

# UNIVERSITIES OF THE THIRD AGE AND THEIR ROLE IN ACTIVATING OLDER PEOPLE IN POLAND

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***Abstract.** Lifelong education, permanent development of interests, maintaining social contacts, or participation in voluntary work are a chance for aging people to stay active for as long as possible. For societies, however, it is a series of benefits derived from the experience, knowledge, skills and time that older people have and which ones often seniors want to share with others. The aim of the article is to present the role and influence on the activation of older people of Universities of the Third Age in Poland. These are institutions that respond in a comprehensive way to the needs of seniors in the social, cultural and educational aspects.*

***Keywords:** Universities of the Third Age, senioral policy, seniors, education.*

## 1. Introduction

Unfavorable demographic changes that can be observed in most European countries require public authorities to take specific actions targeted at older people. To a large extent, these activities are focused on the modification of the social security system, including its retirement element, which is to guarantee financial security for the elderly. However, seniors should not be seen through the prism of inactivity. Old age can not be a reason for social exclusion and discrimination. It must be borne in mind that due to changes in the demographic structure, older people are an increasingly important element of social life. This means that actions taken by public decision-makers, at various organizational levels, must take into account the needs articulated by this age group. These activities are carried out in various areas – consumption of goods, health care, care services, culture, physical activity, as well as education.

With regard to the last of these areas (education), it is worth noting that the changing birth rates along the prolonged average life expectancy

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mean that the broadly understood senior education starts to gain importance. It means above all the necessity of systemic support for adult and seniors education. It is worth noting, however, that in order for the entire system to function properly – changes in the way of providing educational services with regard to the youngest generation that are just entering the “education market” are also necessary.

The aim of the article is to present one of the forms of seniors’ education in Poland and its impact on the activation of older people. In particular, the study will show the role of Universities of the Third Age (UTA) and the directions of their development. This issue is extremely important, because nowadays, the activity of UTA introduces not only a new quality to the lives of older people, but also brings a number of benefits to entire communities. In Poland, UTAs are already perceived by other institutions as advocates of interests of older people and partners in activities for the benefit of local communities. It is extremely important to promote their ideas, programs and achievements, as well as appropriate funding for these institutions.

## **2. Older people and their functioning in society**

Old age, being one of the stages of human life, is defined in various ways. Depending on the approach (biological, demographic, psychological, and social) for its limit shall be either a certain age, or some changes in personality or in the exercise of his social roles. From the point of view of biological (medical) sciences, old age is associated primarily with biological changes in the human body. Psychology – by attempting to define old age – indicates personality changes, such as, for example, limiting relationships with other people, a sense of loneliness. In the case of social sciences, an important determinant of old age is the change of social roles [Kubiak, 2016]. It can be, for example, retirement, limiting professional activity or becoming a grandmother / grandfather. In economic terms, the basic division of society is based on activity that allows distinguishing people in pre-productive, productive and post-productive age. Old age is understood essentially as the phase of life in which economic activity disappears (outside of own household) [Szatur-Jaworska, 2000]. On the other hand, demography – assuming as age the age of over 60 – makes an additional distinction within this category. It introduces notions of: a younger post-production age (60-69 years), an older post-production age (70-79 years) and old age (over 80 years) [Szymańczak, 2012].

Generalizing, it can be assumed that old age is a phase of withdrawal from life. This takes place both at the biological, psychological and economic levels [Wiśniewska-Roszkowska, 1989]. The literature on the subject presents many, sometimes contradictory theories that describe the aging process and attitudes of the elderly towards the situation in which they found themselves. These include: exclusion theory, activity theory, continuation theory, exchange theory and selectivity, optimization and compensation theory. The first of the aforementioned theories (theory of exclusion) describes old age as a state of gradual withdrawal, which is caused by the weakening of life forces. Withdrawal is a decision of the elderly person, but to a large extent it takes place in specific socio-cultural conditions that support this process. Theory of activity perceives old age as a period of activity. Resignation from certain social roles (the end of the activity) should mean the beginning of other forms of activity. In the sense of the discussed theory, this is a condition for successful old age. According to the theory of continuation, old age is just another stage in a person's life. Man enters this stage with values, norms and customs developed and acquired in earlier phases of life. Having them, he adapts to new conditions. Another theory, or exchange theory, is associated with the concept of all resources that are in the possession of man. This applies to both health and material resources. In general, with the passage of years, the amount of resources available to man decreases. This results, inter alia, in limiting relationships with other people and gradual withdrawal from social life. The last of the mentioned theory (the theory of selectivity, optimization, and compensation) as a prerequisite for a good old age while recognizes the need to make a choice by the elderly. This choice applies to both forms of activity and commitment. It is based on a certain limitation of activities and focus on those forms which – in new life conditions – are the most useful and least aggravating [Osiecka-Chojnacka, 2012].

