encourage health and well-being and to use their skills to benefit the local community. It showed that older learners were engaged in leisure learning but not in civic engagement. The recommendations included facilitator training to encourage civic engagement, particularly among people over 75, to try to reach more marginalised older people and to increase the numbers of men who were involved.

Two more presentations followed. **Ildikó Berény**, a PhD student from Hungary, gave a presentation about learning possibilities for older people by training methods in the Márianosztra Penitentiary Institution. There were now more inmates in this prison with very low educational levels; 14 % had not finished primary school. The Institution encouraged both educational courses and vocational training. There were good results: learners reported increased self-esteem, leading to better communication and lower incidents of violence. Next, **Zbigniew Durczok**, SMZK Krzeszowice, Poland, talked about Universities of the Third Age (U3A) in Poland. The first U3A in Poland was established in Warsaw in 1975 and now there were 385

U3As, based mainly in major towns, supported largely by local, regional and national governments and the National Bank. There were 3 types of U3A: independent organisations, university-based organisations and library-based groups. There was also intergenerational co-operation with students teaching older people for mutual benefit. The number of old older people had opened up a discussion on a University of the Fourth Age.

#### Closing session

By the closing session, there was a good general feeling about the conference, the presentations and the workshop sessions. Those present agreed that they had heard a great deal of useful information and practical ideas and the discussions had been highly fruitful and stimulating.

**Jim Soulsby** summarised the conference and observed that it had encouraged the discussion of new perspectives. Good practice and interesting research had been shared.

**Professor John Benyon** congratulated the speakers on the quality of their papers and commented on the valuable workshops and discussions which had taken place in a packed programme. There had been some inspiring stories about later-life learners. He especially thanked **Barbara Varga-Pinter**, the conference organiser, for all her hard work in making the conference so successful and memorable.

More information about the conference and presentations can be found on the ForAge website: [www.foragenetwork.eu](http://www.foragenetwork.eu)

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