The process of aging, as well as its character (active or passive), depends on both individual characteristics and living conditions (health, professional activity, property situation, family situation), as well as external factors (attitudes and social values – including the attitude towards the elderly, the well-being of society, social security systems, education level etc.). The period of old age is associated with various types of limitations, both biological and psychological, social or economic. Talking about biological changes that occur in the elderly, it should be noted, among others: changes in appearance and function of the senses, reducing sexuality, disturbances in the functioning of various systems and organs in the body and different diseases, often having the chronic character

[Szatur-Jaworska, 2000]. It is a natural process and applies to all people in general. Of course, the changes that have taken place in recent decades (improvement of health care, prevention, healthier eating etc.) have improved the health of the society (manifestation of this is, among others, life extension), nevertheless it is an unavoidable process. In practice, it often means changes in the structure of expenditure (a larger share of expenditures on health care and medicines), as well as the need to use other people's help. This is due to the appearance of specific disease entities as well as the limitations of fitness. Older people have problems not only with heavier housework. Basic tasks such as preparing meals, shopping, taking medicines as well as using modern media or managing their own finances also make them difficult.

The period of old age in most cases is related to the natural process of limiting professional activity. Of course, this does not apply to all people, but also – which is worth remembering – is an element of policy pursued by public authorities. It can be manifested by activities that professionally activate older people (flexible forms of employment, the use of the experience of older employees, the possibility of further employment after retirement), and the opposite processes – for example lowering the retirement age.

The limiting of professional activity has its impact on the economic dimension of elderly people's life. In this place one should mention the declining resources, which is mainly caused by smaller current incomes (in the case of people relying only on retirement benefits). The structure of expenditures also changes in the elderly (the biggest expenses are incurred for food, housing and health). They are therefore related to satisfying primarily basic needs. Due to the often single-person household and the amount of fixed costs, some people may be at risk of poverty. However, when we talk about the economic situation of the elderly, we should also mention the reverse situation. The economic potential of older people is increasingly recognized and adapted to them by specific market activities (gray people industry, silver economy). In the world's richest countries, the period of old age – identified with retirement – means an increase in the standard of living and an increase in the amount of free time that can be spent on consumption [Furmańska-Maruszak, Wójtewicz, Zamosjak, 2014]. To a large extent, however, it depends on the way it functions during the production period, as well as the planned security for the period of old age (passive income, real estate investments).

For many older people the limiting of professional activity means no activity. This is especially the case for people who did not take various

forms of non-business activity in the earlier period. This often leads to psychological problems in the case of such people in the absence of an alternative to work. These include, among others: withdrawal from social life, low self-esteem, a sense of no more life, conviction about low productivity and efficiency of their own actions, increased misunderstanding by the environment (especially the younger generation), problems with everyday functioning in family and social life. An important problem is also the sense of loneliness of older people. It results both in the life situation (death of the spouse and other family members, leaving the family home by the children, weakening or disappearance of social relations), as well as changes in the model of the modern family (disappearance of multigenerational families, singularization of society).

Older people react in different ways to their old age. On the one hand, we can meet with active attitudes. They consist, among other things, in the continuation (or attempts to continue) of professional activity, intensification of activities within the family or undertaking various forms of physical or educational activity. On the other hand, the attitude is often passive. It is characterized by isolation from the environment and limitation of activity only to their own household.

Regardless of the seniors' lifestyles and their attitudes towards old age, it should be noted that the aging of society is a significant challenge for social policy. In the basic view, one can speak of two basic approaches – individual (single person) and global (whole society). On the one hand, it is related to various forms of security for the elderly – financial, caring, cultural or educational. This is done through the pension system, appropriately tailored health and care services, as well as cultural and educational offer adequate to the expectations of older people. On the other hand, the increasing share of older people in society is a reason for changing the rules (redefining priorities) of the social and economic system of the state. This is due to the need to find more financial resources for retirement benefits, higher costs of elderly people's care, as well as the need to activate older people and to alleviate intergenerational tensions. All this is part of the broadly understood senior policy.

### **3. The senioral policy in Poland**

When we talk about actions taken by public authorities in relation to older people, we must distinguish between two concepts functioning within social policy. It's about the policy towards the elderly and the senioral policy. The policy towards older people includes activities aimed, inter

alia, at preparing for old age, providing care services for the elderly, compensating for expenses related to old age, creating conditions for developing interests and activities by the elderly, as well as creating a system of institutions and services providing services older people [Błędowski, 1998]. The senior policy – treated as a broader concept – has the task of preparing the young generation for the inevitable old age. Her task is also to help elderly people deal with old age. It is also shaping the positive image of old age. It allows treating old age on an equal basis with other life stages [Szatur-Jaworska, Błędowski, Dziegielewska, 2006].

It is obvious that the aging of the population (an increase in the share of older people in society) causes the demand for health and care services, as well as certain forms of social security. The functioning of the social security system as well as the health care and care system in Poland, adequate to the needs of citizens – including the elderly – results primarily from the provisions of the Basic Law. According to the Constitution: everyone has the right to health protection, and the authorities ensure equal access to health care services and are obliged to provide special care to the elderly. At the same time, after the retirement age, citizens are guaranteed benefits from the social security system [Konstytucja RP, 1997]. The insurance forms include, first of all, retirement and disability benefits in the field of medical care. The supply forms, granted independently of the premium paid and usually dependent on income, include mainly the social welfare system, in particular: assistance in institutions, environmental assistance and financial, service and material assistance [Każmierczak, 2014].

In the face of prolonging life expectancy, the key challenge for social policy is creating conditions and forms of active aging. Active aging in European conditions has been defined as the process of creating optimal health, participation and safety opportunities in order to improve the quality of life of people in old age [Raczek, 2014]. Activities of public authorities in the area of senior policy are implemented both at the local, national and international (EU) level. From the point of view of the European Union – in the face of contemporary demographic trends (aging of the society) – various adaptation measures are necessary. This does not mean creating a universal system for the entire EU, but working out rules of action that guarantee protection of older people, reducing discrimination on the basis of age and greater activity of seniors, especially on the labor market. The economic aspect of the senior policy includes, among others, limiting the costs of health care systems, including through the promotion of health [Kraboszyńska, 2014]. It is also worth paying attention to such an

EU initiative as the European Year of Active Aging and Intergenerational Solidarity 2012, as well as all activities aimed at activating seniors.

In the case of Poland, senior policy is a relatively young area of activity. It is worth noting that in the past it was practically not implemented and the activities of the state – in relation to the elderly – focused on satisfying their basic needs and guaranteeing a minimum security. As a result, this policy is not systemic and focuses on selected areas [Kubiak, 2016]. Of course, we can identify specific institutions that take action for the elderly and their problems – for example, the Senior Policy Department and the Council for Senior Policy in the Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Policy. At present the basis for activities for the benefit of seniors is the Long-Term Senior Policy in Poland for 2014-2020. Its aim is to provide conditions for active aging in health and to lead an independent, independent and satisfying life, despite some functional limitations [Resolution No. 238]. Extensive activities for the benefit of older people are also implemented as part of the Social Activation Program for Older People. The main goals of this program include: increasing diversity and improving the quality of educational offers for the elderly, creating conditions for the integration of older people in their age group and intergenerational integration, development of various forms of social activity (including volunteering), and improving the quality of social services [Raczek, 2014]. Moreover, it should be emphasized that at the beginning of 2018 the document entitled “Social policy towards the elderly 2030. Security was presented. Participation. Solidarity”, which will then be forwarded to inter-ministerial consultations. This document is the first government document of this type that includes all spheres of life concerning the elderly, including broadly understood safety, health, active participation in society, as well as the need to adapt infrastructure, health system or labor market to the needs and capabilities of older people [<https://www.mpips.gov.pl>].

As we can see, an important emphasis has been placed on social activation. It is an indispensable element of the implementation of the idea of healthy and active aging. Social activity can be understood as commitment to the local community, family, closest neighborhood, which takes place in both informal and formal forms (for example, volunteering) [Adamczyk, 2015]. Seniors' involvement in voluntary activities benefits all parties. Older people are characterized by experience, availability, responsibility, duty, commitment, peace and patience [Adamczyk, 2015]. On the other hand, these people by engaging in the activities of specific

groups reduce their isolation and satisfy the needs of belonging, recognition and often self-fulfillment.

Among others, the most common active social roles seniors can identify the roles associated with the family (elderly parents, grandparents), socializing groups (they are usually a group of peers), but also specific organizations (religious community, local community). Because of the greater amount of free time some older people (provided good health and sufficient financial resources) often use certain forms of activity as a "user of free time" (using culture, trips / holidays) [Szatur-Jaworska, 2000]. Activity in the field of culture depends, of course, on the level of education, material situation and place of residence. Nevertheless, activating seniors in this area (increasing competence in the field of culture, using the creative potential of older people) is often an element of subsequent activation in other areas – economic and civic.

Speaking about the need for self-fulfillment of seniors, it is worth to note for one more area of activity, which is education. It is worth emphasizing that the postulate to enable lifelong learning (regardless of age) on European soil has been raised for many years. This postulate was expressed, among others, in the Europe 2020 Strategy, according to which learning covers all stages of human development. Learning to learn is considered a key skill of every human being. Man has the ability and the right to learn and, taking up new educational challenges, influences the course and shape of his own life [Borczyk, Wnuk, 2013]. However, for the system to function well, changes in the education system at earlier stages of life are also necessary. It's all about preparing the young generation for old age. This means a change in stereotypes and ways of perceiving old age and the elderly, as well as shaping certain attitudes [Borczyk, Wnuk, 2103].

Enabling older people to learn is one of the key factors affecting the development of seniors' activity and maintaining good health and independence until the late years. Thus, it clearly contributes to the improvement of their quality of life [Resolution No. 238]. The basic functions of educational activity of the elderly include, above all, cognitive, educational, preventive, compensatory, therapeutic and integrating functions [Leszczyńska-Rejchert, 2013]. From the point of view of the specificity of education, the first two functions play a key role, namely cognitive and educational. On the one hand, the educational activity of older people allows them to acquire new knowledge and skills (which is very important in the conditions of fast civilizational and technological development). On the other hand, this activity gives seniors



the opportunity to verify and update their skills as well as their continuous training. Educational activity – in addition to its basic "teaching" function – also plays an important role in creating social ties. This is a very important element of a good old age [Adamczyk, 2015]. It is also an important tool to counteract the marginalization and social exclusion of older people.

In Poland, activating older people in the area of education – in accordance with the principles of the Senior Policy – is based primarily on the creation and implementation of an educational offer tailored to existing needs. Areas are health education, civic education and education in new technologies. On the other hand, the emphasis was put on systemic solutions in the scope of organizing education of the elderly. In this area, the Universities of the Third Age (UTA) play an important role.

#### **4. Universities of the Third Age on the Polish "education market"**

In Poland, the first University of the Third Age (UTA) was founded in 1975 under the name – The Study of the Third Age. Poland has created an institution guaranteeing access to education for the elderly as the third country in the world, after France and Belgium. The intensive development of UTA was in the years 1975-1979, when UTA was established in Wrocław, Opole, Szczecin, Poznań, Gdańsk and Łódź. In the 80's and 90's of the twentieth century, the Universities of the Third Age in Poland did not develop as dynamically, which was mainly caused by political instability and political transformation. After 1989, there was a further development of these facilities, but a rapid increase in their number occurred only after 2002, and especially in 2006-2010. Since 2011, this tendency has slowed down [Universities of the Third Age – preliminary results of the study]. From the data of the National Federation of Associations of Universities of the Third Age [Universities of the Third Age in Poland in numbers] it appears that in March 2017 there were 614 UTAs in Poland, the largest number of UTAs were in voivodeships: mazowieckie – 80; kujawsko – pomorskie – 78; śląskie – 64 and małopolskie – 59.

The model of functioning of Polish UTA is based on the French and Swiss concepts, which is why their activities focus on the increase of cognitive skills of seniors through didactic classes, but not only. These institutions guarantee permanent access to education for seniors, while at the same time adjusting the program offer in the area of transformation,

related to technological progress, demographic changes, activation and integration of older people in the social, political and cognitive environment. The UTA group in Poland is characterized by the uniformity of the objectives of the action and forms of work, as well as the separateness associated with the application of various organizational and structural solutions. Over the past few years, they have been expanding the scope of their offer and activity through cooperation with other universities in Poland and abroad, in the sphere of training and tourist trips [Koniczna-Woźniak, 2001].

The functioning of UTA in Poland includes several legal and organizational forms. Among others, these are institutions operating at public or non-public universities, which are represented by the rector's representative of a specific university. Entities operating in this form do not have independence in action – they are structurally and financially dependent on the university authorities. The university indicates the goals of the activity, helps in the organization of classes, and provides teaching staff.

Acting on the basis of the Law on Associations, the Law on Foundations and the Law on Public Benefit and Volunteering, UTAs can act as non-governmental organizations, be independent associations with legal personality that cooperate with universities, for example they have scientific patronage, they use teaching staff or cooperate with other organizations, e.g. with cultural centers. Such entities are independent in action; they organize classes and logistic facilities themselves. Contemporary UTAs in Poland can also act as organizational units in the structures of various associations and foundations whose statutory objectives include, among others, activities for the benefit of older people. Such UTAs operate based on the statute of the parent organization, but they usually have a large degree of freedom of action, their management and other bodies.

In addition, UTA also have the possibility to act in the structures of local government organizational units (e.g. cultural centers, centers of lifelong learning, libraries, social welfare centers etc.). In this case, the local government authorities define the rules of functioning of UTA and support them in the organization of didactic classes. Entities operating in this form do not have independence and separateness in action – they are structurally and financially dependent on the organizational units of local self-governments [Borczyk et al., 2014; Szluz, 2016]. Nowadays UTA in Poland most often take the form of associations, this is mainly related to the issue of independent management and freedom of action.

In the majority of UTA classes take place on similar principles as at universities. They are carried out both by academics and people from the world of culture, art, authorities with specific areas. Students of The Third Age Universities usually do not receive any grades, or certificates for their work and study, although there are institutions in which the students pass the exams.

Universities (regardless of the organizational and legal form) do not have permanent financing. UTAs in Poland are financed by themselves and supporting institutions. The financing model for these institutions mainly includes: membership fees for participants of classes, own income, co-financing by local government authorities or subsidies from local communities and city budgets. Education centers also use the material basis of educational institutions, including the support of university institutions – in the form of access to premises, facilities and teaching aids, volunteering of students, professors and sponsors. It is also important support in the form of grants from the state.

In Poland there are implemented programs, grants, projects (e.g. “Support for Universities of the Third Age”) which main goal is to provide financial support to existing Universities of the Third Age and to enable subsequent scientific units and entities acting for science to undertake this type of activity [www.nauka.gov.pl]. The development of UTA and seniors is also significantly influenced by other organizations, operating mainly within the third sector, both national and international<sup>1</sup> [seniorzywakcji.pl/utw-dla-spolecznosci].

## 5. Conclusion

Observed in recent years huge changes in socio-economic nature determine the need for ongoing activities related to the development of the knowledge-based society. The success of this process depends, inter alia, on the popularization of the concept of lifelong learning, by guaranteeing citizens access to education at all stages of their lives.

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<sup>1</sup> An example is the Polish-American Freedom Foundation, which as part of the “Seniors in Action” competition offers grants and trainings for people over 60, who – alone or in cooperation with a young person – want to implement social and intergenerational activities based on their own ideas. From 2013, as part of the “UTA-Seniors in Action” program, the Foundation also implements the “UTA for the community” project. Its purpose is to provide substantive support to UTAs that want to actively work for their local communities, especially based on volunteering, <http://seniorzywakcja.pl/utw-dla-spolecznosci/>, access: 08.01.2018.

Universities of the Third Age (UTA) plays a big role in this field, which, in order to meet the requirements of contemporary societies, should focus on creating an active aging model related to the continuation and acquisition of new skills, competences, professional, social and family roles by seniors. In particular, attention should be paid to the concept of the integrity of society related to the formation of lasting bonds between generations, and above all to ensure intergenerational, two-way transfer of knowledge and skills.

For UTAs, new technologies play a significant role in the transformation and creation of future forms of offered educational services. The development of methods and tools enabling effective combining of the roles of seniors, on the one hand related to the transfer of experience, cultivating customs, traditions, history, on the other based on the skills of adapting to functioning in the ever-changing information society, becomes crucial.

Strengthening UTA intergenerational ties can be shaped, for example, as part of the activities and courses offered, in which more and more attention should be paid to the strengthening of volunteer values. Creating special groups of volunteers – seniors who provide various assistance to others, share their experiences, can have an invaluable influence on the development and functioning of individuals and entire communities.

In addition, with permanently increasing life expectancy, planning the offer and verifying the needs of UTA learners should focus not only on the target group of people aged 60+, but also 80+. Matching the educational proposal to the community described as "the fourth generation" should result not only in the implementation of other forms of activities, but in the creation of new structures and even entire institutions – Universities of the Fourth Age.

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